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Sports fan experience: Electronic word-of-mouth in ephemeral social media

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ABSTRACT

Fans consuming sporting events commonly use social media to spread electronic-word-of-mouth (eWOM) related to their experiences. Ephemeral social media, an emerging form of social media that auto-deletes content after a prescribed time, allows fans to have greater control over their messages than ever before. The purpose of this experimental study was to investigate factors leading fans to lengthen or shorten the lifespan of their social media content. A nationwide panel ($N = 242$) created social media content in a controlled setting in which the fan experience and audience size were manipulated. Results suggest fans having a positive experience or who were broadcasting to a large audience were likely to share their content for a longer period of time. In contrast, fans having other than positive experiences, sharing with a small audience, or displaying greater team identification wished to limit the availability of their content. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

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Introduction

“Everyday consumers are wielding greater control over their media habits and their role in the commercial marketplace.”

Cate Riegner (2007)

Fans have more control of media surrounding their favorite teams than ever before. Rather than being limited to messages from marketers, thoughts and opinions from anyone can be distributed and accessed across the globe using the internet (Dellarocas, 2003). Consumers are empowered to create electronic-word-of-mouth about their experiences (Daugherty & Hoffman, 2014) and become active participants in conversation about brands (Riegner, 2007). Fans consuming or attending sporting events commonly use social media to share their experiences, such as Chinese fans discussing the World Cup (e.g., Yang, Wang, & Billings, 2016). In addition to controlling the reach of a message, fans also control the timing and valence of conversations—all aspects previously under the watch of marketing managers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Fans can create, share, and access content of any kind at any time through various sources, such as branded communities (Popp & Woratschek, 2016) or brand publics (e.g., Twitter; Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). The Internet medium has consistently given

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high control to users (Ha & McCann, 2008) and, now, fans control even more about their media—the length of time that others are exposed to their messages.

Ephemeral social media, an emerging form of social media that auto-deletes content after a prescribed time, has recently drawn the attention of scholars (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, & Falk, 2016; Billings, Qia, Conlin, & Nie, 2017; Piwek & Jinson 2016). Unlike archived social media, ephemeral social media applications like Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook Stories or Xpire allow user content to be shared for a set time limit before auto-deletion (see Table 1 for examples of ephemeral social media and the time limit given to messages before they auto-delete). Snapchat, the most popular ephemeral social media application, boasts over 160 million active daily users, and shares of its parent company are traded publicly (Constine, 2017). Sport teams heavily use the application (Mason, 2016), and Billings et al. (2017) suggest it is the preferred social media to facilitate fandom.

It is important for scholars and practitioners to understand what may result from fans' control over the length of time messages are available. Lengthening (limiting) a message's lifespan could lengthen (limit) its reach and exposure. Further reach and exposure is helpful for branding as consumers of branded social media intend to (a) share such information with others (Park & Dittmore, 2014), (b) purchase the brand's products (Moyer, Pokrywczynski, & Griffin, 2015), and (c) maintain stronger relationships with their brand (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015; Schmittle & Hull, 2015). With the exception of cases of wearout (see Calder & Sternthal, 1980), marketers have long known such positive impacts of brand exposure (Keller 1993 Zajonc, 1968) over lengthier periods of time (Puto & Wells, 1984). However, while marketers hope to increase exposures (e.g., viral marketing; Hinz, Skiera, Barrot, & Becker, 2011), fans indicate a desire to decrease exposure through adoption of ephemeral social media.

Therefore, the purpose of this experimental study is to investigate what factors lead fans to lengthen or limit the lifespan of social media content. For example, do fans prefer their messages to be available for a few minutes or a few weeks? As Chandler and Lusch (2014) suggest that consumer behavior is strongly circumstantial and may change in various contexts, we focus on the sport fan experience and aspects of that context that are prevalent for a fan creating a social media post. To explicate the theoretical support, the time a message is made available is examined as a function of the size of the audience and sharer focus. Both influence what people talk about and share (Barasch & Berger, 2014). Fan experience, which represents an experiential view of consumption that is "directed toward the pursuit of fantasies, feelings, and fun" (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; p. 132), has been largely overlooked in sport literature. In including fan experience, we join Delia and Armstrong (2015) in assessing the role of valence (e.g., positive experience) in fan experiences. We accomplish this by way of experimental design in order to isolate the effects of each chosen factor on the length of time a message is made available.

Furthermore, while a plethora of research has been conducted on eWOM via social media channels, to date the overwhelming majority of empirical investigations have been conducted within the context of archived (permanent unless manually deleted) social media, like Facebook and Twitter. These investigations have focused on motives for social media use by consumers (e.g., Witkemper, Blaszk, & Chung, 2016) and professionals (Armstrong, Delia, & Giardina, 2016; Hambrick & Kang, 2015; Roberts & Emmons, 2016), linking social media use to purchasing (Moyer et al., 2015) or maintaining relationships with consumers (Filo et al., 2015; Schmittle & Hull, 2015). Therefore, we contribute to the knowledge base through our focus on the process of content creation of eWOM rather than on its motivations, and on ephemeral social media rather than archived social media.

2. Theory and hypothesis development

2.1. eWOM and control of media

Word of mouth (WOM), the "informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers" (Westbrook, 1987, p. 261), has an enormous impact on consumers. According to Berger (2014), eWOM generates over 3 billion daily brand impressions. These impressions come in various media, such as social media. Due to its relevance, scholars have focused on examining the value and influence of such

Table 1
Examples of Ephemeral Social Media Applications.

Social Media Platform	Time Limit Options
Snapchat	1–10 s; 24 h
Instagram-Stories	24 h
Facebook-Stories	24 h
Xpire	Minutes to Years
Wickr	Seconds to Days
Jott	5 s; 10 s; 20 s
CyberDust	30 s
Clipchat	5 s
Burn Note	2–120 s
Bleep	10 s

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