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# Engaging Runners Through Social Media

A comparative Study: Adidas, Asics and Nike

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<p>The fast-paced social media environment has changed the nature of marketing in the recent years. Marketing has shifted from a traditional top-down model towards a two-way dialog in which companies are able to communicate with their customers on a more personal level, leading to a further understanding of the marketplace and consumer behaviours. Social media platforms have made it possible for companies to follow the activities of their consumers as well as directly engage with them.</p> <p>The social media landscape is now an important environment for sporting goods companies building closer relationships with their customers, and furthermore, runners as a rapidly growing community of socially connected consumers. Smartphone applications, training programmes and running communities as well as the basic social media channels are a huge opportunity for sports companies to build a relationship with their customers and revolutionize the runners' experiences with sports brands.</p> <p>This research is a comparative study of the three large sporting goods companies Adidas, Asics and Nike and their attempts to engage with runners as a marketing phenomenon, enabled by Web 2.0. The study highlights some of the currently practiced forms of social media engagement in the sports industry as well as the new opportunities which are starting to occur. Additionally, consumer behaviours and reactions of runners are covered to provide a more holistic approach to the topic of social media engagement in the sporting goods industry.</p>	
Keywords	social media engagement, consumer engagement, social media marketing, Nike, Adidas, Asics

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## Glossary of terms

**Facebook:** Social Media Platform launched in 2004 and founded by Mark Zuckerberg. Today the world's most popular social media platform with over 900 million users monthly.

**Hashtag:** Words that take form of tags beginning with # in front of the word on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, allowing the metadata tag define a search term for topics on social media.

**Marketing Mix:** A business tool also known as the 4P's of product, price, promotion and placement. Was widely used in marketing before Web 2.0 enabled new, more personal, marketing strategies.

**Twitter:** A global microblogging service with 646 million users, allowing consumers to share their news in a message of 140 marks, known as tweets.

**Web 1.0:** A name for the early days of the Internet, which did not facilitate content creations by third parties.

**Web 2.0:** The new and more developed form of internet, including the opportunity to create content and interact with other users. Constantinides & Fountain (Palgrave Journals, 2008) describe Web 2.0 as "a collection of open-source, interactive and user-controlled online applications expanding the experiences, knowledge and market power of the user as participants in business and social processes. Web 2.0 applications support the creation of informal users' networks facilitating the flow of ideas and knowledge by allowing the efficient generation, dissemination, sharing and editing/refining of informal content".

## 1 Introduction

The idea of the research was first established when the author was completing an internship in the running category of the global sporting goods company Nike between summer 2013 and spring 2014. During the author's internship it became apparent that running as a hobby was booming around the globe, and not only because people wanted to be healthier and challenge themselves, but because they were able to share their training process and achievements in their social media networks. Desiring to conduct a contemporary study relevant to the sporting goods industry and thus her work-life, the author chose to complete a comparative research around the social media activities of large sports companies particularly in the field of running.

As socially connected consumers have started running, the consumption of social media around the sport has increased rapidly. Race results, challenges and pictures can be shared, liked and forwarded to friends. As a result of the simultaneous increase of social media usage and amount of runners, large sports companies have noticed the new marketing opportunities for runners using various online channels. Additionally, the marketing of sports companies is shifting from traditional mass marketing to more personal communication and engagement, enabled by web 2.0 (Constantinides & Fountain (Palgrave Journals, 2008; see glossary of terms).

The author conducted a comparative study around the consumer engagement activities of Asics, Adidas and Nike which are positioned as the key players in the global athletic footwear market (Forbes 2013). All three companies are heavily investing in marketing for runners as well as enhancing social media as a platform of consumer engagement.

First, Asics was chosen as the purely running-led company which has provided high-quality, high-mileage shoes to consumers since 1949. The Japanese shoe manufacturer, often seen as a reliable brand, may not be the most popular topic on social media but is one of the most highly recognized companies providing quality running products and therefore plays a large role in the running markets around the globe. Although the company used to focus more on running events such as marathons, Asics has now picked up on social media engagement through providing

training programmes on online communities and smartphone applications for runners. (My Asics 2013) Secondly, Nike was naturally chosen as it is the largest sports company on the globe (Forbes 2014), also highly recognized through its consumer engagement activities both on and off social media. Founded in 1964, the American company has recently invested in digital activities such as smartphone applications and online troubleshooting programmes on Twitter as well as organized run clubs and running events in large cities around the globe as a form of consumer engagement. Nike has caused a buzz through its social media campaigns several times before, and is now more connected to its running consumers than ever. Thirdly, Adidas was selected due to the company's high consumer engagement rate in various social media platforms. The German sportswear manufacturer (founded in 1924) is known as one of the most advanced multinational companies when it comes to real-time marketing and benefiting from live events, such as the Olympics. Along with its largest competitor Nike, Adidas was ranked amongst the 50 most popular companies on social media in 2011 (Ranking the Brands in Social Media 2011).

The internet was initially built upon a top-down approach with most webpages preventing consumers from editing information, meaning that they did not necessarily create much online information themselves. The shift towards an open-source, more interactive environment took place in the early 2000s corresponding with the rise of social networks and technological development (Cormode & Krishnamurthy 2008: 2).

Having started from various online forums and more controlled communities, social media now connects more than a billion people together in its various platforms and networks, including areas targeted for niche, such as communities for fans of sports. Companies have noticed that consumers with similar interest can be reached in these online platforms, leading to social media marketing, and furthermore personal social media engagement directly with the consumers as a more "customized approach".

When discussing social media engagement, the best customer experiences often come when a consumer feels that they are being cared about. When someone listens to them and responds to their thoughts, they know they are taken good care of. Providing feedback to companies, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, has become easier than ever before as social media allows sharing information and news. Large sports companies, including Nike and Adidas are now engaging with runners as a new form of

social media marketing. These various engagement activities, as well as the consumers' aspect were aimed to be covered in this study.

## 2 Research Methodology

Having studied literature and articles discussing social media engagement, the author felt that many sources led towards the fact that companies who engage with consumers on social media will receive customers who value the brand and will want to be loyal to it as a result of the engagement.

Not being able to see if this was the case within the sporting goods industry, the author's research question became as follows: "What are the engagement activities of large sporting goods companies towards runners, and would running consumers feel more connected to a sports brand, having experienced these types of engagement?"

To examine the social media engagement aspects as well as to answer the research questions the author used a combination of primary and secondary research methods during the timeframe of February-April 2014. However, the main focus was attributed to the primary research base as the activities of sports companies on social media are easier to be identified in the social media environment and amongst the target market. Therefore, a questionnaire was conducted to gather information of runners' views on social media engagement activities of sports brands as well as to learn their consuming behaviours. The writer also observed the activities of sports companies on various social media channels to identify the amount of engagement and its correlation with the amount of (positive) reactions amongst consumers.

The difference between engaging with consumers and pushing services and products at them was to be studied further after several sources of literature made the conclusion that higher consumer engagement rate brings more customers to the brand. Along with creating a questionnaire for consumers, it could also be studied on the social media pages of large sporting goods companies themselves. The writer wanted to research whether a company with the so-named narcissist adverts with little to no discussion on their page could gain as many likes, comments and shares as a company which encourages consumers to be a part of the brands' journey. Studying the social media pages and activities of sports brands was vital as the study was to be

built around a comparison of the companies' engagement activities as well as consumers views on social media engagement. The largest social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook were the main source of information as there are the environments where the majority of sports-related marketing takes place.

The literature review consisted of works related to social media marketing and consumer engagement strategies. For a strategy-based viewpoint *The Social Media Strategist*, written by Barger (2012) were selected in order to gain an understanding of the issues companies need to take into consideration when starting to engage with consumers on social media channels as well as how to deal with different sorts of social media content users, such as influencers and new customers.

After learning about building a consumer relationship it was appropriate to find out how to build lasting value through consumer engagement. This information was provided by Gordon, the author of *Managing the New Customer Relationship: Strategies to Engage the Social Customer and Build Lasting Value* (2013). The work provided a thorough view on gaining customer knowledge as well as optimizing the one-to-one marketing and taking it even further to one-through-one marketing.

As engaging with consumers is more than just working to gain attention on social media, the author consumed information on mobile phone applications and services marketing. For example the training applications provided by Nike and Asics contain some low-key advertising as the applications themselves are free of charge. In this case *Services Marketing* (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011) came to use when studying about marketing different services to consumers as well as understanding the topic of word-of-mouth (WOM).

Finally, continuous monitoring of social media platforms of sports companies as well as news related to their newest online activities and services was executed throughout the study to ensure it stayed contemporary.

To ensure the quality of the literature the author used the online Ebrary platform provided by Metropolia Business School. Having access to a range of marketing, social media and consumer engagement strategy foundation books allowed the author to rely on the books' contents when it was appropriate. The literature review mainly focused on the basic steps of the social media engagement process, and the scope could have

arguably been increased. However, the author's primary research approach to the research question focused more towards social media activities of sports companies, which is specific and thus not fully covered in literature. Additionally, the best way to measure consumers' thoughts and companies' activities is to monitor the environment where it all happens.

## 2.1 Literature Review

The literature review introduces various theories and arguments on social media engagement, enabled by Web 2.0. First Web 2.0 and the consumers' power of information sharing will be presented, paving the way to explain digital relationship building capabilities for companies using social media. Finally the approaches of social media engagement processes and the functions of customizing and personalizing marketing for specific consumers through social media engagement will be introduced.

The Social Media Strategist (Barger, 2012) provides a strategic approach presenting today's fast-paced social media landscape as a learning opportunity and a channel for companies to use for engaging with consumers in the middle of a fiercely competitive environment, for example in the world of large sporting goods companies such as Nike and Adidas.

However, rather than deep diving into theories with a holistic approach towards the opportunities brought by Web 2.0, Barger (2012) focuses on explaining how to make social media a business strategy priority for companies, further stating that not only should companies focus on engaging with consumers, but should also go through internal changes towards adopting social media communications as an internal part of the company. The author presents the importance of social media engagement and notes that there is a greater urgency than ever before to establish a vibrant social media program – and it all starts with a key strategist who can best organize and leverage all of the organization's resources to cut through the bureaucracy and get real-time results (Barger 2012: 1).

Although the author of The Social Media Strategist has a main emphasis on building a social media strategy from the inside towards the out, Barger (2012) also gives insight into building a social media profile and approaching different consumer groups,

including bloggers, influencers and average every-day consumers searching for information on social media channels. This information was useful when applying it to the world of sports companies, as it is known how Adidas and Nike use social media influencers to reach target audiences with their newest product innovations.

While *The Social Media Strategist* (Barger, 2012) focuses on how to engage with consumers, the author of *Managing the New Customer Relationship: Strategies to Engage the Social Customer and Build Lasting Value* (Gordon, 2013) further explains how to manage the relationship built in a way to create lasting value for both the company and the consumer.

The author also benefited from studying the work of Rohrs, *Audience: Marketing in the Age of Subscribers, Fans and Followers* (2013), as the literature provided useful information on the fragmenting nature of consumer-brand relationships in the social media environment and addressing information to wide audiences in the correct way.

#### 2.1.1 Anyone can be a publisher

The World Wide Web has become Web 2.0, an interactive channel where anyone has the set of tools to publish content, share ideas, vote on them and to recommend products or services to others as a trusted source of information. No longer satisfied with advertising and promotional information, the consumers view traditional sources of information, such as companies, with less trust and skepticism (Barger 2012: 2). Supporting Barger's views, the author of *Social Media Marketing: The Next Generation of Business Engagement* (Evans 2010:4) recognized how consumers are searching on Web 2.0, leveraging the experiences of others, before they actually make a purchase themselves. An example of consumers becoming publishers in a social media channel would be the environment of Twitter, with its rapid, real-time paced discussions and randomness of trending topics consists of almost fully user-generated content on which companies do not have control. In social media the audience directs conversation and does not want companies to reassert control over conversations of its products and services. The shift from talking to consumers to listening to consumers is one of the key messages Barger (2012: 13) emphasizes in *The Social Media Strategist*. Barger (2012: 1) notes that those companies who master social media space and understand consumers shall be the ones who eventually come out on top.

Along with the statements of Barger (2012), Lovelock & Wirtz (2011: 206) note that some of the most powerful messages about a company and its products come from outside the organization and are not controlled by the marketers anymore. Everything and anything can be said behind the backs of companies. Within social media channels word of mouth (WOM) has a strong influence on consumers. Recommendations from other consumers are viewed as more credible than firm-initiated activities and can have a powerful influence to either use or avoid using certain products and services.

Lovelock et.al (2011:206) know that consumers who hold strong views are likely to tell people more about their experiences than those with milder views and that extremely dissatisfied customers will spread the word to more people than those who are highly satisfied. In the modern social media landscape it is even possible that a strong complaint has the potential for a global reach in a matter of days, especially when a social influencer has their word to say in a popular blog, Twitter account or even through Youtube. However, Lovelock & Wirtz (2011: 206) point out those consumers initially dissatisfied with a product or service can end up spreading positive WOM if they are delighted with the way the company handled the challenging situation.

“Organizations are increasingly investing in social channels to rapidly create or propagate their brand through viral content, social media contests and consumer engagement efforts” (Kumar 2013:192). As the discussion between consumers has moved online, it should be a natural step for companies to follow their customers and monitor the amount of WOM being created around the companies’ products and actions.

As noted by Barger (2012: 13) Online marketing, especially on social media channels, is no longer about one-way mass communication, and because of the shift from consumers being listeners to becoming publishers, companies should be ready to engage with their customers and listen to what they have to say.

Clashing with some ideas stated in The Social Media Strategist (Barger 2012), according to Gordon (2013: 73), the basic idea of the customer always being right is not the only way of managing relationships. The Author explains that a new approach is to only recognize the right customers always being right and that others may or may not be, depending on circumstances. Gordon (2013: 73) explains that building capabilities around the right customers will support those loyal to a brand whereas those consumers who are never satisfied with products or services should receive less

attention and resources from the company. However, Barger (2012: 7) shifts more towards the idea that consumers are already out there talking, and therefore companies should listen and learn from them. Barger (2012: 9) also reminds that once a company has social media channels, the cost of maintaining them is low and therefore anyone should be listened to.

### 2.1.2 From Pushing to Engaging

*"Engagement is central to the effective use of social technology and creation of social business."* (Evans 2010: 15)

According to The Social Media Strategist (Barger 2012:13), the best customer experience outcome is when consumers feel they are being cared about. When someone listens to them and responds to their thoughts, they know they are valued by the company. The author reminds that consumers do not necessarily let brands into their social networks because they want to hear how fantastic the particular brand is, but actually find the brand interesting and want to engage with it. The Social Media Strategist (Barger 2012: 9) also notes that it is not about the brands and their products, but about the consumers, as nobody wants to listen to someone who only talks about themselves.

The shift from a traditional push of marketing products to consumers is rapidly moving towards a two-way discussion with potential customers. The two-way dynamic, according to Barger (2012: 9) and supported by Gordon (2013:4), is the most important aspect of social media. Audiences will reward brands that join social networks and platforms to discuss with people rather than only talk at them. The author of Audience: Marketing in the Age of Subscribers, Fans and Followers (Rohrs 2013: 14) reminds that no audience can be owned and anyone can leave at any time they want. Because of this it is vital to keep the audience in mind when posting something on a social media page.

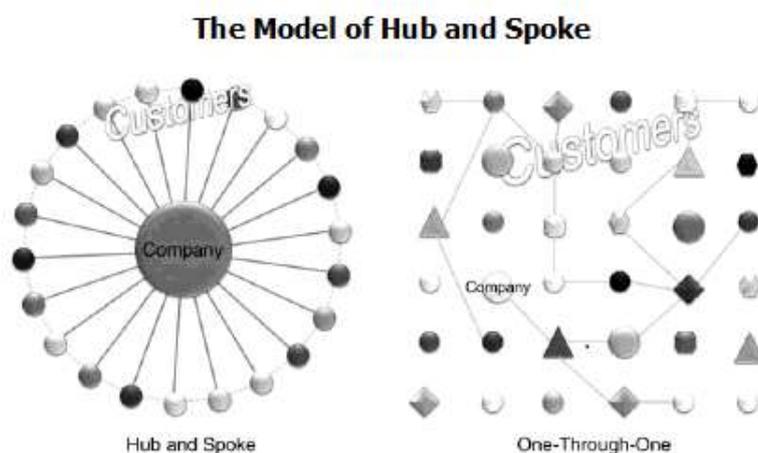
The two-way discussion, which is often linked with handling consumer feedback or giving services through social media channels, can help brands build new relationships with potential long-term customers. Answering directly to consumers in real-time even when they do not expect to hear a reply will further support brands in changing their

image in the minds of people using social media (Gordon, 2013: 111). Enabled by Web 2.0, companies have the possibility to monitor real-time social media discussions and optimize one-to-one marketing on a personal level.

When a consumer on a social media channel discusses about buying a new product, a brand who has been listening and following consumers carefully will be able to identify the chance to present the consumer their own product. Explained by Gordon (2013: 90) the method of helpfully stepping into a conversation at the right time to provide the help needed is known as intelligent engagement. If a company's communications bring innovative content that actually matters to consumers, the customers will most likely use the company's products and services again. Barger (2012) supports Gordon's (2013:12) idea of real-time marketing, but reminds that sometimes consumers don't want brands pushing into their discussions. It has to be about the correct timing and the ability to listen to what consumers also have to say.

Direct response marketing may help consumers pull the trigger once they are making the decision to buy a certain product (The Financial Brand 2013). In the end it is often the brand marketing (brand advertising, public relations, social marketing) and the way companies engage with consumers that helps consumers make their choice. Once the consumer does choose a certain brand and buys their product, it is still possible to close the sale by contacting consumers afterwards asking questions such as what do they think about the product and would they like a reminder when a new one hits the markets.

Gordon (2013: 121) recognizes that a well-established one-to-one discussion between a customer and the brand can potentially become a one-through-one situation, where positive WOM takes place and the story of a well-performing and high service oriented brand starts spreading in the network of consumers with equal interests, as shown in figure 1. The module of Hub and Spoke displays how companies used to be the source of information and the marketing strategy was a push, whereas nowadays WOM carries the information on.



**Figure 1** The Model of Hub and Spoke as presented by Gordon (2013: 121)

### 2.1.3 The Engagement Process

Explained by the Author of *Social Media Marketing: The Next Generation of Business Engagement* (Evans 2010: 3), after the visible impact of Web 2.0 around the globe, social technology is often automatically considered as a “given” in business. Many companies have simply assumed that presence in places like Facebook and Twitter “is a must”, too often without fully understanding the long-term organizational impact and the business opportunity offered by these channels.

Evans (2010: 15) presents the social engagement process which moves customers and similar participants in brand, product, or service-related conversations beyond the act of consumption (which would be for example reading an article about a product) and toward the shared act of working together (customers with the brand) to collaborate and produce an experience that may become a long-term project.

Building up a one-to-one discussion may be easy, however in order to gain the full advantages of social media engagement companies should remember to follow-up with consumers and focus on building a long-lasting relationship with the consumers. A customer can follow a company’s website only because of a short-term competition or raffle, but may stop following the company if no more engagement activities take place. Gordon (2013: 66) reminds that customers can become profitable to a company

if they stay for the long-term, meaning that not only would the customer buy products or services, but would also collaborate with the company to share new ideas and feedback on products.

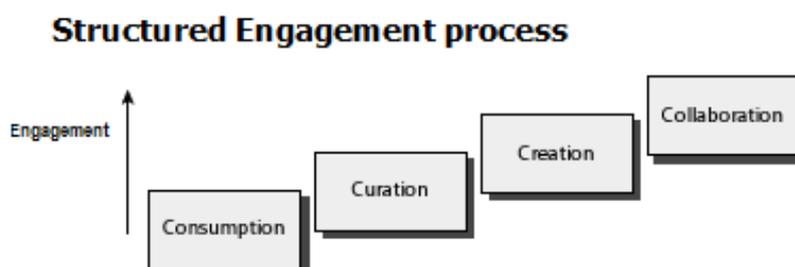
It can be noticed that the process of engagement is expanded to include not only the collaborative activity that occurs between customers, but also the activities that connect the business with its customers as well. Evans (2010:16) also recognizes this, explaining the consumer engagement process step by step to show how consumer engagement may lead to useful insights.

As presented in figure 2, the foundation of building social engagement towards a long-term relationship leading to collaboration and consumer profitability has four main steps explained by Evans (2010:15-20). The first level of engagement is almost nonexistent as the consumers are simply consuming information online, but not necessarily producing any themselves. This could mean downloading, watching, reading, or listening to digital reading content. Consumption is the basic starting point of every online activity – for example it is impossible to share information before seeing it first.

The second level of consumer engagement would be curation, which means filtering, commenting on content as well as tagging content online. This would basically mean that the consumer is not necessarily producing information themselves, but they are reacting to the social media usage of other consumers. The third level already leads towards creation of content, such as blog posts, tweets, image sharing on Instagram or posting status updates on Facebook. Gordon (2013: 94) explains that it is important to sense how consumers behave online before taking the relationship further and connecting with them personally.

Finally, Evans (2010:19) explains that collaboration takes place. In the case of social media consumers this would often mean that a follower of a certain brand online would provide feedback to the brand, thus bringing value. However, if companies are able to actually ask for consumers to provide feedback on products rather than only social media advertising, the company may well benefit from the consumers' views and thoughts.

To further understand the platforms in which these collaboration activities and social media engagement takes place, the social media landscape was included as an appendix.



**Figure 2** Structured social media engagement with consumers, presented by Evans (2010: 15), supported by Gordon (2013: 93).

#### 2.1.4 Customization

The traditional four P's of marketing, presented in Principles of Marketing (Kotler & Armstrong 2008), no longer work seem to work as discreet marketing tools in the social media landscape anymore. Kotler et al. (2008) present strong theory that has been used in marketing for a long time, but not all of it can be applied to social media marketing. Enabled by Web 2.0, the marketing mix (known as the four P's of product, price, placement and promotion) has changed from traditional ways of pushing information towards a more individual customer-oriented approach, whereas approaches in Principles of Marketing are still seen mostly as mass communication. Gordon (2013:5) presents the "digital 4Ps" which are also recognized by various social media analysts, one of them being Heidi Cohen (Actionable Marketing Guide 2013).

The product is now designed, developed, tested, piloted, provided, installed and refined, cooperatively with each individual customer to the extent that still makes any economic sense. (Gordon 2013: 207) Products today can comprise an aggregation of individual benefits customers have participated in selecting or designing. For example the large sporting goods company Nike provides their consumers the opportunity to

select and customize a pair of running shoes and then order them for a slightly higher price than average.

Although mass customization is seen as a strong method of reaching all types of consumers within the target market, Complete Marketer (McDonald & Meldrum 2013: 47) details the challenge of this type of practice; the ways of keeping the cost of mass customization down and yet utilizing the growth of new direct consumer channels to provide customization in innovative and consumer-friendly ways, remain difficult for marketers. McDonald and Meldrum (2013: 47) further note that with too much customization the entire activity is too expensive and time-consuming for companies to practice, yet with no customization many relationship objectives between companies and consumers would not necessarily be met. However, author of Services Marketing (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007: 356-357) explains that by smartly gathering information from consumers who have used customized products or services, companies can save money and offer similar customized products and services again, if they already know what the customers often want.

#### 2.1.5 Engagement Potential

Several of the authors with experience on social media marketing strategies and content creation come to the same conclusion that consumers are likely to develop a strong relationship with the brand providing unique marketing, individual discussions and commentaries, customized products and strong network building.

Barger (2012: 198) notes that an important aspect is to first build trust by acting transparently and engaging actively with both happy and unhappy consumers as well as confronting tough situations in a reliable way. A company providing trustful information will be valued more than one trying to trick consumers into buying their products. The author also states that after publishing a new campaign the work is not over, but the company should continue answering to consumers and acting as a part of the entire process of audience discussion. Lovelock & Wirtz (2007:413) support this view with the message that following up with consumers asking for feedback is equally as important as it is to market to them. Without feedback companies cannot develop their services to fully meet requirements of customers. Evans (2010:4) knows that many campaigns can fizzle out if the company does not focus on engaging with

consumers after the new product launches. As social media is a constantly changing environment, even trends of discussion can change within a couple of days if marketing and social engagement is not practiced by the company with a long-term goal in mind.

Gordon (2013: 247) provides the thought that consumers like to explore and play with new innovations. The author's view on consumer engagement is on building a long-lasting relationship through keeping consumers interested in the brand and the products and services it offers. Marketing and pushing themselves do no longer work on a long-term basis, unless it keeps consumers coming back to look at the brand's services. Gordon's (2013: 247) thought is that if consumers didn't adopt new innovations and ideas, marketing would go to deaf ears.

Evans' (2010: 19) idea of collaboration rather than exposure and impression support the author of "Managing the New Customer Relationship: Strategies to Engage the Social Customer and Build Lasting Value" (Gordon, 2013). According to Evans (2010: 19), engagement is central to the effective use of social technology and creation of social business in general. A well-handled engagement process can shift from basic information consumption to actual collaboration with a customer who is willing to bring new thoughts and ideas to the company with an addition of the company gaining more knowledge about their customers. Barger (2012: 262) knows that in the best situation, both the company and the customer get exactly what they want, and more.

## 2.2 Primary research – questionnaire

The study was supported by the creation of a questionnaire, targeting runners found in the international online environment. The author studied if large sports companies' attempts to engage with runners through social media were noticed, and if so, did consumers feel more connected to the brands they had been engaging with.

Initially the author distributed the questionnaire through two main social media channels, Facebook and Twitter, contacting international students as well as a wider audience on Twitter. In order to avoid answers from colleagues working for Nike and thus avoiding subjectivity, the author did not post the information to the general newsfeed of her personal Facebook account. In addition to the approaches through

Facebook and Twitter, the author contacted the Finnish running-led online forum Juoksufoorumi as well as the Runner's World online community in order to secure that along with basic joggers, the questionnaire would also reach core runners as a source of information. The author also distributed the questionnaire to a trendy Finnish website including sports-related discussions and fitness blogs, known as FitFashion. Finally, a few runners were contacted personally, leading to overall 161 answers over the timeframe of two weeks.

Although the questionnaire received over one hundred replies within two days, the potential full reach of the questionnaire could not be determined due to the character of social media being a channel on which information travels fast and one person may share the information with another. The possibility to share information with wide audiences often leads to a pebble-effect due to which the networks of people sharing the information cannot be fully identified. As the research question was closely related to social media activities and running, the author felt confident that despite the reach was not fully defined, using Web 2.0 as a tool to distribute the survey was highly appropriate in the nature of this study, especially when the questionnaire was targeted in specific channels where the target audience (runners) could be reached.

As instructed by the author of Marketing Research: An Applied Approach (Malhotra & Birks, 2006: 343) the questionnaire was logically split into sections in order to make it easier for participants to follow. The first section focused on gathering basic information from runners including demographic questions on age and gender, as well as general running-related background information, including years spent running and how often do the participants run.

The second section gathered information on the respondents' social media usage, asking if they followed sports brands online and if so, which ones and why. In order to approach the main research question of the study, the author included a question to find out if consumers had ever interacted with a sports brand online, and if so, did they feel more connected to the brand or would they feel connected to a brand if one was to approach them personally. For those runners who were not active with sports companies on social media, the author asked for an explanation to see what is stopping the target audience of sports companies from following the brands.

The third section of the survey gathered information on the runners' usage of smartphone applications and various training programmes. The author let the consumers tell themselves which services or applications they had used in order to see the competition of the three large sports companies, as well as understand do consumers feel connected to companies offering such services and applications. The author felt that although smartphone applications are not directly a form of social media, the information from the applications is often sent to social networks by consumers, thus enabling the applications as a potential form of consumer engagement in the future. The training programmes of sports companies were also included in the questionnaire these are often a way for companies to reach consumers on a more personal level.

Finally, the fourth section of the questionnaire discussed various forms of consumer engagement. Because this form of marketing is still relatively new in the sporting goods industry, the author could not expect that runners had already experienced such engagement activities. Therefore, the author asked to which extent did runners agree or disagree that various engagement activities would bring them closer to a brand practicing such activities. Additionally the section contained open-ended questions where runners were able to explain which sports companies they had experienced consumer engagement with and what did they think of it. The last open-ended question was to see which sports brands come out as the favorites and why. This could lead the author to making conclusions if consumers who had experienced various engagement activities and services brought up the same brand as one of their favorites.

Presented by Popper (The Logic of Scientific Discovery, 2004) one of the main disadvantages of creating a questionnaire is that quantitative research is simply an artificial creation by the researcher, as it is asking only a limited amount of information without much explanation. Additionally, respondents may read differently into each question and therefore reply based on their own interpretation of the question, creating a level of subjectivity that is not acknowledged by anyone else. In order to avoid these disadvantages as far as possible the author included help texts to further explain participants what the author was actually seeking for. As an example, the term "social media engagement" may not be fully understood by participants and could lead to invalid answers to the questions if not carefully explained.

Once data sampling took place the author used two tools to analyse the results of the questionnaire; SPSS as well as excel. The basic information was analysed in SPSS in order to define variables and frequencies whereas Excel played an important role with calculating the percentages of open-ended responses leading to certain sports companies.

### 3 Social Media Engagement in the Sporting Goods Industry

Social media marketing was initially recognized by large sports companies in the early 2000's as the World Wide Web was becoming more accessible for consumers than ever before (Mashable 2011). The first forms of social media included online forums and user spaces where people sharing the same interests could discuss topics such as sports. In the sports industry the first social media communities created by sporting goods companies were online forums for football-obsessed teens, one of them being built by Nike in partnership with Google (Mashable 2011).

Sports companies soon noticed the potential of online marketing and shifted towards online communities in the search of connected consumers. In the beginning marketing was still performed in a traditional model having the company share the information and consumers listen. As one of the early industries to be socially connected it was a natural step to shift from pushing adverts to consumers to engaging with consumers.

For Nike, one of the most socially devoted companies in 2013 (Social Bakers 2013), the shift happened during 2012 when the company started connecting with consumers through social media in a more unique way when the brand discovered how individuals are letting brands into their social networks. Ranked as the world's most innovative company of 2013 (Fast Company 2013), Nike received expectations from consumers and thus decided to bring the company a real-time social media team to support the creation of a social community for the brand's consumers online. This was a huge strategic move as Nike almost completely dropped their traditional advertising channels and focused on advertising online, where the company can more personally connect with their consumer audience and target market. (Intelligent HQ 2013) After Nike's shift from pushing to engaging, other large sporting goods companies, including Asics and Adidas, have started to take huge steps towards social media engagement in order to be able to answer the expectations of consumers.

Although Asics is a highly-recognized global running company, the brand's social media activities are not as bold and connected as the ones performed by Adidas or Nike. The company does not spend lots of resources on sponsoring top athletes or appearing with bold campaigns (Sport Business Daily 2012). The brand tends to market its

products with a more traditional approach and product benefit communication, including hashtags but not really encouraging consumers to use their full potential. However, Asics is recognized as a brand with high-quality running shoes and thus has loyal customers including core runners who aim for long distances and rather seek for high-performance footwear than trendy running products (as analyzed in questionnaire results further in this study). The slightly different target audience of Asics would rather see services related to coaching programmes than fun posts on social media channels. The company has highly invested in building a digital community, also known as the personalized My Asics running application (My Asics 2013). On Facebook Asics is followed by 1.1 Million consumers, whereas in Twitter the company has 63,000 followers.

The majority of marketing activities of Adidas take place in the social media landscape, since this is where the company's target market (young consumers) is spending their time. In March 2013 the sportswear company said its brands needed to be more relevant online in order to propel demand. In fact, Adidas is setting up internal digital newsrooms, in partnership with video platform the TheNewsMarket to tap into trending topics as a part of its real-time marketing strategy which has been successful also in the social media networks of runners (Newsweek 2014). Like Nike, Adidas has segmented its marketing efforts to different categories of sports, one of them being Running. Adidas running has its own Facebook pages in a few different languages (3.6 million followers), a Twitter account for its real-time marketing activities around running events (570,000 followers), and even its own dedicated Youtube account containing advertising.

### 3.1 Facebook

With over 900 million monthly active users worldwide Facebook represents the largest online sampling of human beings on the planet. (Forbes 2014) It is the community in which consumers spend their time to follow the activities of friends, like posts, share information and to follow interesting pages. Along with Twitter, Facebook is one of the best places for companies to advertise online, as stated by Rohrs (2013: 115).

Unlike Asics, which is a pure running-led sports company, Nike and Adidas have both multiple fields of sports to specialize on. Both companies have set up different

Facebook pages for each sport, including running. The various Facebook pages and product benefit communication as a form of marketing could potentially be more effective when the right target market is reached. For example a runner might not be interested in the newest football boots but would be happy to hear about running-related innovations and inspirations. Additionally, to engage closer with their consumers Nike uses a localization strategy in order to further reach consumers from countries in which English is not the first language. For example the Facebook page of Nike Running Mexico has 2.6 million followers, thus outgrowing the original Nike Running Facebook page which has 2.1 million followers (April 2014).

Nike's running Facebook page has a high focus on bringing the consumers closer to the brand by letting them be a part of product stories. An example of the brand's attempts to connect with consumers as a form of marketing is Nike's Flyknit Friday, which is celebrated once a week with Nike's Facebook fans who post a picture of their Flyknit running shoes in the Nike community. As consumers engage with the large sports company by sharing pictures of their favorite shoes, consumers following Nike's running page will see pictures different colors and designs of the Flyknit shoes, yet without having to listen why they should buy the products.

As another engagement strategy, both Nike and Adidas answer consumers' questions on the companies Facebook pages as a new form of customer service. Several consumers comment on the companies' Facebook postings and adverts and are now able to receive replies from brands even when they haven't provided feedback or asked for a response. In 2013 Nike's general Facebook page reached the top 10 socially devoted brands list with a response rate of 84.9% to consumer's questions on Facebook (Social Bakers Blog, 2013).

With 1.1 million followers on Facebook and a highly recognized quality brand, Asics tends to be a little behind with the consumer engagement activities on the Facebook platform. The company includes posts which provide product benefit communication and focus on innovation, which is also what the company's core target audience seeks for.

Adidas has been using Facebook as one of the tools to really leverage the impact of the company's product campaigns. In spring 2013 Adidas launched the new Boost footwear innovation, knowing that traditional advertising may not bring the product as

much visibility as consumer engagement could. The company created energy around the product and launched a Facebook competition for the Adidas running community which people could use to express their concept of energy, which was known as the element of the boost footwear. The consumers' responses were used to create personalised online cards, which they then shared on their Facebook timelines and could ask their friends to support their card with a vote. Ten winners were then selected based on number of votes and the quality of their entry, and they were given an exclusive invite to the Adidas boost launch party in Milano (We Are Social 2013).

### 3.2 Twitter

Established in 2006, Twitter has become one of the most popular social media channels for sharing information (Mashable 2013). Due to its simplicity and speed of sharing news, Twitter allows companies to set up profiles not only to send adverts and links to new product innovations, but also to provide free customer services to consumers who are socially connected. It is stated that several consumers turn to Twitter to talk about companies and their industry in messages of only 140 characters. This gives brands a powerful context to connect directly with present and future customers in real time (Twitter Business 2013).

The Author of Social Media Marketing (Khare 2012: 69) recognizes that Twitter can also be used as a platform for companies to listen in on what's happening in a particular business niche, without ever posting a tweet. Even that activity can be useful from a marketing perspective and for studying the activities of competition.

Nike's Twitter page called @NikeSupport, launched on Twitter in June 2012, quickly redefined how Nike serves their consumers. The result of a partnership between the company's global digital brand and global consumer service, @NikeSupport is now delivering a 24/7, one-to-one connection that serves customers across the globe. The team of product and brand experts provides support by answering questions, offering product recommendations and troubleshooting Nike+ application issues. @NikeSupport plays a critical role turning frustrated consumers into brand advocates. With a consumer response rate of over 74 percent, @NikeSupport sets one of Twitter's highest bars. It boasts a sporting goods industry-leading response time, connecting with 55 percent of inquiries within 30 minutes, averaging 380 interactions with

consumers in a day (Nike Maxims Gallery 2013). This social media troubleshooting platform received the Best In Class award from Social Media Today and earned recognition from Mediabistro as the "Gold Standard for Customer Service on Twitter". (Nike Maxims Gallery 2013).

Nike does not only use Twitter to give technical support to consumers, but also to engage with their activities. For example the Twitter team of Nike inspires and congratulates athletes who have been posting about their sports achievements on Twitter. Consumers like to interact with a brand and see that their opinions and thoughts matter. However Nike will also sometimes make the initiative and start the interaction first (see figure 3 below).



**Figure 3** An example of social media engagement as Nike takes the initiative to connect with a consumer through Twitter (7-March 2014)

Where Nike has established a strong platform for serving and connecting with consumers on Twitter, Adidas has taken the advantage of real-time marketing on the platform where news travels fast, especially when users are following large events together, creating a popular stream of live tweets. The method of live marketing seems to work especially for sports, fashion shows, music concerts and other international performances. In this form of engagement the advertisers first watch what is trending and then they draft their content to match with the topics being widely discussed (The Wall Street Journal 2014). The advantage of real-time tweets is that the timing of

tweets is perfect, as the event is fresh in everyone's mind. Everyone can relate to them and feel the passion for the sport and the brand (Beta TwentyOne 2013).

According to the author of *Search and Social: The Definitive Guide to Real-Time Marketing* (Garner 2012: 4) real-time marketing is all about time, existence in time, and the ability to use search and social technologies to interact and strike with lightning speed and strong efficiency. Adidas brings the company's new products to a forefront through their live tweets. Showcasing products along with the activity in a real-time setting, such as the Olympics, has a higher impact on followers than a stand-alone image of the product (Beta TwentyOne 2013).

Live marketing is often planned beforehand, as getting an image of the right athlete wearing the right product needs to be ready for posting if the athlete wins an event. It means that companies like Adidas often have an archive ready for the moment. Figure 4 below proves how Adidas Running posted a picture of the world's fastest marathon runner Wilson Kipsang's shoe when he broke the course record of London Marathon in April 2014.



**Figure 4** A screenshot from Adidas Running's Twitter account after the London Marathon on 13-April 2014.

### 3.3 Smartphone Applications

A newly noticed opportunity in the world of sports is the ability to get into consumers networks by providing them free mobile phone applications. This form of engagement may actually work for those consumers who are not interested in advertising or sports brands but want to have something free that would be beneficial for their runs. The online coaching programme, also as a smartphone application provided by Asics targets consumers by stating: "Train for your personal best." (Asics: My Asics, 2013).

The possibility to track your run and gather useful information from your training, such as your pace, is not only beneficial for the consumer, but also for the company. Although Nike and Asics provide consumers applications free of charge, the companies get the opportunity to see where the consumers go running, how they use the

application with social media, and in some cases even which products the consumer is wearing. Mobile phone applications are bringing companies the chance of direct marketing to consumers, often in a way that the consumer does not even realize they are being marketed to.

My Asics is an online running community application, allowing members to create training programmes, track their runs and get advice from professionals (EConsultancy 2011). The coaching program can be customized accordingly to the runners' needs, for example for someone who wants to complete a marathon in the timeframe of three hours. Having been localized to different countries and languages, including Finnish, aids the brand reach consumers who would not necessarily understand applications conducted in English (Asics 2014). According to the American news and technology site The Verge (2013), Asics's smartphone application is differentiated from other running applications because of its features which are designed to help runners achieve their personal records and goals set. My Asics is said to constantly adapt to the performance of runners, pushing them to train harder if they improve faster than the application initially expected (The Verge 2013).

The Nike+ Running application is more basic. Since its launch in 2006, the Nike+ has provided runners around the world the chance to track, measure, share and compare their runs with a global community of other runners. Today the Nike+ Running community has logged over 1 billion miles worldwide and is constantly growing (Nike 2013). Amongst the more expensive Nike+ products, the running mobile phone application is downloadable for free and thus easy to reach for anyone. The latest update to the popular running app allows users to share photos from their runs with their friends through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Path. Being so closely connected to social media, the application can easily gain more visibility amongst potential consumers of Nike products, especially when consumers have the opportunity to create groups and challenge each other through the application or send cheers through Facebook. Following consumers of Nike+ has helped the brand track which products the runners are wearing and for how long. The runners can register their Nike shoes on the application and once a runner has logged a certain amount of kilometers wearing the shoes, Nike contacts the runner recommending the runner to retire the old shoe and get a new model which would be suitable for the distances the consumer is currently running (Nike Plus 2013).

### 3.4 Communities

As consumers have become more excited about sharing information on social media channels and taking pictures of their achievements, the fun events offered by sports brands have become more popular (Running US Today 2013). This can be seen in various run clubs and training classes provided by sports companies for free.

For example Nike has established Nike+ run clubs around the globe, bringing runners living in the same area together. The runs are designed to meet needs of different level runners – for example beginners will be taken to a short, easy route, whereas the more advanced runners will take longer distances on a faster pace (Urban Runners 2013). The author visited a Nike+ Amsterdam run club in the Netherlands and received a free running T-shirt as a welcome gift. The run club started from a Nike store, thus bringing runners to a retail environment, but no marketing took place during the event. After the weekly run each runner was provided a stamp to a Nike leaflet and once the runner has a certain amount of stamps, they will receive a free product and a discount. Additionally, the run club provides free product trials and this way brings awareness of the company's products to consumers. For those consumers who do not want to run in a group but would like to share thoughts and experiences with other runners Nike has built a social media community specifically for runners training for different distances and goals (Nike Communities 2014).

Adidas has a slightly different approach to creating communities. The company also hosts run clubs, known as Adidas Tribes (Adidasheimo 2014). These run clubs are hosted by social media and sports influencers and thus create WOM on blogs, Twitter and Facebook. Unlike the run club provided by Nike, Adidas Tribe focuses on training runners to achieve results. Because of this the group is kept small and only a certain amount of people will be accepted to one training programme – in Finland 15 people were selected for the project in 2014 (Adidasheimo 2014). The exclusivity of the run club means that it is mostly for social influencers who are able to spread the word of Adidas running products to a wide audience. Barger (2012:162) notes that social influencers can help the build a consumer-driven experience which will be shared with a large audience to gain trust in products.

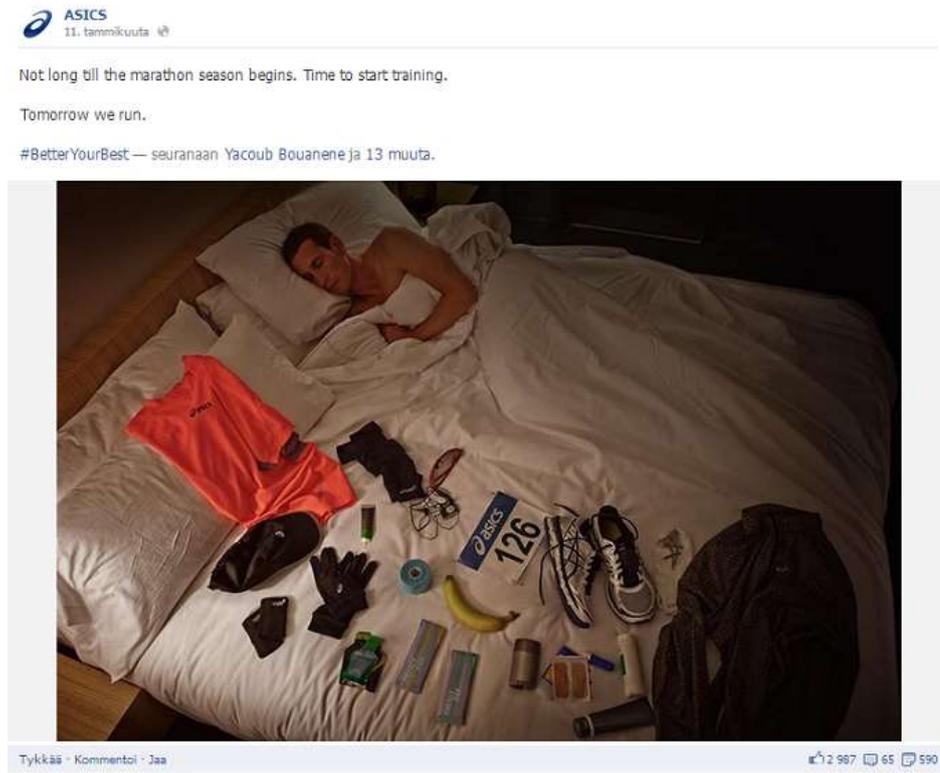
### 3.5 Audiences on Social Media

The author of *Audience: Marketing in the Age of Subscribers, Fans and Followers* (Rohrs 2013: 78) explains that nothing kills engagement faster than a stream filled with self-promotional posts on a company's social media channel. Rohrs (2013: 78) presents an exercise for companies to find out if they are engaging enough with their consumers on social media channels. The exercise suggests companies to study their own social media posts and compare them to competitors' activities on web 2.0.

According to Rohrs (2013: 78), a company engaging with consumers rather than marketing products at them is likely to get a higher engagement rate and thus a larger reach to audiences, whereas narcissistic brands only posting about their products would have less shares, likes and comments.

In this context, the writer compared three Facebook posts from three sporting goods companies to find the differences between the amount of audience reactions to different levels of social media engagement (March 2014). The author calculated the aggregated reach of social media posts through the amount of likes, shares and comments, as was suggested by Rohrs (2013: 78). The correlation between unselfish interaction or sharing together with consumers and receiving a volume of comments could be recognized.

As shown in figure 5, the running-led sports company Asics posted a picture of a runner sleeping next to his race equipment reminding consumers to prepare for the race season, using the hashtag #betteryourbest. As several consumers of Asics are marathon runners, runners following Asics could possibly feel identified with the post. The aggregated amount of likes, shares and comments for the Asics post climbed to 3642, whereas a post from Adidas Running (figure 6) received merely a reach of 156 consumers, suggesting that their advert on Climawarm apparel was not engaging consumers enough. In turn, Nike's post (figure 7) consisting of pictures taken by consumers and a message "let's score some frequent flyer miles together" received altogether 5902 likes, shares and comments, proving that consumers would interact more with a brand which takes their activities as a part of their marketing stories.



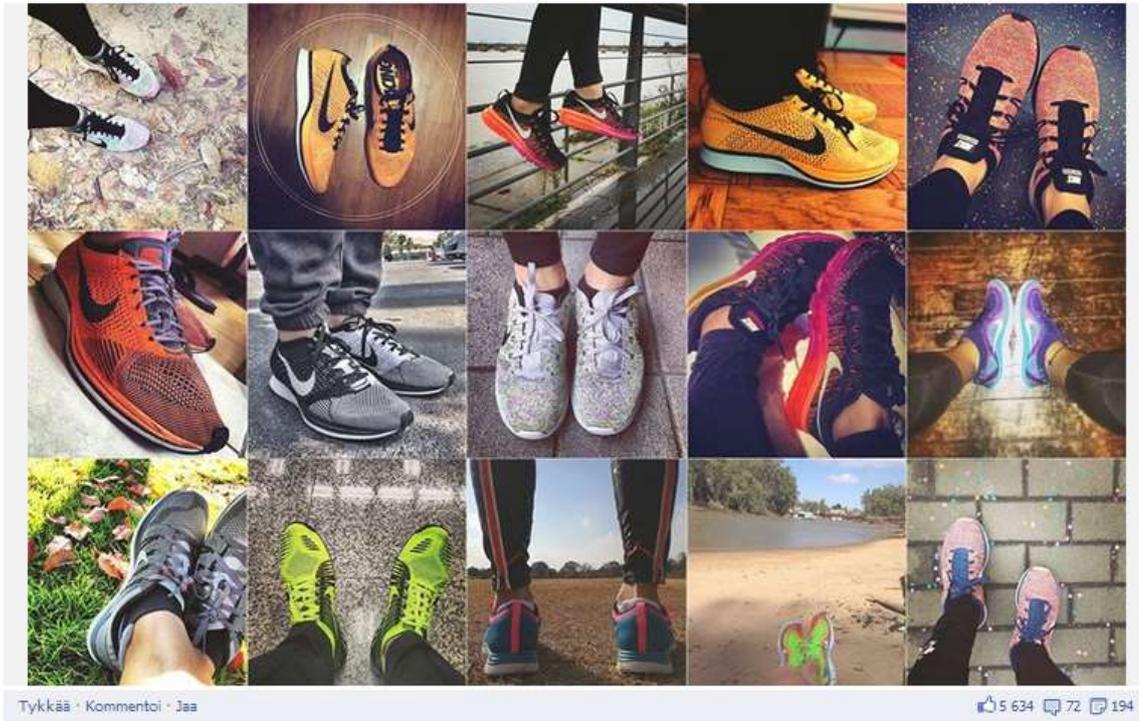
**Figure 5.** A post from Asics on the company's Facebook page on 11-January 2014 reaching 2987 likes, 65 comments and 590 shares with the hashtag #betteryourbest.



**Figure 6.** A Facebook post from Adidas on 11-January 2014. The post contains a link to the company's online store along with the hashtag #WarmDontQuit.



It's #flyknit Friday. Let's score some frequent flyer miles together.

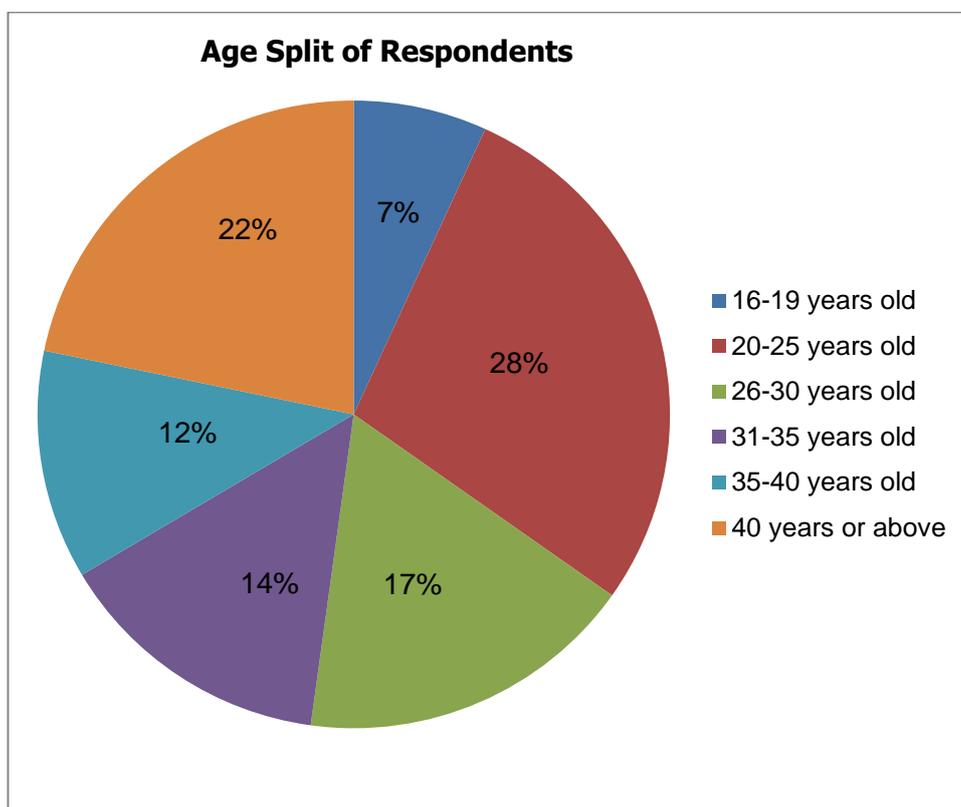


**Figure 7.** As shown on Nike's Facebook post on 10-January 2014, the company celebrates #flyknit Friday together with its customers each week.

## 4 Questionnaire results

The questionnaire provided for runners brought altogether 161 responses from several different age groups, genders and levels of runners.

Out of the 161 respondents of the questionnaire 44.7% were female and 55.3% were male. Possibly followed by the distribution to different forms of social media, the split of age group in percentages was close to equal. Most replies to the questionnaire were from the agegroup of 20-25 year olds representing 28% of the respondents, followed by the over 40-year olds with 22%. The smallest group were the 16 to 19 year olds, bringing only 7% of the responses to the questionnaire (see figure 8 for full split).



**Figure 8.** The split of the age groups of the respondents to the questionnaire.

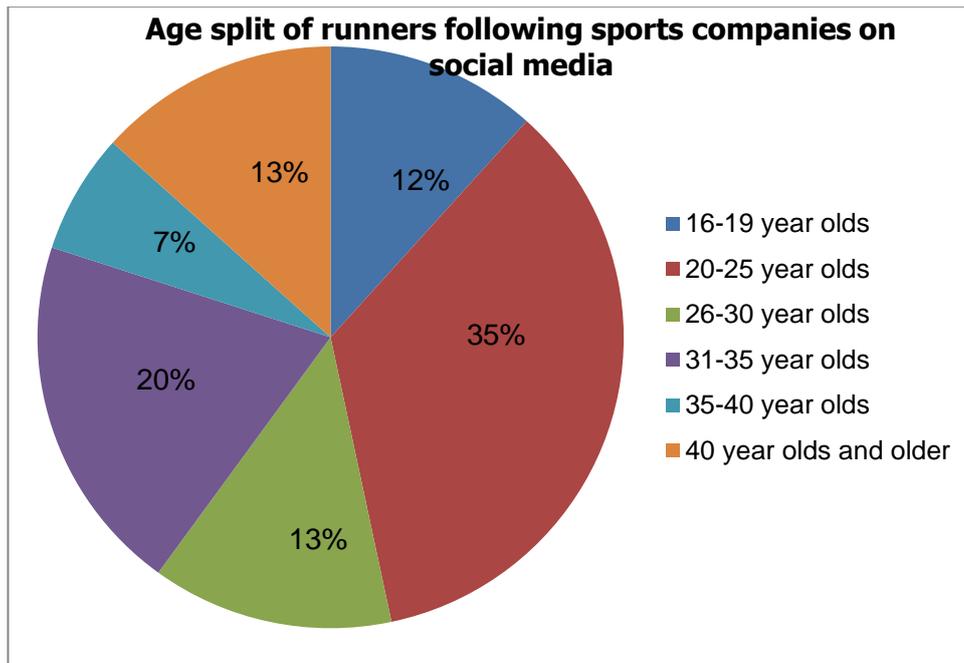
Based on the questionnaire the most popular source of information for new running products is the web pages of sports companies themselves. Out of the 161 respondents 58% would seek for information there. Interestingly, although several sources of social media strategy books state that consumers don't fully trust

companies, they would still seek for information directly from the companies' pages. This however, may not lead to the final buying decision yet. The second most popular source of information for the respondents were different online running communities and forums, where core runners share their thoughts and experiences on products – 52%. The third most popular place for information seeking were sports stores with 45%, followed by books and magazines (41%), friends (33%) and only then social media channels (32%). Additionally 7% of the respondents would search for information from other sources. The question “where do you seek for information on running products” allowed respondents to choose multiple options, thus showing that the percentages do not add up to 100%.

Although social media as a source of product information was the second least popular option in the questionnaire, it was still chosen by almost a third of the respondents, thus proving that social media as a channel for product benefit communication could work for sports companies targeting runners, especially for Adidas and Nike, as their target market is a slightly younger age group than the one of Asics, and younger consumers were following sports companies more than the older ones, as stated in the following chapter.

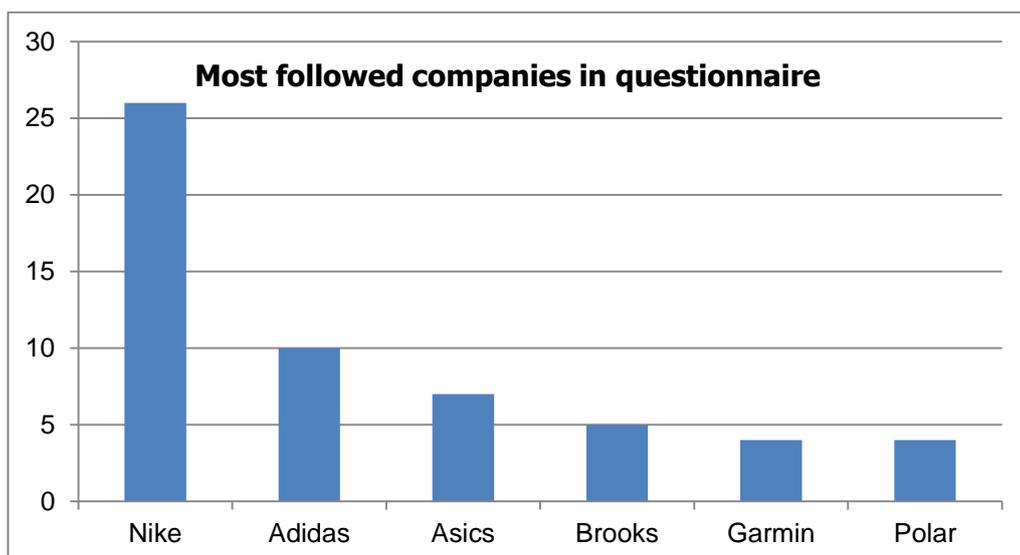
#### 4.1 Runners on Social Media

Out of all the respondents 37% follow sports brands on social media channels. The youngest group of consumers, aged 16-19, had eleven respondents of which seven follow sports brands, that being 64%. The largest group of respondents, aged 20-25, has the highest amount of people (21) following sports brands, making it 47% of the overall age group. The 26-30 year olds were less active followers with 28%. Twelve (52%) out of the 23 respondents in the age group of 31-35 year olds follow sports companies in their social networks. whereas the two oldest groups, 35-40 year olds (21%) and over 40 year olds (22%) were the least interested in following sports companies.



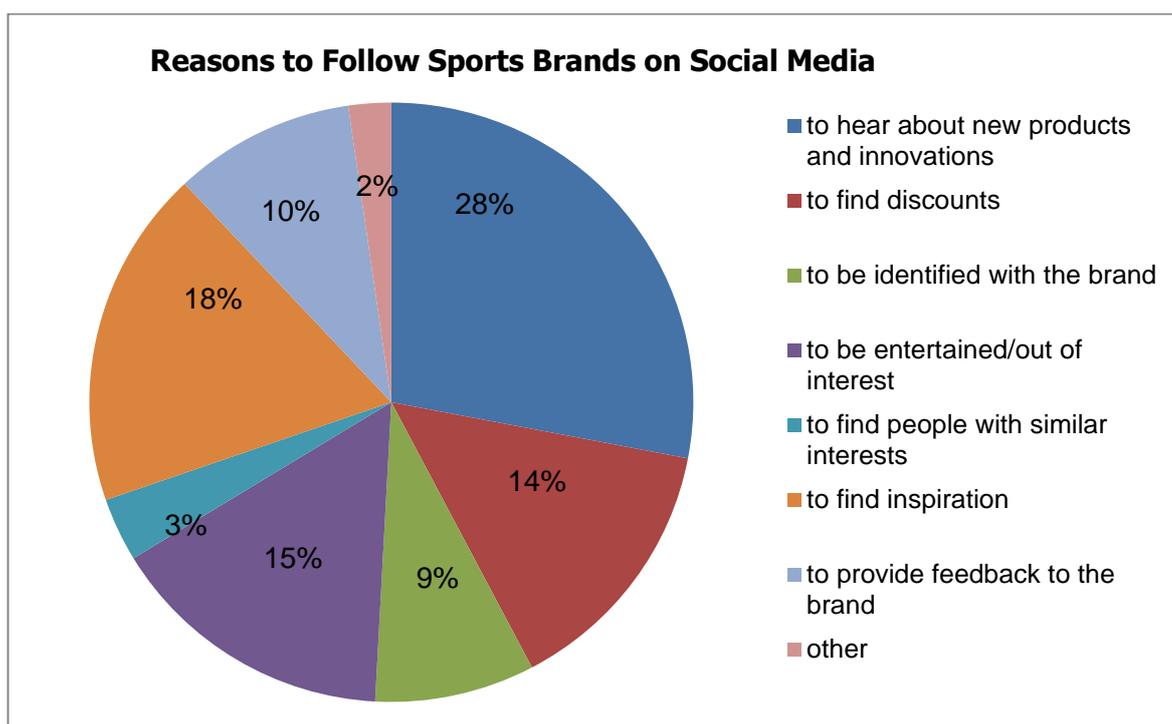
**Figure 9.** The followers of sports brands split by age groups.

Out of the 60 respondents who follow sports companies online 47 people provided names of the brands they followed. The clearly most followed brand was Nike with 26 respondents (53%) following the company's activities. Adidas and Asics came out in the top three, but with significantly less followers. The full split of most followed companies amongst the responses of the questionnaire is provided in figure 10 (below).



**Figure 10.** The most followed companies amongst the respondents of the questionnaire.

According to 82% of the respondents following sports brands on social media, the most common reason to follow a sports company was simply to hear about new products and innovations. Over half of the respondents (53%) following sports brands did it to also find inspiration, and 45% simply wanted to be entertained. The least popular reason was to find people with similar interests (10%), along with other reasons (7%). It must be noted that the question allowed multiple choices of options and therefore the percentages above do not add up to 100%. However, in the figure 11 below the split is defined from the amount of all answers provided to the question.



**Figure 11.** The reasons why runners choose to follow sports brands in social media

Although 37% of all the respondents follow sports brands in their social media channels, only 28 (17% of total respondents) had actually experienced consumer engagement with a sports company. Out of these people 18 shared the name of the companies they had engaged with, Nike being the most connected company (33%), followed by Adidas (17%). Asics, along with other sports brands such as Puma, was only mentioned once.

Although less than half (45%) of all respondents of the questionnaire (including those who had never experienced consumer engagement online) thought that the engagement would bring them closer to a company, 71% of the 28 respondents who actually had communicated with a sports brand on social media felt more connected

towards the brand(s). This would support the theories of Barger (2012) and Gordon (2013).

It can be noted that a clear phenomenon of reactions towards the idea of letting brands into consumers' social networks was tied with the age of the consumers. The over 40-year olds did not feel the need to follow sporting goods companies whereas a 20-25 year-old was more interested in the social media activities. To compare these differences the author looked into the behaviour of the two largest groups of respondents, also representing two very different age groups.

Out of the largest group of respondents, aged 20-25, 47% percent follow the activities of sporting goods companies on social media channels. Out of these consumers only eight (38%) had actually engaged with a sports company online. Interestingly seven out of these eight people (88%) felt that after the online discussion with a sports brand they felt more connected to the company they had experienced engagement with. Additionally, out those who had never engaged with a sports brand 57% stated that they would feel more connected with the company if they ever were to experience such an activity.

Out of the 35 respondents in the age group of 40 year olds or over, only eight people (23%) followed sports companies on social media. The most common explanation for why most respondents didn't let sports companies into their social networks was that they were simply not interested in the activities of sports brands. Two runners also stated that if they need information about sports products they would rather go somewhere where they could touch and feel the product than trust general information presented on social media channels. Finally, five runners explained that they do not use social media at all and thus don't follow sports brands on these channels. Seven people of the 35 respondents had experienced consumer engagement with a sports brand online, but only three of these people (43%) felt more connected towards the brands. The only mentioned brand which had brought a positive consumer engagement experience amongst this age group was Nike.

## 4.2 Coaching Programmes

71 (44.1%) of the respondents use or have used a smartphone application for running. The most open age groups for the usage of a smartphone during a run were the 20-25-year olds (62%) as well as the 31-35 year olds (52%). Additionally almost half of the 16-19-year olds used smartphone applications for their runs (45%). The least interested age group was the 35-40 year olds (21%), followed by the 40-year olds and older (28%). The people aged 26-30 landed in between with a result of 32% using smartphone applications for runs. As one may notice the age-split of interest towards mobile applications was closely similar to the interest towards following and engaging with sports companies.

Out of all the users of smartphone applications, less than half (46%) felt more interested towards the companies offering the services. The clearly most popular application amongst the 65 respondents was Sportstracker with a user rate of 49%, followed by Nike+ (22%) and Heiaheia (6%).

Out of those 89 consumers who were not interested in following smartphone applications, 29 respondents (32%) explained that they are using GPS sports watches which are more advanced devices for measuring performance, this being the most common response. Out of those who mentioned GPS, up to 31% were 40-year olds or older, followed by the 31-35-year olds (24%). This would mean that the opportunities of sports companies also lie with the sports watch technology. For example, the Asics application would be more useful if core runners (the target audience of Asics) had the opportunity to measure their heart-rate rather than take pictures while running. Another common reason to not use a running application was that smartphones are too bulky to carry on a run (12%), the consumer did not have a smartphone (16%) or they were simply not interested in applications (15%). Five consumers (6%) mentioned that they didn't use an application yet, but were planning on downloading one in the near future.

Coaching programmes were not as popular as running applications amongst the respondents of this questionnaire. Only 34 consumers (21%) had used a training programme provided by a sports brand. The most mentioned training programme was Nike's half marathon programme, which was used by 21% of the 34 consumers. The second most mentioned brand providing coaching was Asics with a response rate of

9%. Another 9% came from online running communities such as Runner's world, Juoksufoorumi, triathlonhaaste.fi and Kuntoplus webpage. The remaining 39% came from various programmes, none of which were mentioned more than twice.

Only twelve runners, that being 7% of the respondents to the questionnaire, have tried a running club or fitness class offered by a sports brand. Four of these consumers had attended sessions hosted by Nike, whereas all other sessions were from various companies' services, such as Salomon's trail running school. Out of the twelve consumers nine (75%) felt more engaged and interested towards the brand's products and services. Additionally, 109 respondents (68%) out of all 161 would be interested in trying out free sports clubs and training sessions offered by sports brands, even if they included some product benefit communication or another form of product marketing. The least interested group of people was the 40-year olds and older, of which 27% did not find any interest towards run clubs or free group training hosted by a sports brand. However, the amount of runners interested in training led by a brand would mean that there is an opportunity for sports companies to build training clubs and help runners meet other people interested in the same hobby as well as train for an important event. Several respondents stated that joining a free training session would be extremely useful and that they would definitely feel closer to a brand which actually helps them achieve their goals and gain positive experiences, such as meeting new people through the hobby. Some respondents also mentioned that they do not like marketing, but would join the sessions anyway.

#### 4.3 Engagement Activities

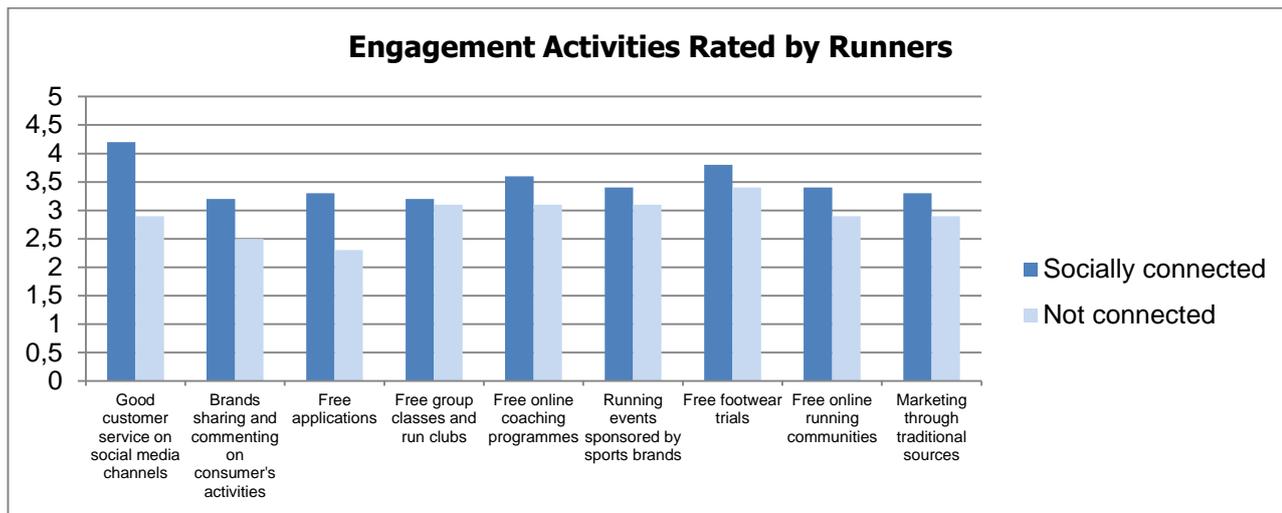
The participants of the questionnaire were asked to reply to a list of activities of sports companies and if it would make them feel more interested towards buying the brand's products. The activities were to be rated on a scale of one to five, one being "completely disagree" and five being "completely agree". The eight engagement phenomena were the following: good customer service on social media channels, brands sharing and personally commenting on consumers' social media activities, brands offering free smartphone applications, brands hosting free group classes and runs, brands organizing running events, free online coaching programmes, providing

footwear trials, hosting online communities and forums and, finally, practicing traditional marketing on television and magazines.

On the highest mean, that being 3.7, the runners felt that their buying decisions towards a brand would be positively affected if they had the chance to complete a free footwear trial offered by the sporting goods company. This would mean that if the consumer got to complete one free run in a new footwear innovation, they would become more interested in the products and services of the company offering those footwear trials. Popular engagement activities were also good customer service on social media channels, hosting running events and free online communities, all of them scoring 3.6 points as the mean.

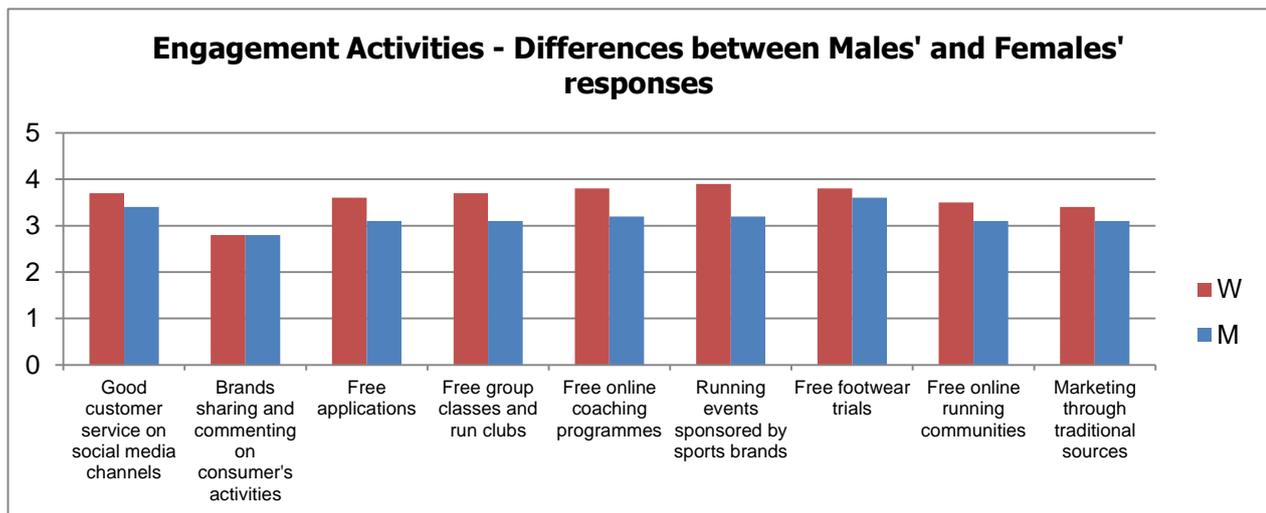
On the contrary, the buying decisions and interest towards companies was the lowest in the case where companies would enter runners' social networks to communicate with them or share the runners' posts in social media. This method of consumer engaged with a mean of only 2.8 points, bringing out a slightly different consumer reaction to what the author had anticipated after studying literature which encouraged companies to openly join conversations of social media users (see literature review).

However, those runners who were already following sports companies on social media channels answered the same question with an average of 3.2 points. Additionally, the questionnaire results proved that those runners who were connected to sports companies in social media were more open to various engagement activities than those who were not allowing sporting goods companies into their social media networks (see figure 12 below).



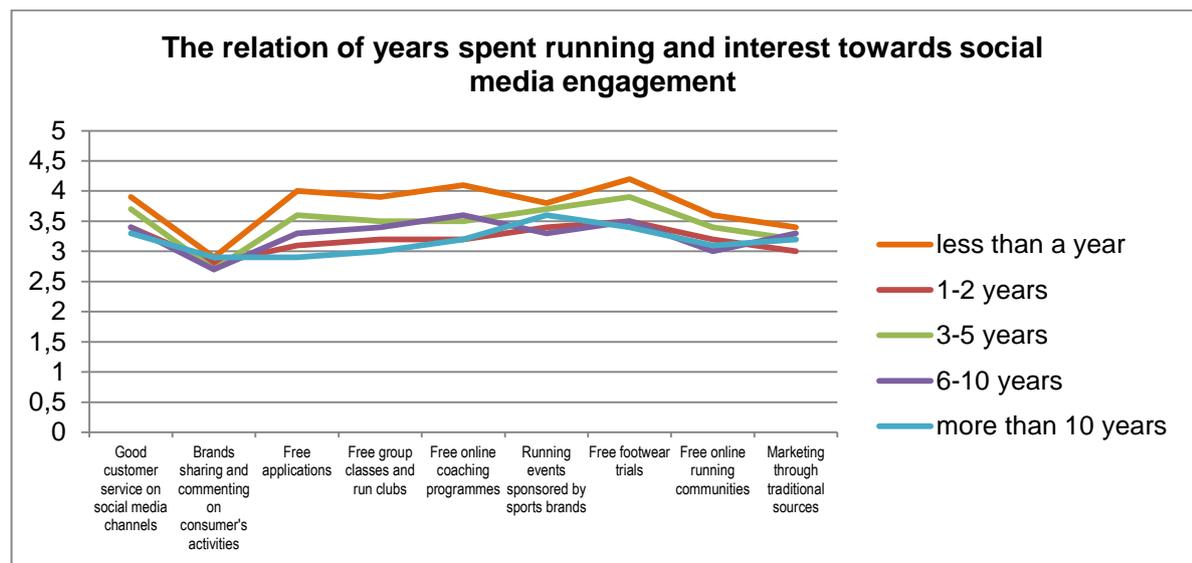
**Figure 12** Engagement activities of sports companies rated from one (completely disagree) to five (completely agree) by runners following sports brands on social media and those who do not allow sports brands to their networks.

Although the mean of replies to each question were all between 2,8 and 3,7, there were clear trends amongst different age groups (younger consumers being more interested in the engagement activities than older ones) as well as genders. Female runners were more open to various engagement activities whereas men felt less affected.



**Figure 13** Differences between female and male runners' responses to engagement activities, one being completely disagree and five being completely agree.

As social media usage has driven people to attend running events and challenge themselves, it could be argued that new runners to the sport are more socially connected than those who have been running for several years. This could be seen in the questionnaire results although the differences were not huge. Those runners who were new to the sport were the most interested in various engagement activities of sports companies whereas those who have spent over ten years of their lives running were generally the least interested in these engagement activities (see figure 14).



**Figure 14.** The relation of years spent running to the interest towards social media engagement, one being "completely disagree" and five being "completely agree".

#### 4.4 Brand Preferences

The final question of the survey asked respondents to state their favorite brand for running and what made this brand their favorite. The aim of the question was to see if there was a connection between brand preferences and social media engagement activities or other form of connecting with the companies.

163 respondents stated their favourite sports brands, meaning that only five people left the open-ended field blank. It was not a surprise that the three most mentioned brands were Asics, Adidas and Nike. The most mentioned favorite brand was Nike with a rate of 32%. The second most popular brand was Asics with 21%, closely followed by Adidas with 18% and a difference of only five respondents. After the three large companies was Brooks with only 7%, followed by several other sports brands.

The author was hoping to notice that social media engagement activities would indeed have an impact of the consumers' choice of their brands. However, this was not the case in the replies of most of the respondents. Consumers were more interested in the quality of the products than the experiences they had with a brand. Over 45% of the respondents chose their favorite brand based on the quality of the products, and many of them used products from several different brands. Especially the quality of running shoes was an important choice amongst these consumers. 6% of the respondents did not have a favorite brand, stating that their buying decisions depend on the product rather than a brand.

However, there were consumers who did mention social media engagement and positive customer service online, meaning that the engagement activities of sports companies have not come unnoticed. Up to eleven people (that being just under 7%) mentioned that (online) service is important today. One response was as follows: *"My favorite brand in sports is Nike. They are active with responding in their social media platforms. Even though I haven't (yet) engaged with them, it does give a positive image when I see them engaging in with their followers. Plus all the apps they have (running, coaching) give support for the consumer."* Nike's social media services and engagement as a reason for it to be a favorite brand was mentioned five times, followed by Polar which was mentioned twice. Adidas and Asics were not chosen for their services and engagement activities.

## 5 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to highlight the engagement activities that sports brands practice in the online environment with runners as well as the reactions and thoughts of runners regarding social media engagement. During the research process the author came to notice some of the possibilities of creating the engagement opportunities, not only on basic social media platforms, but in other environments too.

It is apparent that the social media engagement activities of sports companies, led by Nike and Adidas, are very much innovative and entertaining, therefore bringing the industry visibility in social media. Having recently included consumers in the brand marketing stories as a form of engagement, Nike has received a large recognition amongst runners. This could also be seen in the outcomes of the questionnaire. Those respondents of the questionnaire who had experienced consumer engagement indeed felt more connected to the brand they had engaged with, thus supporting Barger's (2012) and Gordon's (2013) key statements throughout their works.

It could be seen that as a consumer group, runners still seem to generally prefer the functionality and high-quality products over brands and social media engagement activities with them. Especially the older age group of runners felt that they do not need engagement as they already know what they are doing and which products to use. This means that despite interesting brands being visible in social media, not everyone will want to follow their activities.

However, if the runners were able to see what is in it for them, they may become more open to social media engagement. For example the coaching programmes of Garmin were mentioned in the questionnaire more than once – meaning that runners really appreciated this type of engagement. Evans (2010:93) talks about the engagement process with consumers and suggests that it leads up to collaboration. However, as noticed during the research process, consumers also need to get something from the company before they can trust the brand and feel willing to support a brand with new ideas.

As learnt from Lovelock & Wirtz (2011:244), positive engagement comes through emotions and trust, which can only be developed once consumers' habits and expectations are known. Based on this statement one recommendation for sports companies would be to tie social media campaigns with actual smaller events organized for consumers, such as short fun run around the launch of a new product innovation – this way consumers would have a positive brand experience without having to necessarily buy products. Unlike the older runners, new people to the sport tend to enjoy more time with social media activities; in fact this may have even driven them to the sport in the first place – to seek for fun experiences, such as fun races, to share in their social networks and encourage others to join the fun and healthy lifestyle too (Running USA Today 2013).

During the two-month research process the author noticed that the amount of sources and studies conducted around the social media engagement of sports companies targeting runners were close to nonexistent. The continuously increasing amount of socially connected runners around the globe as well as social media marketing had been noticed by several sources, but no research was conducted to prove the reactions of runners when it comes to social media engagement practiced by sports brands, thus making the gathering of secondary information of the topic difficult. However, the author focused on primary research and was able to build it upon literature discussing social media engagement theories and strategy.

The amount of runners' responses to the questionnaire showed that the sports industry and running brands have a huge target market and should thus conduct market mapping in the social media landscape regarding runners. Because of the gap in specific information of runners' behaviours with sports brands in social media, the scope of the research could have been wider if the author had a longer timeframe to conduct such a large study. In this case the author would have explored the new phenomenon of urban running, run crews and the presence of brands (and opportunities) in these authentic consumer environments which are visible and followed on social media. Additionally the author would have conducted a more throughout research on the various social media platforms which sports companies are using as their marketing tools rather than only focusing on the major platforms.

Looking back at the primary research methods the author could have directly asked from runners what makes them feel connected to a brand. Although the questionnaire

included open-ended questions which received a high response rate, the author could have got a more holistic picture of the runners' thoughts on social media engagement. Additionally as the author learned that collaboration with consumers brings more visibility to the marketplace, the author could have asked consumers to provide engagement ideas or thoughts of what would make them loyal to a brand. Nevertheless, having conducted the questionnaire successfully the author felt that research objectives were met with the responses received anyway.

Finally, the author feels that this study covers the concept and most recent trends of social media engagement and the overall field in the sporting goods industry, particularly in the environment of runners. The author is satisfied with the approach to choose runners as the target audience rather than focus on the sports industry in general. Having conducted a research around the of social media engagement with runners, the author finds the end-result of the process satisfying, hoping that it would be useful in the future as well as for the readers.

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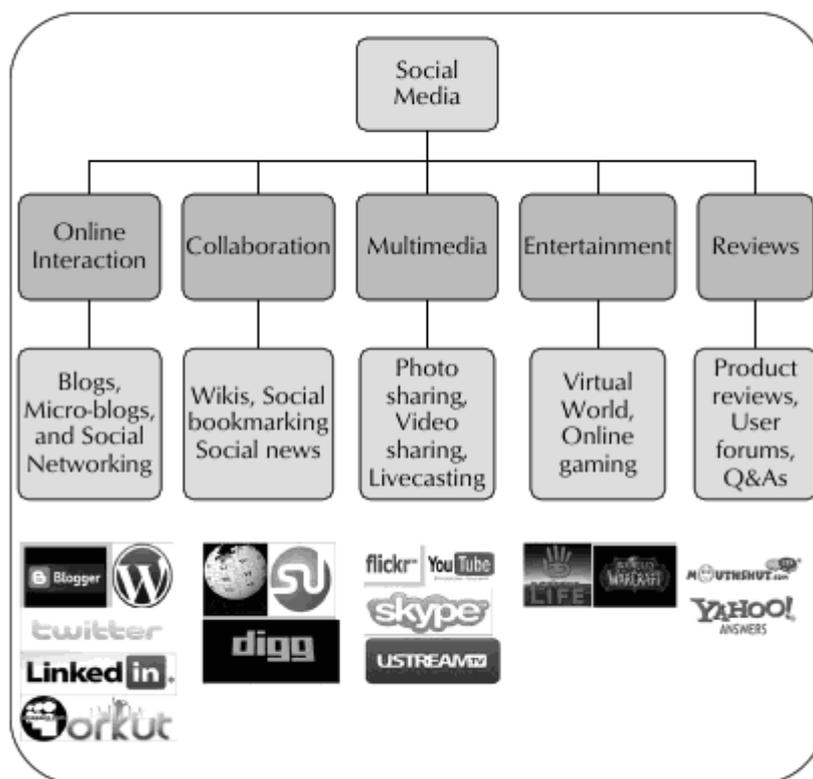
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## 7 Appendices

### Appendix 1: The Social Media Landscape

Appendix one presents the social media landscape and the various platforms in which social media engagement activities can be practiced. (Kumar. Profitable Customer Engagement : Concepts, Metrics and Strategies, 2013: 341)

**Figure 7.1** Social Media Landscape



## Appendix 2: The Questionnaire conducted for runners (presented in screenshots)

**General**

\* 1. Gender

\* 2. Please select your age group

3. Years spent running  
 Less than a year  
 1-2  
 3-5  
 6-10  
 More than 10

4. How often do you run?  
 Less than once a month  
 1-3 times a month  
 Once a week  
 2-3 times a week  
 4-5 times a week  
 more than 5 times a week

5. Where do you look for information on running products?  
 On sports companies' web pages  
 In social media (Twitter, Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn, Pinterest...)  
 On running communities' web pages or forums  
 From friends  
 From stores  
 From books or magazines  
 Other

**General**

\* 1. Gender

\* 2. Please select your age group

3. Years spent running  
 Less than a year  
 1-2  
 3-5  
 6-10  
 More than 10

4. How often do you run?  
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5. Where do you look for information on running products?  
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 On running communities' web pages or forums  
 From friends  
 From stores  
 From books or magazines  
 Other

### Digital Applications

11. Do you use smartphone applications for Running?  
 Yes No If you selected "no", please explain why not.

**If you replied "No" to question 11, please proceed to question 14.**

12. Which smartphone application have you used for running?

13. After starting to use the application, do you feel more interested in the activities of the company offering it?  
 Yes No

14. Have you ever used an online coaching programme for running?  
 Yes No

15. If you replied "Yes" to the previous question, please state which coaching programme you have used.

**Consumer Engagement**

16. Have you ever attended fitness classes or run clubs offered by sporting goods companies?

Yes No

If you replied "Yes" to the previous question, please state in which clubs/classes you have participated. Have these classes made you feel more connected to the brand offering them?

17. Would you be interested in taking free fitness/running classes offered by a large sporting goods company, containing product trials and advertising during the sessions?

Yes No Please explain why

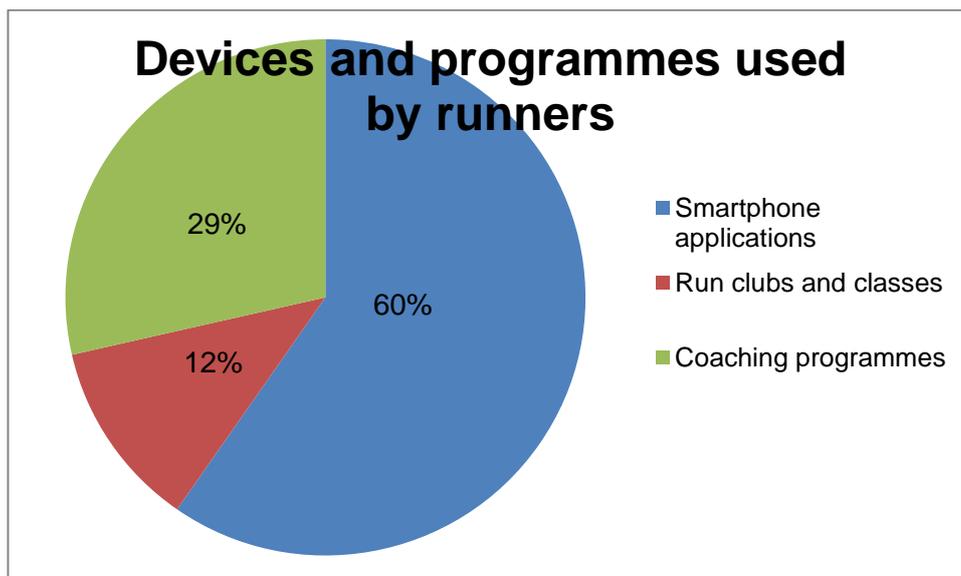
18. On a scale of 1-5, do you agree or disagree that the following activities of sports brands affect positively your engagement and loyalty towards the brand?

	1 Completely disagree	2 Disagree	3 Somewhat agree	4 Agree	5 Completely agree
Good customer service in social media	<input type="radio"/>				
A brand sharing or commenting on your social media activities	<input type="radio"/>				
Free smartphone applications for running	<input type="radio"/>				
Free fitness classes and run clubs	<input type="radio"/>				
Free Online coaching programmes	<input type="radio"/>				
Running events (for example Nike's We Own the Night)	<input type="radio"/>				
Free product trials (for example one free run in a new footwear innovation)	<input type="radio"/>				
Free online running communities (for example a forum for runners preparing for a half marathon)	<input type="radio"/>				
Traditional Marketing (TV, Magazines..)	<input type="radio"/>				

19. What is your favorite sports brand for running and why?

### Appendix 3: Devices and programmes used by runners

Appendix 3 presents the split of various devices and programmes which respondents of the questionnaire are using to improve their running performance. The pie chart does not include devices which were not measured in the questionnaire, such as heart-rate monitors.



## Appendix 4. The top 10 Socially Devoted Brands in 2013

Appendix four details the most devoted brands on social media in 2013 – this meaning which brands have been answering consumers' questions and other issues on social media.

	Brand Name <sup>®</sup>		Number of Fans	Questions Response Rate	Number of Questions Answered
1	 KLM	KLM	1 540 778	94.14 %	<b>2 843</b>
2	 T-Mobile	T-Mobile USA	940 004	86.19 %	<b>2 541</b>
3	 SONY	Sony Mobile	6 768 173	68.25 %	<b>2 354</b>
4	 AirAsia	AirAsia	1 498 415	68.87 %	<b>1 958</b>
5	 SEPHORA	Sephora	3 303 937	73.97 %	<b>1 822</b>
6	 TESCO	Tesco	750 971	82.11 %	<b>1 400</b>
7	 Nike	Nike Running	995 621	84.90 %	<b>1 400</b>
8	 next	Next	1 037 899	90.45 %	<b>1 335</b>
9	 redbox	Redbox	4 662 722	83.82 %	<b>1 202</b>
10	 Virgin Media	Virgin Media	147 655	81.39 %	<b>1 181</b>