The Effect of Twitter on Sports Fans’ Information Processing: The controversial Referee’s Call at the 2012 London Olympic Games

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Social media such as Twitter, Facebook and blogs dominated the 2012 London Olympic Games by providing event information and highlighting relevant issues. Among social media, Twitter is the most influential communication channel during sporting events (Ovide & Stewart, 2012). Due in part to its rapid growth, Twitter has become one of sport communication scholars’ crucial areas of investigation (e.g., Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2010). However, most previous research has focused on what people (e.g., athletics, sports team, sports fans) do with Twitter. How much impact Twitter has on sport consumers has been neglected to date.

Kwak, Kim, and Zimmerman’s (2010) study could be a starting point for answering these questions. To investigate the effect of user generated content (UGC), the authors compared the effects of traditional media sources and social media on source credibility. Surprisingly, media source did not impact perceptions of source trustworthiness and attitude towards content. The study indicated that sport fans perceive messages generated by users and mainstream content producers as equally reliable and favorable. Messages generated by social media have extensive impact on consumers. However, what factors influence the reliability of social media has remained largely unanswered. Kwak et al. (2010) suggested that future studies investigate the effect of user source (e.g., professional writer, amateur writer) on sport fans’ responses.

Other studies have examined how sport comments in mainstream media sources impact audience perceptions (e.g., Beentjes, Van Oordt & Van Der Voort, 2002; Bryant, Brown, Comisky, & Zillmann, 1982; Comisky, Bryant, & Zillmann, 1977; Sullivan, 1991). Recent research (Lee, Lim, & Williams, 2013) revealed that messages by sport commentators have both framing and priming effects on sport fans’ cognitive responses. However, the effects of priming and framing of the message on fans’ perception has not yet been examined in relation to UGC.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of user source on source credibility to figure out the determinant factors which make UGC more attractive. In addition, the power of a Twitter message is also examined by employing existing traditional media theories (i.e., framing theory, priming theory). By examining these factors, the impact of Twitter on sport media consumers may be better understood.

Based on the above literature review, two hypotheses were tested:

H1: After controlling for dispositional tendency, messages generated by a professional sports analyst are more likely to have impact on source evaluation and perception.

H2: After controlling for dispositional tendency, messages valence will have impact on perception.

The current study employed two (message valence: positive or negative toward referees’ call) two (User sources: professional or nonprofessional) experimental design. The Twitter messages (i.e., tweets) were developed as stimuli for the experimental design. Message valence (i.e., positive or negative attitude toward a referee’s call) was manipulated by indicating the message was written by either a professional writer or an amateur writer. After viewing a short video clip which contained a controversial referee’s call from the men’s semi-final soccer match in the 2012 London Olympics, participants were randomly exposed to one of four condition tweets (i.e., a positive or negative message, written by either a professional or amateur writer). Following this exposure, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding perception (i.e., attitude toward referee’s call, image of Internal Olympic Committee) and source evaluation (i.e., attitude and trustworthiness toward twitter comments).
To test the effect of user source and message, a series of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were conducted. The result showed that there was a significant message main effect on attitude toward a referee’s call ($P < .01$) and IOC ($P < .05$); Participants who were exposed to positive message evaluated referee’ call ($M_{\text{Referee}}=3.39$) and image of IOC ($M_{\text{IOC}}= 4.85$) favorably while those who were exposed to the negative message rated referee’ call ($M_{\text{Referee}}=2.62$) and image of IOC ($M_{\text{IOC}}=4.36$) unfavorably. However, no significant user source effects on source evaluation (i.e., attitude and trustworthiness toward twitter comments) were found.

The findings support existing literature in the realm of sport communication that sport consumers’ responses can be influenced by message type (Kwak et al., 2010, Mahan, 2012). The findings advance previous research (i.e., media effect) into a social media context, indicating that social media contents are as powerful as traditional media. Indeed, sport fans’ evaluations of the referee’s call were shaped by message type. Not only that, the message prime effect was found to be salient. Attitudes (i.e., referee’s call) that are framed by message types provide standards to evaluate organization (i.e., IOC). Moreover, it is interesting to note that user sources did not have an impact on audiences’ responses. In other words, sports consumers perceived the messages that were generated by professional sports analysts and amateurs as equally reliable and favorable. The findings from this study contribute to the body of knowledge in the realm of sport communication (e.g., application of priming theory, the effectiveness of social media). Furthermore, the findings of this study inform the sport industry by highlighting the potential role of social media outlets (i.e., communication strategies, marketing tools) and by better understanding of social media.