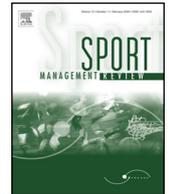




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Understanding fan motivation for interacting on social media

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ABSTRACT

Social media provide fans with an additional means to engage with their team and are a valuable forum for sport organizations to better understand fan motivations and strengthen fan relationships. This study contributes to emerging research on the nature of social media use by revealing the motivations underpinning the desire of fans to communicate on the Facebook sites of several National Basketball Association (NBA) teams. Our findings indicate that fans exercise four key motives as they draw value from the social media enabled connection to the team: passion, hope, esteem and camaraderie. Further, and in light of our understanding of these motives, we identify how this platform can be used to facilitate interaction, a key construct in relationship marketing. A content analysis, using a netnographic methodology, was undertaken to explore online comments by fans of eight purposefully selected NBA teams over a two-week period during the off-season. This period represents strong potential for isolating highly identified fans who are motivated to seek engagement and interaction. Implications for sport managers to further relational goals are identified.

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1. Introduction

Effective relationship marketing is critical in the sport environment (Heere & James, 2007). It has been suggested that sport consumers are becoming increasingly “discontented and disconnected” in response to escalating attendance costs, the increased commercialization of sport, and what they perceive as dubious motives behind the marketing activities of sport organizations (Kim & Trail, 2011, p. 57). Therefore, sport organizations need to ensure that their interactions with fans are mutually beneficial (Bühler & Nufer, 2009). Interaction has been identified as a core element of the relationship marketing process (Grönroos, 2004). In order to develop an effective relationship marketing strategy, sport managers must understand the fan motivations that underpin sport consumption and how these are uniquely identified in context (Beverland, Farrelly, & Quester, 2010), which in our research relates to the use of social media. Sport fan motivation has been described as “a self-determined and volitional state that energizes a desire to engage in sport goal directed behaviour to acquire positive benefits” (Funk, Beaton, & Alexandris, 2012, p. 364).

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Sport managers have embraced the opportunity provided by the digital environment to communicate with fans (Evans & Smith, 2004; Seo, Green, Ko, Lee, & Schenewark, 2007). Sport fans, compared to casual spectators, are more likely to seek out information about their team and players (Tapp & Clowes, 2002) and are more “invested in the organization–public relationship” resulting in potential opportunities for sport organizations to create long lasting relationships with this audience (Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2011, p. 165). Social media provide relationship marketing opportunities for sport organizations and an additional avenue through which fans can engage with sport (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Encompassing a wide range of forums, social media present a unique platform for marketers to create a dialog with consumers and for consumers to interact with each other. This vehicle is particularly promising in the sport context as the enthusiastic engagement shown by fans suggests that they would welcome additional high-value experiences both within and outside regular sport consumption (Redden & Steiner, 2000; Williams & Chinn, 2010). In addition, with the increasing globalization of numerous sport leagues, technology inherent in social media can deliver innovative experiences and interactions to strengthen relationships with supporters outside of a team’s home market.

Despite these potential advantages, and the increasing proliferation of social media, there is only limited research that examines their use in sport management (Mahan, 2011; Wang, 2013), particularly from the fan perspective (Clavio & Kian, 2010). Studies have explored the motivations of fans in using sport websites (Seo & Green, 2008), fan and athlete use of communication applications such as Twitter (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Frederick, Lim, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Thomas, 2011) and Facebook (Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012; Sanderson, 2013) as well as blogs and podcasts (Lewis & Kitchin, 2010). Williams and Chinn (2010) propose a conceptual model to demonstrate how relational goals can be achieved through social media and highlight the importance of these networks in facilitating interaction and creating value for the sport consumer. However a deeper and empirically informed understanding of the motivation of sport fans to engage with social media is required.

Therefore, the purpose of our research is to provide a rich, multi-layered insight into fan motivation by examining fan interaction on Facebook, the leading social media platform. We utilize a netnographic approach to study fans of teams in the National Basketball Association (NBA), one of the world’s elite sporting competitions. This insight is empirically derived and critical for sport managers seeking to develop targeted relationship marketing strategies using this interactive communication platform. A greater understanding of the relational needs of social media users is required, particularly as sport consumers are active collaborators through these media. Our research provides a deeper understanding of what motivates fans to engage with sport by revealing additional motives not previously identified in the literature. It also illuminates the existing and somewhat generic fan motives by providing a finer-grained insight into some of their components that have not received empirical consideration to date. These findings will allow sport managers to better understand why fans engage with sport, particularly through social media, and provide the basis for facilitating meaningful interactions as part of the organization’s relationship marketing strategy. Providing a more robust picture of fan motives is especially important for maximizing the use of online channels as well as for allowing sport organizations to differentiate their brands and explore how fans engage with one another and the team away from the playing arena. The findings from our study advance theory and practice in relation to both fan motivation and the use of social media in sport.

2. Literature review

Relationship marketing can be described as the process of developing, maintaining and enhancing mutually advantageous long-term relationships through interactions (Harwood, Garry, & Broderick, 2008). Grönroos (2011, p. 244) defines interaction as a “mutual or reciprocal action where two or more parties have an effect upon one another” and suggests that the process of interaction is the core of successful relationship marketing.

With the advent of new technologies and platforms, interaction with consumers is being made easier and more efficient (Yadav & Varadarajan, 2005). At the same time a new generation of empowered and engaged consumers has evolved and they have increasing access and exposure to organizations (Tapscott, 2009). As a consequence, an emphasis on motives, dialog and creativity is needed to inspire consumers to co-create value (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) and to provide firms with the raw material for relationship creation, expansion and maintenance (Baron, Conway, & Warnaby, 2010).

Ramani and Kumar (2008) suggest that an interaction orientation has superseded previous forms of orientation for successful firms and can be described as “. . . firm’s ability to interact with its individual customers and take advantage of information obtained from them through successive interactions to achieve profitable customer relationships” (p. 27). The challenge remains however to identify the most appropriate means by which to facilitate interactions that add value to relationships and allow for purposeful interventions by the firm. To create an effective relationship marketing strategy it is critical to identify the motives of fans in interacting with sporting teams or organizations in context, and the value which this interaction delivers.

2.1. Fan motivation

Much of the extant research on sport fan motivation has been devoted to measuring its impact via the development and modeling of various scales. Interestingly, the initial psychological factors identified by Wann (1995), while criticized for lacking validity (Trail & James, 2001), have been corroborated, refined and extended by various others (e.g., Bilyeu & Wann, 2002; Mahony, Nakazawa, Funk, James, & Gladden, 2002; Milne & McDonald, 1999; Seo & Green, 2008; Wann, Schrader, &

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