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## 'A Russian airline for an English club… F****** joke': Aeroflot, Manchester United and corporate reputation (mis)management on social media

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**Abstract**
The study of our paper is the online co-branding initiative of Aeroflot and Manchester United, launched on Facebook and Twitter in July 2013. Our discussion focuses on the failed attempt to build a community around this co-brand. In our analysis of the reasons why this initiative failed, we pay particular attention to the connected issues of corporate identity and reputation. In our conclusion, we make certain recommendations as to how such online co-branding initiatives might be better designed in future. These include a discussion of the importance of organizational design in social media branding.

**Mots clés :** Brand Community, Co-Branding, Corporate Reputation, Corporate Visual Identity, Organizational Design, Social Media

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**Key Words:**

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## 1. Introduction:

When Aeroflot became the official airline of Manchester United (henceforth 'MUFC') in July 2013, the alliance was sealed with the launch of an official Facebook page and Twitter account. Recent years have seen a number of different co-branding initiatives between leading European football clubs and their official airlines. These include: Liverpool's launch of a special edition 'Garuda Indonesia' training kit; shirt sponsorship by Emirates of clubs such as Arsenal, AC Milan, PSG and Real Madrid; Turkish Airlines repainting its aircraft in the colours of Borussia Dortmund; and the naming of Manchester City's ground 'The Etihad Stadium'. The initiative between Aeroflot and MUFC ran for less than one football season, however, having attracted a mere 26,000 followers (the Facebook account was effectively terminated in April 2014, following three months' inactivity)[1].

In recent years, a number of scholars have looked at the potential of social media to build a 'community' around certain brands[2]. There is a significant gap in the literature, however, on brand community formation around online *co*-branding initiatives – especially in those cases where there is a significant imbalance in the respective reputation of the two brands involved. Furthermore, scholars writing on brand communities tend to focus on marketing issues, to the detriment of the broader organizational and managerial context (see for example Muñiz Jr and O'Guinn 2001; Amine and Sitz 2007; and Schau, Muñiz Jr and Arnould 2009). The same is true of much of the literature on brands' use of social media (see for example Bough and Agresta 2011). With this in mind, the main questions which we seek to answer are: first, to what extent has the joint Aeroflot-MUFC social media initiative helped

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[1] Activity on the Twitter account (@AeroflotManUtd) began again at the end of April 2015. However, while the account's name remains unchanged, it is now described as the official English-language Twitter account of Aeroflot alone, rather than of the co-brand. At the time of writing (22 June 2015), 38 new tweets or retweets have been added since the relaunch, just two of which mention Manchester United.

[2] For a useful literature review, see Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014).

create a genuine online 'brand community'?; second, what impact has the reputation of the brand behind the project, Aeroflot, had on the way the co-brand has been perceived by fans?; and third, what lessons can be drawn from this initiative for managers seeking to use social media to enhance their brand's reputation? Our study will be in five stages: first, we present a review of the literature on 'brand communities' and co-branding; second, we analyse the visual design of these pages; third, we examine the ways in which the brands' 'followers' are invited to respond to these images, and how they actually respond; fourth, we suggest some reasons as to why this initiative failed; and fifth, we discuss some of the implications of the Aeroflot-MUFC social media initiative for online co-branding, paying particular attention to the question of organizational reputation and design.

## 2. Literature review:

The phrase 'brand community' was first coined by Muñiz Jr and O'Guinn (2001). Taking their cue from Anderson (1983/2006), they argued that in today's fragmented, and 'distanced' (Giddens 1990) late modern consumer society, it is now brands, rather than physical places or religious groups, that create a sense of belonging for people. For Muñiz Jr and O'Guinn, creating such communities can help strengthen the emotional bond between consumer and brand, and thereby enhance consumers' commitment and attachment to the brand in question – what Batra, Ahuvia and Bagozzi (2012) refer to as 'brand love' (see also McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002; Stokburger-Sauer 2010; and Kaplan and Haenlein 2012). In his landmark article on Nutella's online 'My Community', Cova (2006: 55) argues that 'brand communities' are part of a three-point 'virtuous circle' in which consumers' passion for a brand favours the formation of a brand community, whose members then generate the kinds of myths about the brand likely to increase consumers' passion towards the brand, which in turn feeds into the brand community, and so on.

Muñiz Jr and O'Guinn maintain that a community may form around any brand, especially one 'with a strong image, a rich and lengthy history, and threatening competition' (2001: 415). Many scholars have seized on this last point to apply the concept to 'underdog' or niche brands such as Harley Davidson (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002). More recently, the concept of 'brand community' has come to be used in relation to market leaders, such as Nutella (Cova 2006) Apple and Nike (Kilambi, Laroche and Richard 2013), Red Bull (Allen, Fournier and Miller 2008), Irish beer Beamish (O'Sullivan, Richardson and Collins 2011), and Pampers (Aaker 2013). As this last point suggests, the original concept has somewhat evolved since its first formulation – especially since the advent of Web 2.0, which has generated a marked increase in scholarly interest in online brand communities. This should come as no surprise, since social media in general lend themselves particularly well to community formation, thanks to the 'sociality' which they encourage, via processes of cognition, communication and co-operation (Fuchs 2014).

A number of scholars have followed the example of Cova (2006) and others, and investigated the potential for brand communities to develop online (see for example Schau, Muñiz Jr and Arnould 2009; Kaplan and Haenlein 2012; and Healy and McDonagh 2013). As many point out, Web 2.0 lends itself particularly well to the construction of certain types of brand community, where the link between consumers may be just as, if not more important than the goods or services on offer from the brand itself (see for example Bonnin and Odou 2010). The research agenda has slowly shifted to take into account not just consumer-led discussion groups, but also brands' official community websites and social media pages. Habibi, Laroche and Richard (2014) for example argue that it is precisely the social and networked nature of such pages that makes them an ideal environment in which such communities can develop, by fostering mutual trust between brands and consumers (see also Zaglia 2013; and Wallace et al. 2014).

Much of the literature on social media branding raises the issue of the 'co-creation' of the brand's value by consumers themselves (see for example Singh and Sonnenburg 2012; Healy and McDonagh 2013; Habibi, Laroche and Richard 2014; and Wallace et al. 2014). In this view, social media have now become central to brands and branding, since as Pongsakornrungslip and Schroeder put it (2011), the 'brand value' they can help generate is not just about the bottom line, but relates in a more general sense to the ways in which consumers understand the brand's very meaning (see also Arvidsson 2006). So, for example, Muñiz Jr and Schau (2005) show how Apple's 'defunct' brand of Newton personal assistants was resurrected by bloggers interacting in discussion forums. At other times, this process is initiated by the brands themselves. Following Cova's (2006) analysis of how Ferrero helped shape its brand image in Italy by launching the interactive site *my nutella The Community*, Bough and Agresta (2011: 255) have discussed Ford's use of videos made by consumers – so-called 'Fiesta Angels' – on its YouTube channel. For their part, Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) demonstrate how consumers' own stories and images on Harley-Davidson's Facebook page feed into the brand's myth-making process.

A decade or so ago, Thompson and Arsel (2004) showed how iconic US companies such as Starbucks could effectively counter 'cultural heterogeneity' in foreign markets, maintaining control over brand meaning by establishing what they call a 'hegemonic brandscape'. Today, with the arrival of a whole gamut of social media, their optimism looks much less justified. Indeed, there are those who have questioned the limits of online brand 'co-creation' (see for example Croft 2013). Many point out the threat that consumers can pose to a brand via that brand's social media (Christodoulides 2009; Fournier and Avery 2011; Champoux, Durgee and McGlynn 2012; and Quinton 2013). Christodoulides (2009), for example, maintains that the Internet and related e-technologies have upset what he calls the 'asymmetry of information' between brand managers and consumers. Thanks to the

arrival of Web 2.0, the latter are now, he maintains, empowered to participate more actively in the online branding process, and often emerge as 'guardians' of the brand. Christodoulides points out that in what he calls today's 'post-internet era', brand managers of Internet companies appear to take a relaxed attitude towards control of corporate identity, and asks to what extent managers of more traditional companies should follow their lead.

Fournier and Avery paint a far darker picture of the implications of Web 2.0 for brands. Arguing that the rise of digital media has heralded an age of absolute transparency, they issue this dire warning to brand managers: 'In Web 2.0, the brand message and source no longer provide claims to authority. Brand culture is authenticated by the masses; cultural populism determines how messages are interpreted and what value brands afford' (2011: 200). Fournier and Avery's argument is essential to our own, as it highlights the link between brand communities, social media, and corporate reputation – what Weiss, Anderson and MacInnis (1999) define as the overall belief among consumers regarding the extent to which the firm is held in high esteem (quoted in Nguyen, Melewar and Chen 2013: 34). Their point is that a firm's activity on social media may have a very different impact on the aggregated perceptions of the organisation's stakeholders (Abratt and Kleyn 2012) from that intended. It may, for example, have a negative effect on the level of consumers' trust in the brand (See-To and Ho 2014, McCarthy 2015). In the Web 2.0 era, then, managers ignore at their peril the threats to corporate identity and reputation posed by what Pongsakornrungslip and Schroeder (2011) refer to as 'co-consuming brand communities' (see also Denegri-Knott, Zwick and Schroeder 2006).

The Aeroflot-Manchester United initiative is of course a particular kind of social media branding initiative, as it involves the creation of a co-brand. Following Helmig, Huber and Leeflang (2008), we distinguish co-branding from other initiatives, such as product bundling, advertising alliances, joint sales promotions, dual branding, and brand extensions.

Rather, we follow Cegarra and Michel (2001) for whom co-branding primarily involves building a joint visual corporate identity (as for example with the special Roland Garros edition of the Peugeot 205)[3]. Recent years have seen exponential growth in such symbolic co-branding initiatives, such as the Karl Largefeld Diet Coke bottle, the Kate Moss and Lenny Kravitz boxes launched by French restaurant chain Suchi-Shop, David Beckham's 'bodywear' range at H&M, and the Android Kit-Kat. By its very 'spectacular' nature (Bough and Agresta 2011), social media lends itself particularly well to this sort of visual alliance, as brands' pages often include posts publicising partner brands. As Preston (2004) has argued, corporate reputation is itself a form of 'capital' that firms can leverage to gain competitive advantage. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that co-branding is often seen as an opportunity for one firm to exploit the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1984) of another in order to enhance its reputation and build market share (Abratt and Motlana 2002, Leitch and Richardson 2002, Ueltschy and Laroche 2004, Kim, Lee and Lee 2007). Alexander Lukashin, Head of Aeroflot's International Public Relations, made this abundantly clear when he declared in July 2013, 'Manchester United is one of the leading clubs in the world, with a fan base of 600 million. We share common values of teamwork and are both leaders in the market' (quoted in Irvine 2013).

Mention of Lukashin brings us to our last point here, namely the question of how social media branding might best be integrated within the broader organization. While he argues that it is ultimately preferably for a company's social media presence to be maintained by one particular person - often referred to as 'community manager' - PepsiCo's B. Bonin Bough nevertheless insists on the fact that, as he puts it, 'social media belongs across the entire organization' (2011: 26). His point echoes one of the main findings of a study on social

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[3] While accepting the basic thrust of Cegarra and Michel's argument, we would not wish to imply that 'corporate branding' and 'corporate identity' are the same thing. For a discussion of the distinction between the two concepts, and the role visual design may play in the latter, see Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006).

media branding by Fournier and Lee: 'Executing community [on social media] requires an organization-wide commitment and a willingness to work across functional boundaries. It takes the boldness to reexamine everything from company values to organizational design' (2009: 111).   One of the reasons why social media branding involves cross-functional issues is that it is not just about building a community. As McCarthy et al. (2014) point out, managers also expect it to generate revenue for the company (indeed, they point to the tension between the attempt to gain short-term revenue on the one hand, and the aim of generating longer-term brand loyalty on the other). The problem for managers overseeing the Aeroflot-MUFC initiative is that, as McCarthy et al. also observe, while football fans appear to have embraced online communities and communication, little is known about the impact of social media on brands and brand equity in the football industry.  One of the reasons for this may be that, as Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014) have noted, firms in many sectors are often unclear as to what Key Performance Indicators should be used to measure the effect of social media (see also Bough and Agresta 2011: 248-50).    In particular, they note: '[C]ompanies in fact experiment constantly by testing various ways of using social media and observing their use by competitors. Expected results and benefits are [often] unclear.'

## 3. Methodology:

Since for the duration of the co-branding initiative (July 2013 – April 2014), the posts on the Aeroflot-MUFC project's Facebook page and those on its Twitter account were virtually identical, we propose to focus on the former. Our close textual and visual analysis of these pages is based on an 'observational netnography' methodology (Kozinets 2006).  While Kozinets suggests that ideally, netnographic research should be multi-method (2006: 132), we did not take part in online discussions, in order to avoid the possibility of soliciting biased responses, following McQuarrie, Miller and Phillips (2013).  Since the purpose of these

pages is to promote their respective brands' 'marketplace mythology' (Thompson 2004), we propose to 'read' them rather as Lévi-Strauss read myth, not following them line by line (or post by post), but rather apprehending them 'as a totality', teasing out their 'basic meaning' by looking at 'bundles of events' that 'appear at different moments in the story' (Lévi-Strauss 1978/2014: 40).

**4. Analysis of Aeroflot-MUFC social media pages:**

The attempts to build a brand community on the project's Facebook page – initially entitled 'Aeroflot-Manchester United', but subsequently re-baptised 'Aeroflot Sports'– fall into a relatively limited number of categories. These are as follows:

- **Visual co-branding.** The main photograph at the top of the Facebook page shows a picture of the players' changing rooms. We see the players' shirts, shot an oblique angle, disappearing into the background. In the foreground, and filling approximately half the screen, is a shirt featuring the word 'Aeroflot' emblazoned across the top, as if the airline were the club's latest recruit. A number of posts contain photographs of a group of Aeroflot stewardesses clad in bright red (the club's colour), and posing in places associated with the club (such as in front of the Old Trafford Stadium, or behind the bar of a Manchester pub festooned with supporters' scarves). However kitsch, these images can be see as attempts to construct precisely the kind of joint visual corporate identity that Cegarra and Michel (2001) argue is fundamental to co-branding projects.

- **Appeals to fans' aesthetic taste.** In one post, fans are asked to comment on the new design of the airline's Airbus A321, which features both the Russian flag on the tail (the airline is the country's national carrier), and the club's colours on the fuselage.

**- Appeals to fans' sporting judgement.** In December 2013, fans are asked 'If you could win a Manchester United shirt signed by any member of the current squad, who would you choose?'

**- Appeals to fans' knowledge of the club and its history.** In an attempt to gain legitimacy (and trust) in the eyes of fans, Aeroflot at times seeks to demonstrate its knowledge of the club's history. So, on 25 November 2013, it retweets a tweet from MUFC's account, @ManUtd, about the death of '[MUFC] legend Bill Foulkes', accompanied by a black and white photograph of the player in his heyday. Often, however, allusions to the club's history are nothing more than thinly veiled excuses to advertise Aeroflot. On 16 July 2013, for example, we are presented with the luminous interior of one of the company's aircraft, and asked, 'If you could fly to any Aeroflot destination in Europe or Asia to watch Manchester United where would it be?' (this question prompts 8 likes and 3 comments, all from Russians). On another occasion, the question is even more spurious: 'We fly to 178 destinations around the world, but which Manchester United legend is only 10 goals short of that figure?' (this post received 91 likes).

Central to this co-branding exercise, then, are the (related) issues of knowledge, judgement and aesthetic taste (Bourdieu 1984). In this respect, the Aeroflot-MUFC co-branding initiative is typical of what one finds across a range of industry sectors (on the fashion industry, see for example McQuarrie, Miller and Phillips 2013). What fans are ultimately being encouraged to demonstrate here is their unswerving loyalty to the club - an increasingly rare commodity in the modern age, as Kuper and Szymanski (2012) note. In effect, fans are being asked both to construct their own personal social identity narrative (Giddens 1991) and to lend legitimacy to the joint Aeroflot-MUFC brand. So how do the fans react? Have the played ball? Fans' reactions can be divided into two basic types:

**- Comments likely to evoke a sense of shared consciousness with other fans.** This is sometimes expressed via attempts at humour. So, on a post announcing a testimonial match for defender Rio Ferdinand, 'celebrating his 11 years of service to Manchester United!', accompanied by an image from an official photo shoot featuring a row of players standing behind a row of stewardesses, one fan comments: 'Look at [MUFC defender] Patrice Evra looking at their bums hahaha'. On another occasion, in response to an image taken during the same photo shot, in which MUFC manager David Moyes appears alongside an Aeroflot executive to launch the co-branding initiative, one fan derides the project itself, commenting, 'A Russian airline for an English club… F****** joke', which prompts a certain Arthur Lantenois (the page's only French fan) to contribute a laconic 'c nul' ('it's rubbish'). More often, however, fans ask other fans for information of a very practical nature, such as the time at which a particular game starts, and whether or not it is being shown on TV.

- Comments such as these are still relatively rare, however. What one finds most frequently are examples of fans' blatant **self-branding**, revealing what Bauman (2007: 114) calls 'consumers' obsession with the manipulation of [their] identities'. So, in response to an invitation to 'name your favourite ever MUFC player', one fan replies: 'Mr Ryan Giggs (11)', before continuing, 'Use (sic) to watch his Dad play Rugby I was a massive Fan back in the day of Swinton Rugby Club. As i am of Giggsy watched him play for years he even use to be our Milkman before he came pro. watched his first TV interview back on Deans Field were it all began for him, (LEGEND) AND WOT AN INSPIRATION!!' Another fan, in an attempt to win a competition to win signed MUFC merchandise, makes the following confession: 'United r my 1st love wife is 2nd and the family's last u r my only love for footy u r my only And everything xxxxxxxxx mufc til I die'.

**5. Discussion:**

What emerges from this online co-branding project can hardly be described as a 'community' in the sense meant by Muñiz Jr and O'Guinn (2001), Cova (2006) or others. On the contrary, it resembles something very different. To see just what, we need to return to Bauman. In late modernity, Bauman argues, in which individuals become simultaneously the promoters of commodities and the commodities they promote, structured, relatively stable groups such as communities are replaced by far more transient sets of individuals, which he calls 'swarms'. As he puts it (2007: 76-77): '[Swarms] assemble, disperse and gather again, from one occasion to another, each time guided by different, invariably shifting relevancies, and attracted by changing and moving targets.' The failure of the Aeroflot-MUFC initiative to generate anything other than a 'swarm' of generally uncooperative, egotistical and profoundly uninterested individuals should perhaps not surprise us. As many have pointed out, if members of brands' social media are at all interested in interacting, they tend to interact with other community members, rather than with the brand itself (see for example Fournier and Avery 2011). Fans' reluctance to engage with the Aeroflot-MUFC co-brand is compounded by Aeroflot's identity - as a foreign (Russian) company - and its reputation - as a low-quality airline. The first issue emerges in the comment, already mentioned, 'A Russian airline for an English club… F****** joke'. The second can be seen in what is virtually the very last comment posted on the Facebook page, a letter of complaint about repeatedly lost luggage from a certain Max Hammer, which ends 'I am Aeroflot Bonus Silver and was going to go Gold this year – sorry but not flying Aeroflot anymore'. Remarkably, this comment is neither addressed by Aeroflot, nor deleted. At times the airline does, however, use Facebook to tackle the issue of its poor reputation directly – in order, to paraphrase Nguyen, Melewar and Chen (2013), to make itself more 'likeable'. On 20 November, for example, one finds a

post about the availability of WIFI on the company's long haul flights (21 'likes'). A few days later, on 25 November, we learn that its fleet of Airbus A330s is 'one of the youngest in Europe' (a post which attracts 30 'likes', and a single comment – 'Loverly [sic] plane'). Aeroflot Sports' Facebook fans are not duped, however; posts such as these, when placed against the real grievances expressed by customers such as Max Hammer, are not enough to generate sufficient numbers of the kind of followers referred to by Wallace et al. (2014) as '"Fan"-atics'. These are the followers who contribute to the brand's – or in this case, the co-brand's – reputation via word-of-mouth, thanks to their strong brand loyalty and 'brand love' (on 'brand love', see also Batra, Ahuvia and Bagozzi 2012, and Nguyen, Melewar and Chen 2013). Little wonder, then, that this co-branding initiative was abandoned after barely half a football season.

## 6. Managerial Implications:

A number of writers have commented that today's late modern consumers subvert brands' messages via 'bricolage' (de Certeau 1984, Giddens 1991, Bauman 2000), in an attempt to construct their own very particular, and constantly shifting, identity narratives. As a result, brands' own identities and reputations are subject to constant renegotiation, never more so when they attempt to go global (Thompson and Arsel 2004), or when they expose themselves on social media (Christodoulides 2009). The question is, then, how can brands help fans build their individual identity projects on the worldwide stage that is Web 2.0 without compromising their own corporate identity or reputation?

On the basis of our case study, we would make three observations. First, since as Wallace et al. (2014) have shown, there are many different types of 'fan' following brands' social media, with very different agendas, it is likely to be impossible to manage them all successfully. Given this, the answer may lie less in 'media-rich' (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010)

social media such as Facebook or Twitter, than in other social media, such as YouTube. Whereas with Facebook and Twitter, the brand's followers (and those followers' performances) inevitably take centre stage, with YouTube, the brand remains the focus of attention, and is therefore better able to create and control brand meaning (Bough and Agresta 2011). To develop this point, we should like to return to the Qatar Airways – FC Barcelona co-branding initiative mentioned in our introduction. The approximately 1'30' video shows a Qatar Airways landing in a mythical land which, while resembling Qatar, appears to be populated by Barcelona players, past and present. The final shot is of an island, illuminated in the night sky, in the shape and colours of the FC Barcelona club crest, across which one can read the inscription 'Qatar Airways and FC Barcelona. A team that unites the world'[4]. Relatively modest social media communications such as this one - viewed over 1,800,000 times in the first 24 hours of its launch on FC Barcelona's web page[5] - have an important advantage over more extended campaigns, in that they may help to resolve the tension, noted by McCarthy et al. (2014) and mentioned earlier, between short-term financial gain and longer-term brand loyalty.

Of course, Qatar Airways has one main advantage over Aeroflot, namely its strong international reputation. On its own, a social media campaign is unlikely to solve the problem of a poor reputation, as Aeroflot has found. This brings us to our second point. While football fans may be relatively fickle (Kuper and Szymanski 2012), they are also enthusiastic participants in online communities (McCarthy et al. 2014). Consequently, any company entering a co-branding initiative with a football club needs to engage proactively

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[4] The video can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkTsyll1SUo (last accessed 29 January 2015).

[5] Figure given on official club website: http://www.fcbarcelona.com/club/detail/article/major-success-of-fc-barcelona-and-qatar-airways-ad-in-first-24-hours (last accessed 22 June 2015). A second commercial for Qatar Airways featuring FC Barcelona players was released in February 2015. It can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIDKD860S-4&list=PLPRzM4WEgNXO63LFCFzAD-F-dMildxDK2&index=1 (last accessed 22 June 2015).

with fans in an attempt to encourage them to spread positive Word-of-mouth about the project. This may take the form of co-opting key opinion leaders, such as bloggers running fans' unofficial websites (on bloggers in the fashion industry, see McQuarrie, Miller and Phillips 2013). This raises Human Resource issues around the recruitment and training of community managers, since those managers will need to be able to identify, and engage in a lasting relationship with, those very opinion leaders. On the other hand, 'ordinary' fans may also be enlisted. Since individuals tend to seek control over the image – the 'performance' - they project to others in society (Goffman 1959/1990), one way forward might be to reward fans for 'selfies' which promote a positive image of the co-brand. To paraphrase Schroeder (2013), the kind of 'snapshot aesthetics' inherent in 'selfies' can be a valuable strategic resource for a brand, as it can be used to align the brand's visual identity with that of its online followers.

One such 'selfie' appears on the Aeroflot-MUFC Twitter account: on 27 September 2013, in response to an invitation to 'tweet us your favourite photos of you supporting the Reds', one finds a picture of a certain Paul Hammond, accompanied by the enthusiastic 'Taking my wife to her First Utd game last season!' (this was, however, the only response to the invitation, and it attracted one solitary retweet). As Marciniak and Budnarowska (2014) have persuasively suggested, rewarding fans' selfies can be a highly effective way of building long-term brand loyalty, and thereby brand value. Their findings echo the point made by Bough and Agesta (2011) and Bernoff and Li (2008), who demonstrate that a judicious social media strategy can help transform a company's customers into 'brand ambassadors' capable of significantly enhancing that company's reputation (on the link between customer experiences, their interactions with the brand, and brand reputation, see also Tierblanche 2009). If, as Abratt and Kleyn (2012) argue, organisational identity is

created through strategic choices and corporate expression, then organisational *reputation* is increasingly generated by consumers' reactions to those choices and that expression.

The question of reputation brings us to our third and most important managerial implication. Since consumers such as Max Hammer can air their grievances freely on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, problems such as poor service need to be addressed upstream before they become so critical that consumers feel the need to air them in public. Put simply, there is little point launching a Facebook designed to enhance the company's reputation if other areas of that company's operations are under-performing. This is why firms need to integrate their social media efforts within the their overall management structure. Discussing the role played by social media branding in the remarkable turnaround of Harley Davidson's fortunes, Fournier and Lee make the following observation (2009: 106):

> Harley's community strategy was also supported by a radical organizational redesign. Functional silos were replaced with senior leadership teams sharing responsibility across three imperatives: Create Demand, Produce Product, and Provide Support. Furthermore, the company established a stand-alone organization reporting directly to the president to formalize and nurture the company-community relationship through the Harley Owners Group (H.O.G.) membership club. As a result of this organizational structure, community-building activities were treated not solely as marketing expenses but as companywide, COO-backed investments in the success of the business model.

Fournier and Lee's comments suggests why the joint Aeroflot-MUFC initiative was likely to fail; for it to succeed, such organizational redesign would have had to be implemented across not one, but two companies from radically different national and sectorial backgrounds, in support of an asymmetrical project from which one of the firms (Aeroflot) clearly had more to gain in terms of cultural capital, brand awareness and brand equity than the other. Moreover, their observation makes clear just how difficult it is for *any* co-branding initiative to succeed online. At the same time, however, it points to a way forward for Aeroflot, as it

seeks to enhance its reputation abroad by relaunching its English-language Twitter account as a stand-alone brand[6].

## 7. Conclusion:

Yan (2011) has argued that if brands on social media do not come across as genuine, they will not survive in the long run. While the Aeroflot-MUFC lends some weight to this view, it also suggests that many consumers are no longer concerned whether brands are 'authentic'. On the contrary, they generally accept them as 'simulacra' (Baudrillard 1994). They do so because they see the increasing 'spectacularisation' of brands and the branding process (Peñaloza 1998) as an opportunity to put themselves (literally) in the picture. Using social media as merely another 'technology of the self' (Foucault 1990), the 'brand' whose identity they ultimately build is their own, the narrative they construct that of their own, 'digital', aggregate self (Belk 2013). This is patently clear from the Aeroflot-MUFC co-branding initiative. Clearly, transforming consumers' *self*-creation into value-adding *co*-creation will be one of the main challenges for brands in the Web 2.0 era. This is likely to be even more difficult when brands engage in co-branding with other brands, which means that choosing the right partner will be even more critical than ever.

Given the case study design of our paper, our findings are inevitably limited. Nevertheless, its main contribution lies in four key areas. First, we extend the theory of online co-creation (brand-consumer) to co-*branding* (brand-consumer-brand). Second, we explore the issue of corporate reputation management in the context of online co-branding and corporate visual identity construction (Cegarra and Michel 2001). Third, we extend the work of Abratt and Kleyn (2012) on the relationship between corporate reputation management and brand community building. And fourth, we add to the growing literature on

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[6] As yet the company has no English-language account on Facebook or YouTube, while its Google+ page contains posts in both Russian and English.

the relationship between social media branding and organizational design. As Web 2.0 technology develops, and online consumer communities come to play an increasingly important role in how brands are perceived, managing this relationship will be crucial to competitive advantage.

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