2019

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BY BILAL SADDIK

THE USE OF **SOCIAL PROOF** AS A STRATEGY TO INCREASE CUSTOMER BASE IN A SPORTING ORGANIZATION

# O.R.E

Rebranding

Ethnicity

Online Presence

Online Presence

Rebranding

Ethnicity

Rebranding

Online Presence

# Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank my family, and my wife Professor Lisa Winstanley for all their emotional and financial support, patience and profound feedback during my research, I want to thank Professor Rob for his patient and profound feedback and lastly I want to thank me for not giving up, I want to thank me for working hard every day, I want to thank me for saying no to all the distraction, I want to thank me for believing in myself, without me this could not be possible.

Thank you so much!

Bilal Saddik

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# Abstract:

**Title:** How can social proof be implemented as a strategy to increase customer base in a sporting organization?

**Focus of the book:** To investigate and discuss the evidence of the heuristic of social proof as an effective strategy at the BFA in Kuwait. Based on the evidence of social proof, this book will establish a system that sporting organizations can implement to increase their customer base.

**Methodology:** This book has undertaken an inductive approach to investigate the question raised by gathering qualitative data relevant to the question through indirect and direct observation of British football Academy (BFA) (formally known as SKELPS) in Kuwait. The data collected was analysed using grounded theory in order to generate a system which sporting organization can implement to increase their customer base.

**Results:** The grounded theory analysis gave rise to, **O.R.E:** Online Presence, Rebranding and Ethnicity. O.R.E is a system based on the concept of Social proof, which sporting organizations can apply to raise their profile within their target markets.

**Conclusion:** The book revealed the new system generated can also be adapted by any type of sporting organization. Furthermore, the book also discussed how ethnicity was identified as a primary social proof strategy and a steppingstone to the implementation of the other two categories.

**Keywords:** Social proof, Sports Organisation, Consumer behaviours, Persuasion Strategy, Ethnicity, Rebranding, Online Presence, Negative impact of Social influence, Psychology.

# Table of Contents

# About the Author

I have considerable background in the sporting industry as a manager, academy director and head coach. Alongside founding and developing two international football schools that specialized in offering football classes for players age 4 to 16 years. More recently my experience as a sporting consultant provided business advice using social proof strategies to local football academies in Singapore. This advice was based on the knowledge and experience gained from SKELPS and BFA. I have been on the ground dealing and interacting with over 1000 customer over the past 9 years allowing me to observe and collect specific and valuable data about social proof as strategy to help sporting organization to increase their customer base. (**see figure 4**)

It is worth noting that my working experience as well as background may pose several possible biases in the collection and interpretation of the data due to his close relationship to SKELPS and BFA, however I will attempt to reduce the effect of any biases that might occur by examining both positive and negative impact of the information collected and reinforce them using additional secondary data from credited sources relevant to the information collected. Furthermore, my awareness that biases might occur will remind the me to analyse the data collected in a way that is not influenced by personal feelings or opinions.



**Figure 4:** Official website of Bilal Saddik (Saddik, 2019)

# "How can Social Proof be implemented as a strategy to increase customer base in a Sporting Organization?"

## Introduction

Competition to attract consumers to football academies in Kuwait rose dramatically between 2012 and 2014 due to the to the increase of both domestic and well known British international sporting brands, that specialize in offering football coaching such as; Arsenal and Everton dominating the market. As a result, the process of attracting consumers became difficult and more costly. Consequently, as there were many similar services which consumers could choose from, how could SKELPS (currently known as British Football Academy: BFA) influence consumers to purchase their services?  Figure 1 below illustrates consumer's behaviours between 2009 and 2018 and the impact of social proof on SKELPS.
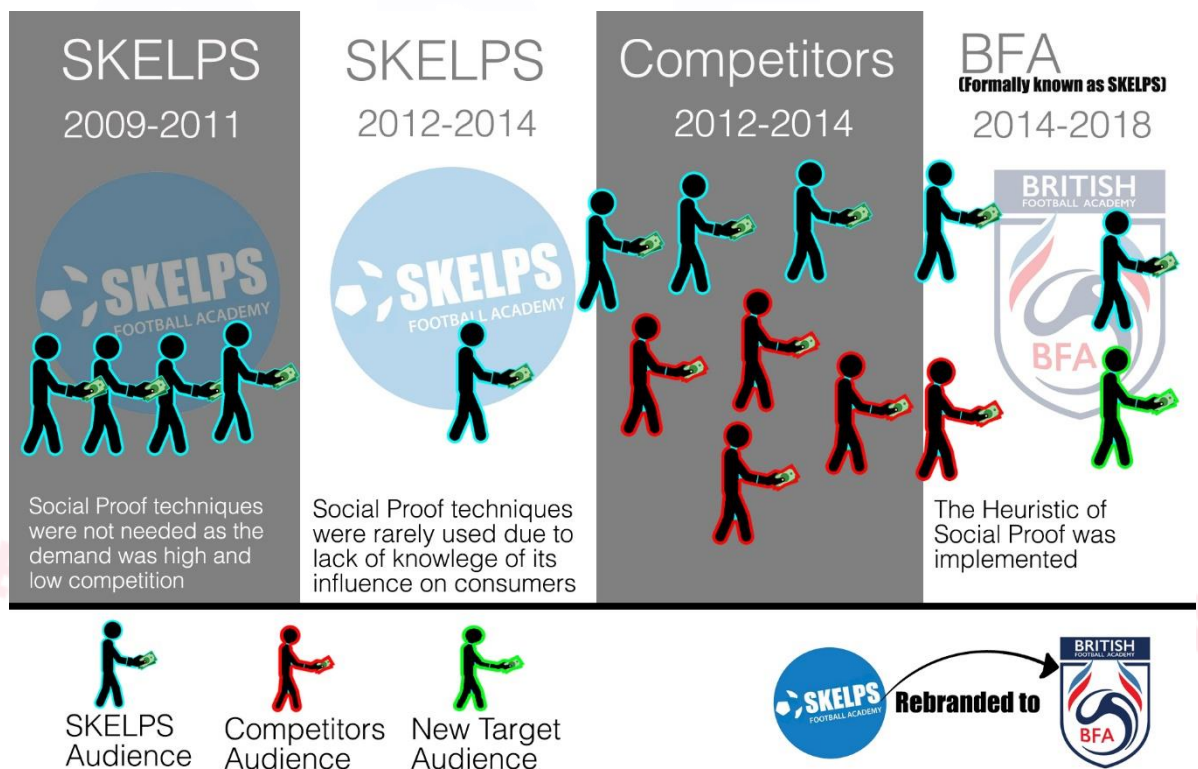


**Figure 1:** Illustration of the impact of social proof on SKELPS (Saddik,2019).

Many domestic sporting organisations, and in particular SKELPS, began to spend large amounts of time and money on marketing to develop services to meet customers' needs. Despite this, SKELPS failed to retain customers or attract new ones as shown in figure 1. **The question here is why they failed? The answer could be social proof.** According to Winstanley (2016, p.31 cited in Saddik,2019) social proof could be defined as a heuristic whereby people make decisions about their behaviour based on the observation of other actions and behaviours in an attempt to remove uncertainty from the decision-making process. As there were many services available in the market, consumer uncertainty was high; as a result, they tended to copy what other consumers were doing, which was buying the services from popular British brands. According to a survey by Barclays (2018, p.6), 62% of consumers in UAE (who share a similar culture as consumers in Kuwait) perceive British products as high-quality, reliable, internationally respected and good value for money. It was observed that many consumers in Kuwait automatically perceived international brands to have high quality and high value and tended to trust in things that were widely known or associated with brands or people that they trusted or related to. As a result, SKELPS survival was at risk and therefore pre-emptive actions were taken to increase customer base and social proof strategies were inadvertently engaged as part of those actions.

## Focus of the Book

This book suggests that factors such as; similarity, uncertainly and numbers reinforced social proof which, in turn, influenced consumers buying decision (Cialdini, 2007, p.107). The main goal of this book is to investigate the heuristic of social proof as an effective strategy at the BFA in Kuwait. Based on the evidence of social proof, this book will establish a system that sporting organization can implement to increase their customer base.

**Book Objectives (Saddik, 2019)**

- The major aim is to investigate the feasibility of devising a 'system' of techniques and procedures based on the concept of social proof which sporting organizations can apply to raise their profile within their target markets.

- To investigate how **rebranding** can be implemented as a social proof strategy to create credibility which in turn increase customer base.
- To investigate how **online presence** can be implemented as a social proof strategy to create credibility which in turn increase customer base.
- To investigate how **ethnicity** can be implemented as a social proof strategy to create credibility which in turn increase customer base.

- This book will explore some of the dark side of social proof as potential persuasion strategy using theoretical examples supported by examples of social proof in practice.

# The Heuristic of Social Proof

This book documents evidence of the heuristic of social proof as an effective strategy for: improving revenue and customer perception, creating brand awareness, building competitive advantage, attracting customers from different backgrounds, increasing loyalty and brand reputation, boosting sales and playing a major role in the marketing strategy at the BFA. And, more recently, social proof was also applied at a start-up academy in Singapore (who wish to remain anonymous, therefore this report will henceforth refer to them as, Singapore Academy SA) who were facing similar business issues to BFA (Saddik,2015,2019).

The book has shown that social proof has a significant effect on marketing and businesses performance, for example, Szot's implementation of psychology in a new infomercials program, revealed how changing three words in the call-to-action line, "Operators are waiting, please call again" to "Operators are busy, please call again" had a huge impact on how customers perceived their TV programme operators, which in turn caused sales to increase (Goldstein, Martin and Cialdini, 2008, p.9-10). Before changing the words, consumers assumed operators are doing nothing as no one wanted the product, however after changing the three words, consumers perceived operators as busy, meaning other consumers were calling and wanted the product. This demonstrates the power of social proof. This book intends to focus on the application of the heuristic of social proof and according to **Cialdini (2007, p.118) "Since 95% of the people are imitators and only 5% are innovators.** People are persuaded more by the actions of others than by any proof we can offer". This indicates that there is also significant evidence that social proof is an effective tactic and a powerful tool of influence.

# Ways Undertaken to Harness the Power of Social proof

This book explores some of the methods undertaken by the two aforementioned organisations to harness the power of social proof in order influence customers' buying decisions, such as: rebranding, price, online presence, testimonials placed at the academy's social media and website, online customer reviews, adding the academy on google maps, timing selected for the registration of the new players, designing and launching an official website, coaches qualifications and background, free trials for potential customers at the academy as well as at some of the schools close to the academy's and lastly sponsors (Saddik, 2019).

## Online Word of Mouth

According to Patel (2019), 90% of start-ups fail, therefore having a unique selling point is not always enough to increase sales, Accordingly, sporting organization could implement social proof in their business strategy to create credibility. Mintel (2015) revealed that 70% of consumers look for others' opinions and reviews before making a purchase. Amblee and Bui, (2011, p.91 cited in Saddik, 2019) discussed the importance of social proof in the e-commerce world and how

consumers rely on previous information such as; online customer reviews, recommendations and ratings to assist them in their decision-making process. This book will investigate the influence of online "word -of- mouth" on the sporting organizations.

## The Dark Side of Social Proof

Research conducted by Cialdini (2007, p.116 cited in Saddik 2019) reveals a darker side of social proof when it is misused by profiteers who leverage it for their own selfish reasons. Rao, Greve and Davis, (2001, p.508 cited in Saddik, 2019) suggest that intentionally or unintentionally the heuristic of social proof leads decision makers to commit errors and to post decision regret. Consequently, despite evidence which demonstrates the profound positive impact of social proof on consumers and businesses, it is worth noting that if it is misused or implemented poorly by sports organisations this could have a negative rather than positive effect.

## Some Factors Which Strengthened the Application of Social Proof at BFA

This book indicates that the viability of some of the social proof tools implemented at BFA were directly linked to consumer's idea of quality/value in Kuwait and how brands were perceived differently depending on their country of origin. Consequently, this book suggests that factors which strengthened the application of social proof at the BFA, were how people perceived ethnicity and price to influence their buying decision process. Consequently, this impacted the way consumers perceived domestic and foreign products/services as being of high or low quality/value.

Book suggests that when purchasing a product/service, the country of origin plays a major role in the consumer's decision and this could be because of the nature of the consumer's behaviour in Kuwait. For example, it was observed that products or services which are either imported from developed countries, or affiliated with them, were automatically assumed to have high quality. Klement (2002, p.384-387) refers to this as **genetic fallacy**, which is when a decision is made solely based on history, origin or source, without considering its current form or meaning. The same is applicable for price. It was observed that consumers in Kuwait automatically assumed that expensive equated to quality. Manzon (2013.p.4-6) refers to this as **buyer's fallacy;** when consumers undervalue or ignore critical factors based on what they believe is important during the product/service selection.

Papadopoulos and Heslop shared the impact of a product's country of origin on buyers' perceptions (as cited in, Bahhouth, Ziemnowicz and Zgheib, 2012, p.2). Moreover, "Roth and Romeo Kaynak and Kara asserted that consumers have significantly different country images or general perceptions about products made in different countries" (as cited in, (Bahhouth, Ziemnowicz and Zgheib, 2012, p.2). According to Williamson (2018) "more than half (51%) of international shoppers would hold out for a British product, rather than buy a non-British item". This book

will attempt to explore in more depth, how ethnicity can provide social proof to consumers.

Lastly, this book will corroborate observational evidence, using secondary studies in order to demonstrate how social proof can be utilized as a tool to influence customer behaviour. For example; reviewing how sporting organizations can take advantage of insights highlighted in this book such as; ethnicity and subsequently implement these as part of a strategy of social proof within their organisation, building trust with prospects and influencing their purchasing decisions.

## Methodology

# Book Approach



Created by **Saddik (2019)** based on data collected from Greener (2008, p.1-110)
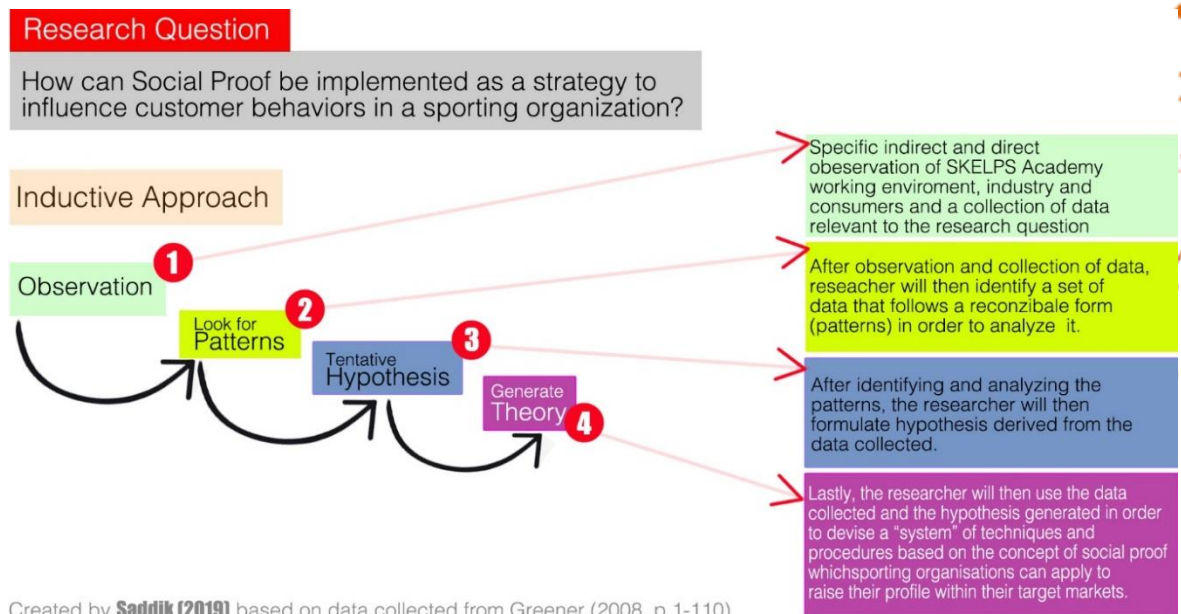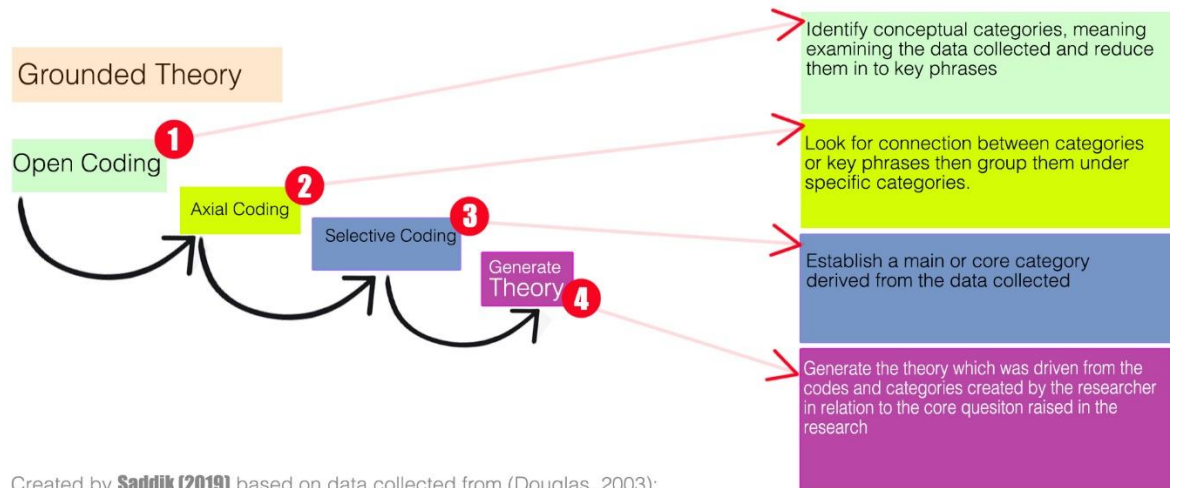
**Figure 2:** Inductive approach (Saddik, 2019) based on data collected of Greener (2008, p.1-110).

This book utilised an inductive approach (**see figure 2**) to investigate the question raised, whether social proof can be implemented as a strategy to influence customer behaviors in a sporting organization. According to Greener (2008, p.16-17) an inductive approach begins by gathering specific data relevant to the question through observation. Once a considerable amount of evidence has been collected, I then begin the next phase to identify patterns in order to build hypothesis, leading to a generalized conclusion based on strong predictions. However, the conclusion may not be certain. This book will analyse the data collected using grounded theory analysis **as shown below in figure 3 (see section 1 in the appendix for more information).**

**Figure 3:** Grounded Theory Analysis (Saddik, 2019) based on data collected of Douglas (2003).

This book will examine some of the evidence of the heuristic of social proof at the BFA in Kuwait, collected through observations of the working environment, industry and consumers behaviour over the past 9 years. After collection of data, this book will then attempt to identify patterns and generate a hypothesis which leads to creating a system of techniques and procedures based on the concept of social proof which sporting organizations could subsequently apply to raise their profile within their target markets.

# Book Design:

According to Greener (2008, p.17) a qualitative approach to research is likely to be associated with an inductive approach to generating theory. Accordingly, this is why a qualitative approach has been chosen to establish a deep understanding of the question raised. This book will adopt a grounded theory analysis based on the experience and observation collected from SKELPS and BFA's academy owner on the evidence and facts of the heuristic of social proof as a strategy at BFA. This data will be utilised to generate a generalized conclusion which includes a new theory/system. Furthermore, the data collected will be qualitative secondary data gathered through indirect (Kiyimba, Lester and O'Reilly, 2018) naturally occurring data and direct observation from the BFA owner, the BFA website and their social media such as Facebook and Instagram. To reinforce the theory/system generated this book will seek additional secondary data from sources such as; books, articles and websites associated with psychology and understanding of human behaviour when the heuristic of social proof has been implemented.

# Inductive Approach Advantages and Limitations:

**Advantages**

- According to Greener (2008, p.17) inductive approach is linked to qualitative approach, therefore is an appropriate approach to examine complex observed qualitative data such as consumer behavior
- Theory or the system is generated from the collected data, which makes the theory more relevant to the question I have raised (R Thomas, 2006)
- Leads to the generation of other new theories that could be tested and applied
  (R Thomas, 2006).
- Time saving and less costly

**Limitations**

- I may interpret the data collected based on his own belief and opinion, therefore this could limit the creditability of the theory created
- Requires strong observation skills, otherwise the conclusion or theory generated might be misleading
- Conclusion or theory generated may be supported by evidence found, however it cannot be conclusively true

**Data Analysis**

Data from my industry experience and observations between 2009 and 2018 has been analysed and assigned into different categories using open coding, moreover multiple key phrases/categories have been analysed using axial coding to find links, before being assigned under subcategories. Lastly, using selective coding those subcategories were linked together to generate a core category as shown below in figure 5.

# Findings

The data I collected between 2009 and 2018 and analysed to give rise to **"O.R.E"** Online Presence, Rebranding and Ethnicity. O.R.E is a system based on the concept of social proof, which sporting organizations can apply to raise their profile within their target markets, **see figure 1**. This illustrates the positive impact those techniques had on SKELPS (BFA) between 2014 and 2018.

Three key subcategories, O.R.E, were derived from the data as shown below in **figure 5** and have been identified as important techniques of social proof to build credibility. Other techniques have also been identified and proved to be effective, however do not fall under the scope of this book (see section 2 in the appendix for more information).
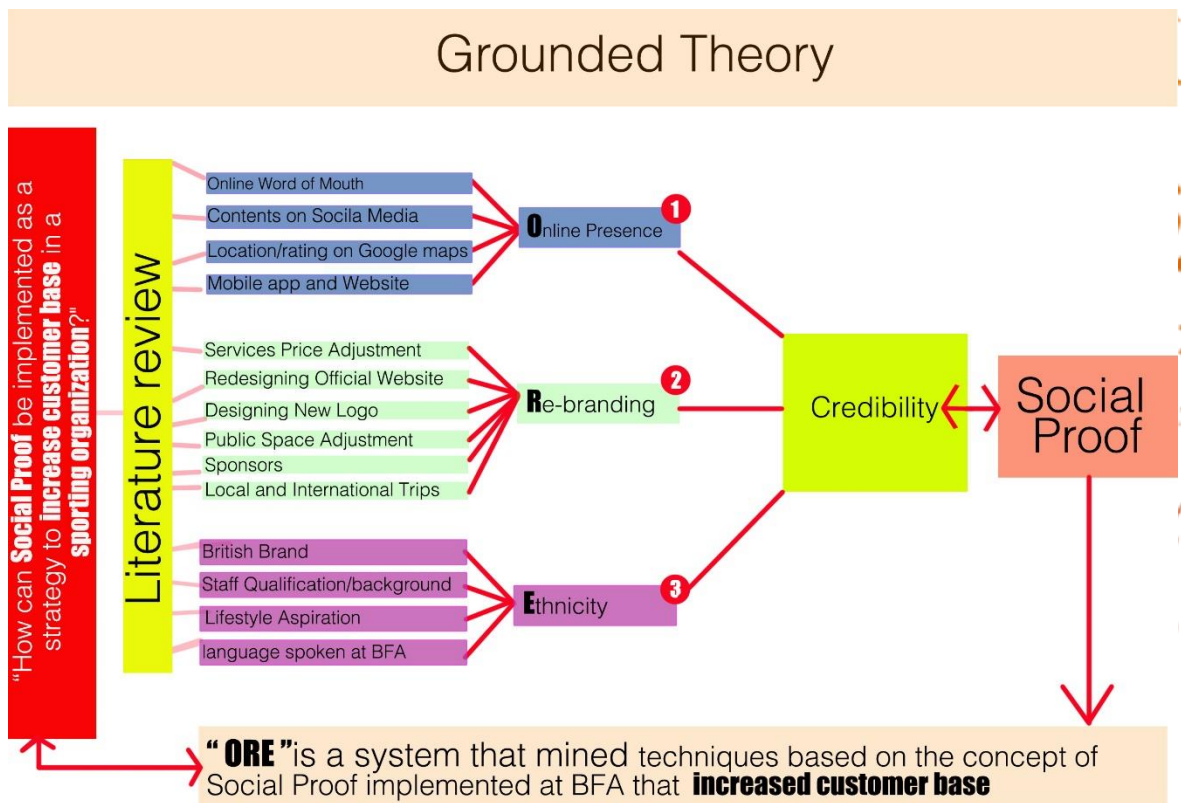
**Figure 5:** *O.R.E system that mined techniques based on the concept of social proof implemented at BFA that increased customer (Saddik, 2019).*

## Main Category – Credibility-Social Proof

Building credibility with customers was extremely important in implementing social proof as a strategy at BFA. By implementing O.R.E, this led to the creation of credibility, which in turn resulted in BFA attracting new customers. Consequently, credibility, created as a result of social proof, influenced customers buying decisions, subsequently increasing customer base. **(figure 1.)**

## O.R.E: Online Presence

This category includes five key phrases which played an essential role in transforming BFA's daily communication with customers; making it more convenient and reliable. "Having a strong online presence increased perceived value of BFA and enhanced customers relations" (Saddik, 2014). Team's (2015) research in the USA revealed that 70% of Americans sought other opinions before purchasing. Thus, indicating that online presence plays an important role as a social proof strategy and based on observations this is also indicative of the behaviour of Kuwaiti society. Furthermore, BFA's reputation and positive feedback recorded through online testimonials increased BFA's visibility and created a positive first impression, which subsequently influenced online and offline sales. Research conducted by Abdul Talib and Mat (2017, p.1) on the use of online presence techniques such as; online-word-of-mouth (OWOM) leads to increased trust with consumers. This book suggests that factors such as uncertainly, familiarity and numbers reinforced social proof at BFA allowing it to build trust online with both current and potential customers.

## O.R.E: Rebranding

This category includes six key phrases which focussed on customers' awareness of BFA by aligning all the different aspects of the business with a single cohesive brand identity that consumers could relate to. "Rebranding had a positive impact on consumer's perception" (Saddik, 2014). This book revealed that rebranding at BFA influenced consumers to perceive services as high quality. Moreover, being aware of factors such as similarity and uncertainty when implementing this technique can strengthen the effectiveness of social proof.

## O.R.E: Ethnicity

This category includes four key phrases which focused on the nature of the market in Kuwait, as a result allowing BFA to target consumers from different backgrounds and attract new target audience. Furthermore, labelling the academy or organisation as a British brand and using the rest of the categories under ethnicity created brand authenticity which in turn enhanced BFA's appearance in the market. "The nature of the market in Kuwait and consumer perception of British brands played a vital role building a strong customer base" (Saddik, 2014). Consequently, this book revealed that BFA was able to take advantage of how consumers perceived ethnicity such as British Brands using the social proof procedures highlighted in this category and aligning them with the market nature.

# How

To answer the book question, I aimed to examine some of the evidence of the heuristic of social proof which took place at a domestic sporting organization, SKELPS (BFA) who faced a decline in customer loyalty, satisfaction and customer base due to the saturated market. The results show that the social proof evidence which was observed not only played an important role in increasing BFA customer base but also in creating credibility with customers, lowering marketing costs, increasing visibility and receiving tremendous support from some customers. Further findings reveal how how the physical appearance of BFA staff, and the photographs chosen on printing materials had a positive influence on consumers' buying decisions and decreased consumers attempting to negotiate price. To support this finding, **Reingen and Kernen (as cited in Cialdini and Goldstein 2002, p.41)** "found that an attractive fundraiser for the American Heart Association collected almost twice as many donations as did less-attractive individuals." Indicating that perceived attractiveness was also an aspect of social proof which was influential in BFA's success.

The three Subcategories explored in the book finding as social proof strategies have one thing in common, which is the creation of credibility with customers and is viewed by BFA to be important in influencing customers and increasing customer base.

Some studies discussed in this book revealed that social proof is a powerful weapon of influence which can increase customer base if implemented correctly. **(Goldstein, Martin and Cialdini, 2008, p.9-10).** social proof has been introduced by Winstanley (2016, p.31 cited in Saddik, 2019) and **Cialdini (2007, p.118)** as a psychological, social phenomenon when people are not certain about making a decision, consequently they tend to imitate what others are doing. According to **Mintel (2015)** people are more likely to seek others' opinion online before making a decision. Moreover, the study conducted by **Barclays (2018, p.6)** highlighted important facts on how people perceive British brands. **Papadopoulos, Heslop and Roth and Romeo Kaynak and Kara (as cited in, Bahhouth, Ziemnowicz and Zgheib, 2012, p.2)** investigated the impact of country of origin on consumers buying decision. These studies support the book finding that social proof can be implemented as a strategy to increase customer base. Many studies support that using some of the social proof techniques identified under online presence and rebranding categories can have a positive impact on consumers' behaviours, however there are few studies discussing ethnicity as a social proof strategy. Intharacks (2017) documented evidence of how ethnicity influences consumer behaviour in Australia, however there was no discussion of how ethnicity could be implemented as a social proof strategy.

BFA's success and the effectiveness of the rebranding and online presence subcategories was dependent on the fact that most consumers in Kuwait were

attracted to European brands, in particular, British brands, due to the popularity of the English Premier League and the fact that decisions were based blindly on factors such as country of origin. Most high-end and middle-class customers were more interested in the staff's **ethnicity**, often disregarding important facts such as experience, skills or qualifications. "The first question consumers tended to ask was, are the coaches British?" (Saddik, 2014) As long as the staff were English speakers, relatively good looking and British nationals, consumers were satisfied. The book also revealed an unexpected result highlighting how the role of genetic fallacy played a part in the application of ethnicity as a social proof strategy.

At BFA, all staff were both British and qualified, consequently, this validated BFA's use of O.R.E as a social proof strategy, in contrast, O.R.E as a social proof strategy could be used to manipulate consumers in Kuwait to make them buy services which are not aligned with their perception of British brands using a British brand, hiring coaches who are British with no experience or qualifications to persuade consumers in to believing that what they are buying was high quality and value.

A great example of social proof in practice which demonstrates how easy it is to manipulate consumers using Online presence is when a journalist created a fake restaurant and used a series of fake positive reviews on the TripAdvisor website to attract consumers. This led to the hypothetical restaurant being ranked as the number one restaurant in London, UK, even though it did not even exist! (Bender, 2017).

## There are some limitations in this book:

- The full use of O.R.E system can only be applied by other domestic sports organisation if their market environment is similar to BFA, where consumer perception of British brands is high quality and high value. Moreover, even though this book was conducted initially to investigate a domestic sports organisation, some of the results revealed under O.R.E system such as; Rebranding and Online presence show that they could also be implemented as a social proof strategy by other types of sports organisation, whether domestic or international.

- This book was based mainly on one sports organisation; therefore, the findings may require more testing by other sports organisation to fully determine its effectiveness. I have examined some of the social proof techniques highlighted in this book at Singapore Academy in Singapore, as a result, Singapore Academy was able to increase its customer base. However, diversely in this instance, Rebranding and Online presence's profound impact were more effective than ethnicity techniques. This demonstrates the flexibility of the O.R.E system showing that emphasis can be placed on any one of the three subcategories. This is mainly due to the specific target audience by SA (locals) where Rebranding (price) and

online presence (visibility) played a bigger role in their decision. Accordingly, further research is needed to examine the O.R.E system, reviewing different target audiences.

# Conclusion

- This book has explored social proof as a strategy to increase customer base at a domestic sports organisation, through observation of data collected from BFA in Kuwait using an inductive approach and Grounded theory for analysis. This analysis generated O.R.E a system that sports organisation can adopt to raise their profile within their target markets. Consequently, the major aim of this book has been fulfilled. It is also noteworthy that although this book focused mainly on a domestic sports organisation, the new system generated can also be adapted by any type of sports organisation.

- The book provided some evidence that Rebranding, Online presence and Ethnicity can be implemented as social proof strategy to create credibility with customers and as a result influence their buying decision. In the early stages of this book, BFA emphasised more on rebranding and online presence than ethnicity to increase visibility of BFA and customer awareness in order to increase customer base. However, the finding suggests that in BFA's instance, ethnicity was the primary social proof strategy and a steppingstone to the implementation of the other two categories. Furthermore, as mentioned in the discussion above, sports organisation awareness of genetic fallacy of the market (Klement, 2002, p.384-387) can strengthen the application of ethnicity as a social proof strategy to increase customer base.

- Lastly, this book revealed briefly using examples of how social proof can be adopted to manipulate or persuade customers in to buying something they do not want. This book intended to explore the dark side of social proof as potential persuasion strategy in more detail, however this objective was not fully investigated as it was not found to be a majorly significant factor to this book.

# Recommendations:

To help improve the viability and feasibility of the new system "**O.R.E**", the following recommendations derived from data generated from the book are proposed:

- Further research is recommended to test the application of O.R.E system on sporting organizations where performance and competitive position are impacted negatively by similar Micro marketing environment factors such as; customers behaviours and competition and Macro marketing environment factors such as; demographic forces and technological and economic factors, in order to determine whether it has the same effect as with BFA.

In BFA's instance, British Football's popularity (Fifa, 2019), reinforced the use of British brand as part of O.R.E system, however what if O.R.E was implemented on a basketball sporting organization and the British brand was adopted? Will O.R.E system have the same effect as it had on BFA even though British Basketball is not popular around the world? (FIBA.basketball, 2019). O.R.E system was generated from the data which was based on a sporting organization that specialize in football, therefore further research is recommended to test its application on different types of sports such as, tennis, basketball, cricket and so on… due to each sport having different target markets and popularity varying from one country to another. Furthermore, this book recommends others to investigate the use of other European or international brands as part of ethnicity as a social proof strategy to increase customer base.

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Rebranding

# Appendix:

**Section 1: Grounded Theory (Douglas, 2003):**

It is an inductive methodology and was founded in 1967 by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss to assist in the generation of new theories due to the unclarity or lack of understanding of some of the processes which took place over a period. The grounded theory process has four elements to generate the theory which derived from the data collected, those four elements are below:

1. **Open coding**: read through data collected in order to identify conceptual categories
2. **Axial coding:** Look for patterns and relationship between concepts in relation to the research question.
3. **Selective coding:** Choose a main concept/category for analysis which derived or related to all other categories created by Axial coding.
4. **Generating Theory**: Generate the theory which was driven from the data collected.

**Section 2: Other Techniques:**

Other techniques such as; time and day selected by BFA to do the registration of the potential customers and re-enrolment of current customers also had a great impact on their buying decision. Selecting the time or day to do the registration where there are many current customers attending the training sessions at BFA gave a strong positive impression as their big number of customers attending and many of those share similar characters as the potential customers. Consequently, this agrees with Cialdini (2007, p.107) that factors such as numbers and similarly strengthened the application of social proof.

# O.R.E

THE USE OF **SOCIAL PROOF** AS A STRATEGY TO INCREASE CUSTOMER BASE
IN A SPORTING ORGANIZATION

★★★★★

by **BILAL SADDIK**