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This conference paper was originally published as:
Madingou, D., & de Burgh -Woodman, H. (2012). Building a new brand community through online media: The transition from print to online platforms at *Le 10 Sport*. *2012 ANZMAC conference*.

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Building a new brand community through online media: The transition from print to online platforms at *Le 10 Sport.*

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Keywords; brand community, online media, online marketing, marketing communication

Abstract

As online media increasingly assumes dominance in the marketplace, we use the case study of French company Le 10 Sport to explore the complexities associated with transition from print to online media and the impact on brand community. Le 10 Sport is a sport media company that has successfully gone online. As traditional print media outlets are increasingly pressured by the need to abandon existing readerships and go online, the essential question explored in this paper is *can a sports media producer build and maintain its brand community while transitioning to the online platform?*

The findings suggest the transition from print to online was ultimately positive for this company, enabling them to differentiate from competitors and re-position after a tumultuous start. Le 10 Sport's experience is instructive for seeing how transition to online poses particular challenges for media marketers, particularly those seeking to transition their product and their marketing. Therefore, some general implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of the online environment on marketing practice is drawing increased attention from marketers who must contend with this comparatively new media channel (Kozinets et al., 2008). The challenges faced by traditional print media outlets have been doubly difficult in that both their marketing and product must be transitioned into the online environment. Media outlets must manage convergent (Jenkins 2006), complex media content disseminated across a range of channels in order to maintain the visibility of their cultural product (Lash and Urry, 1994; Venkatesh and Meamber, 2006) since communication of the product is key to uptake (Prins and Verhoef, 2007; Bass, Krishnan and Jain, 1994) – especially in the media environment. This paper is concerned with the sports media environment and looks at the question of how companies in this market, that have been traditionally reliant upon brand community for their survival (like many other media outlets), might harness the potential offered by the online media environment. Essentially, this paper seeks to answer the questions *can a sports media producer build and maintain its brand community while transitioning to the online platform?* Secondly, *can the transition to online media actually build brand community?* In answering these two questions, this paper makes a contribution to our understanding of the challenges faced by companies transitioning their media strategy and its impact on existing (and future) brand communities.

The present paper conducts a study of *Le 10 Sport*, the French sports media company, as an example of a young company caught in the tide of transition from print to online delivery. The French media environment is particularly insightful for tracing the challenges of the online world. The reconsideration of traditional mainstays in the press industry and the

concept of journalism in the era of the Internet collide with serious economic crisis in Europe, resulting in tight margins, economic instability and a general sense of uncertainty (Roussel, 2009). Amidst this climate has been an overwhelming emphasis on the need to preserve an independent, transparent and pluralist newspaper industry (Roussel, 2009) that responds to technological innovation and greater dissemination. The online environment is seen to empower consumers, assist in maintaining a transparent press and ushering in innovation. However, the traditional French reliance on print media and a general delay in the uptake of web technology also characterises the French media context. These competing imperatives and intervening political, economic and social dynamics set the scene for our investigation of *Le 10 Sport*'s genesis as a print publication and its decision to re-position as a predominantly online publication. The implications of this transition for its brand community are discussed at length.

The concept of brand community is a central tenet of consumer research (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Kalman, 2009) and underpins the research presented here. The existence and concept of community has traditionally come under much investigation in order to better understand the threads, discourses and practices by which communities are bound (Arnould, Price and Otnes, 1999; Belk and Costa, 1998; Holbrook, 1993; McRobbie, 1995; Moisio and Beruchashvili, 2010; Thornton, 1995). Understood through such paths of investigation as tribes (Cova and Cova 2002; Cova, Kozinets and Shankar, 2007; Maffesoli, 1991), brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Muniz and Shau, 2005) and consumption communities (Cova, Kozinets and Shankar, 2007; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), the study of communities with shared habits and meanings has formed the basis for new insights into consumption as a site for identity-building and expression of collective interest. Like community at large, these communities embody certain attributes, rituals and discourses that guarantee their ongoing cohesion and survival (Belk and Costa, 1998: Arnould, Price and Otnes, 1999). These characteristics also define the subculture against rival groups, subvert structured public life roles and delineate a sense of individuality or self-expression (Goulding, Shankar and Elliot, 2002, 2001; Maffesoli, 1991; Muggleton, 2000). This is particularly so among sporting communities where sport represents an escape from other elements of participants' lives and creates a valued opportunity for shared self-expression. We commence this paper with a brief overview of the research context out of which the case emerges followed by a short commentary on *Le 10 Sport's* three-year history and challenges. After a review of the method, we move to a discussion of the findings from the data analysis and conclude with some broad implications for marketing in the media context.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The impact of the Internet on traditional media channels has been a source of significant speculation with differing views. Heslin (2007) suggests that newspapers will become unknown to the next generation of children while Kayany and Yelsma (2000) see the positioning of print as an information and entertainment medium as unchanging despite the increase of Internet use. But at the same time, people/customers have limited time to devote to media so when one gains popularity, it usually costs another e.g. Internet for radio (Lee and Kuo 2002; Vyas, Singh and Shilpi, 2007). Filistrucchi's (2005) conclusion that Internet has had a negative impact on the market share of four major Italian national newspapers would appear to flag the greatest risk to print media companies. It seems clear that if a traditional media company is to survive, the swift adoption of new channels and the distribution of content must fit with customers' expectations (Brown, 2005). They should not only be an information distributor but also offer specific services to their customers to

improve their loyalty to the media brand.

The next battle will be on the mobile market (Pearce, 2006). It is already clear that smart phones have become a lucrative market (Mort and Drennan 2002). But these mobile channels need to offer novelty to consumers. A simple rendering of website or newspaper content must be replaced by dynamism and interactivity (Villanueva, Yoo and Hanssens, 2008). The drive to make mobile usage dynamic and interactive through the use of apps, adapted content and specialist content will, in turn, impact on online consumption. Tsao and Sibley's (2004) characterisation of the Internet as a revolutionary platform as an informational channel might be apt but it is also clear that this new platform has an impact on the use of other media by consumers. The consumption and perception of content by consumers is modified in a circuitous movement between media outlets (McLuhan, 1994).

BACKGROUND – LE 10 SPORT

The French press environment establishes the context of this research in that it is at something of an impasse. Facing weak investments, lower circulation, ageing readership, decreasing points of sale, decline in advertising receipts, outflow of classified advertisement to the Internet and, consequently, trading losses plague this once robust French industry, which is now confronted with the need to adapt or die. Curiously, Paris based *Le 10 Sport* entered the market just at this moment of crisis for French print media. Created in 2008 by *Paru Vendu* founder Michel Moulin, *Le 10 Sport* entered at a time where only one major daily publication, *L'Equipe*, posed competition. Moulin believed that a second daily newspaper could create an alternative to *L'Equipe*. *Le 10 Sport* was composed of radio, newspaper and a website, 60 % focused on football (soccer), 30 % on rugby and the less 10 % on general-purpose (in sport). 1,5 million of Euros were invested in the company, 80 people were part of the start-up and other well-known French sport media were associated such as RMC (Radio Monte-Carlo), the French sport radio. In response, Amaury group (which owns *L'Equipe*) launched another sport daily newspaper. The strategy was clear; quickly eliminate *Le 10 Sport* and consolidate *L'Equipe's* monopoly. *Aujourd'hui Sport* failed at the end of June 2009. Amaury Group officially explained that market outlook including advertising and sales did not secure economic viability in the mid-term.

After these chaotic early stages, the financial state of *Le 10 Sport* was damaged: wage bills, low sales, difficulties in finding advertisers, increased and weakened brand image had all negatively impacted the fragile company's financial position. Consequently, €2,25 million were reinvested in the company. Today, *Le 10 Sport* is a weekly newspaper (rather than its original daily format), a podcast radio and a website. Their aim is to keep developing an identity as a sport tabloid, recover quickly from three years of bad results, utilise a new marketing team and consolidate an online format as its dominant platform.

METHOD

The method used for this research consisted of a mixed method indicative survey of *Le 10 Sport* subscribers and interviews with senior executives. The results from 66 survey respondents (of 184 surveys sent via email) combined with the in-depth interviews (Bernstein, 1986; Lux, 1986) with senior staff were analysed for their insight into how contemporary subscribers are now using le 10 Sport. The codification method of analysis enabled the classification data through a unique codebook (Lewis-Beck et. al., 2004), which flagged the key themes to emerge out of the data. The codebook illuminated bonds between

data and gave an overview of recurrent answers, divergent answers and emergent themes. The codification of the data also facilitated comparisons between the quantitative and qualitative data, meaning the comparison between the company perspective (qualitative) and consumer perspectives (quantitative).

DISCUSSION

The print media industry has suffered from the arrival of the Internet, forcing media producers to adapt to this shift by making difficult strategic decisions about where to take their companies. The recent announcement that News Corp will divide into two distinct companies reflects the complex decisions media companies face (Jannarone 2012) in an ailing print media market. The marketing, web, and editorial departments of *Le 10 Sport* made the same assessment, suggesting "the French press industry has fossilised in over 50 years of *L'Equipe's* monopoly" (interview) and with the "democratisation of Internet, we can observe an appreciable decrease of newspaper sales and a disengagement of advertisers on this [print] channel" (interview). In 2010, *Le 10 Sport* moved from a daily to a weekly publication due to low print sales - despite the fact the print format offered readers more sophisticated content (the print version offers features, long interviews and more reporting than the online platform). This may also explain the research findings that print readers are not necessarily web consumers of le10sport.com since traditional print consumers seek depth content while online consumers are satisfied with "bites".

55% of readers surveyed were print subscribers, leaving a 45% and growing online readership that is currently driving the re-positioning of the company as a predominantly online publication. This is a positive, albeit temporary, situation for the print side of *Le 10 Sport* given that the newspaper was only created three years ago and no marketing for print subscription has been done. From the perspective of brand community, this loyal readership represents one of the core strengths of the business and plays out the tension involved in transitioning from one media platform to another. The company still believes in the print channel but sees the need to privilege the online platform. Print production costs are high and the achievement of the breakeven point is a challenge. *Le 10 Sport* sees the newspaper as a tool for attracting readers to visit their website and increase the traffic. Equally, as one interviewee stoically suggested, newspaper still has a real place in French social habits. However, the next generation of media consumers do not engage with print media. If a new, sustaining community of loyal readers is to be generated, this must occur via online content, social media and apps (an app is available on iTunes), placing this new generation of consumers in direct contrast with the existing dominant brand community of *Le 10 Sport*. The company has utilised social media, blogs/forums and real-time results as part of its online presence, thereby engaging consumers in new ways. An online store has also been incorporated along with additional links to related sites.

11% of readers surveyed currently consult their newspaper online and 85% of this group are already subscribers to the online newspaper. It is encouraging for the company that 62% of readers are ready to read the newspaper online and 58% of these readers are ready to approach this new mode of information. These results must be looked at through the lens of gender and age. Based on the survey results, 74% of readers are men against 26% of women. *Le 10 Sport* attracts more women due to lotteries. Socially speaking, women play more lottery than men. One interviewee suggests that online lotteries explain this rate of female consumers. 36% of readers are between 25 and 34 years and 24% are between 35 and 44 years old. Therefore, 60% of readers are between 25 and 44 years of age. These readers are

young and dynamic. They work and are technologically educated.

In light of this paradox between an emerging online readership and reluctance to abandon a loyal print brand community, the print strategy has become more focused on regionalisation. This emphasis on regionalisation in the print format has also flowed through to the online content, giving rise to a number of sub-communities within the larger online community. Harnessing the forum, blog and social media tools, the online readership has self-organised into numerous sub-groups that run along either team or regional lines. In May 2011, it was decided that two local print editions would be created for Saint-Etienne and Marseille. These two clubs have two of the largest and loyal fan clubs in France. The strategic decision to tap into these large fan bases using a traditional media channel such as print appears to have resonated in regional areas where internet access and use is not as advanced and consumers have a "grassroots" connection to their sports consumption. Again, we see the recurrent tension for *Le 10 Sport* emerge in that their general thrust towards a web platform in the hope of connecting with a new, tech-savvy generation of consumers is problematised by their existing community of sports media fans who are more comfortable with traditional media channels. Both the staff of *Le 10 Sport* and their existing community are reluctant to give up their identity (connected to a larger sense of the traditional French *journal*) but feel compelled by future survival in a changing media terrain.

However, the comparatively cheap marketing channels such as social media, along with the blogs, forums and videos, has meant that the marketing of the site has been more effective than the print side and has been more cost effective. The benefits of regionalisation in print have also been harnessed online. This has encouraged the company to invest more in the site, acquire a larger marketing team and build the online presence with more focus. This comes in contrast with the relatively under-funded print marketing campaign. Despite their evident apprehension about communicating via the online platform, *Le 10 Sport* acknowledges that just as its consumers are moving online so too are its potential advertisers and has thus focused on selling advertising space on its website. With the launch of its website, the new tactic adopted by the marketing service is to sell page space dedicated to a specific soccer club to a local advertiser in the same way that physical space has traditionally been sold. This strategy enables Le 10 Sport to exploit local print connections to build online synergies between soccer clubs and commercial interests (thereby harnessing advertising revenue). From a brand community perspective, this is regarded as authentic since it supports local clubs, local business and reflects core brand community values for both print and online community members.

CONCLUSION

Can the online transition actually build brand community? Yes it builds multiple communities within an online community but it draws from a different demographic. The research conducted here shows that a portion of the brand community linked to the print media will move to the online platform. But as the literature consistently shows, brand communities are not strictly homogenous. Some consumers evolve with the product and the social changes it embodies. However, it would also appear that *Le 10 Sport* has an older existing brand community who will ultimately fade. These loyal consumers of the product have been the core of the publication for the last three years – a fact that is not lost on the company leaders who share this sense of ambivalence about abandoning the print format altogether.

The implications for marketing practice are complex in that competing imperatives between existing and new communities must be balanced. However, this complexity also presents a key opportunity for marketers. This study shows that each channel has its own identity, its own content and community. As previously noted, it is important to consider the question of generation and segment accordingly without abandoning other segments or channels. Different consumption patterns across audiences suggests that media outlets making this transition need to consider segmentation, according to media channel preference, as a potential strategy to exploit to gain and maintain brand communities. It is better to build and maintain a series of independent communities in each of its channels. Firstly, this ensures content fits with customer's expectation and satisfaction. Secondly, it enlarges and reinforces its reputation and visibility in the market.

Perhaps more significantly though, this research suggests that within the online environment, marketers still need to segment within their online brand communities. The use of forums/blogs to encourage regional or interest specific groups, the tailoring of content to club-based or regional groups and the broader inclusion of add-on information have all enhanced the company's ability to create "communities within the community". The success of *Le Sport 10* thus far has resided in the creation of sub-communities made possible through the site. The harnessing of diverse engagement tools, addition of links and a store and the ability to bring real-time information to the community lie at the heart of the company's success and provide a blueprint for other firms making the transition. Further, *Le Sport 10* has been astute in maintaining their print community while transitioning. The reliance on their loyal print community while moving online has reduced risk and loss of revenue. It has also enabled them to maintain their traditional readership. To this extent, *Le Sport 10* provides insight for other companies.

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