Sponsorship Activation through Social Networking Sites: An Investigation of World Cup Marketing Hashtags on Twitter

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Social networking sites (SNS) are the fastest-growing forms of marketing communication (Meenaghan et al., 2013). Instant global reach, ease of networking, and ease of collaboration make SNS powerful marketing tools (Kotler et al., 2010). Researchers have investigated the use of SNS for branding purposes and found that that instantaneity, large target audience, and low cost are the unique benefits of using a microblogging service such as Twitter (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, Chen et al., 2011). Unlike traditional media, which allows only unidirectional communications, every Twitter user has the ability to become part of the marketing process through participating in electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and diffusing messages across that platform.

Sport sponsorship has emerged as a viable opportunity to create brand associations between events and sponsors, as it has been found fans are three times more likely to purchase products when they have familiarity with a brand (Horowitz, 2012). The ability to build brand knowledge and engage with stakeholders are key aspects of SNS that have significant implications for sponsorship and activation initiatives (Meenaghan et al., 2013), creating an opportunity for sponsors to interact with and engage customers (Cahill and Meenaghan, 2013). Recently a large proportion of sponsorship activation efforts include digital, mobile and on-line media (Meenaghan et al., 2013), as indicated in a recent IEG (2013) report that stated public relations (89%) and social media (88%) are the two most popular platforms of activation used by sponsors. The incorporation of SNS in sponsorship activation capitalizes on the availability of these channels to create consumer engagement through integrated messaging, and thus strengthens brand associations (Santomier, 2008). To date, limited studies have examined online marketing initiatives through SNS. Meenaghan et al. (2013) suggested the need for researchers to extend studies of sponsorship in the social media environment, specifically emphasizing the notions of eWOM, sentiment, and engagement as measures of sponsorship effectiveness.

Much scholarly work on Twitter to date has focused hashtags which are an integral part of Twitter’s ability to link the conversations of strangers together (Murthy, 2013) and make tweets more easily searchable and visible amongst all Twitter message traffic (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013). Therefore, this exploratory study seeks to improve our understanding of Twitter as a sponsorship activation tool around a global mega-sporting-event, the 2014 World Cup, though the analysis of specific marketing hashtags.

Twitter offers a reciprocal outlet of exchange where consumers can express their opinions and biases, thereby spreading eWOM about a brand (Steyn 2009). Jansen et al. (2009) studied eWOM brand communication on Twitter and found that more than half of the branded tweets with sentiments were positive tweets, and only one third were negative tweets. Thus we ask the following research question:

RQ1: What is the composition (e.g. original tweets Retweets) and sentiment of the eWOM on each marketing hashtag?

As Yan (2011) stated, audience connection to a brand can be built on social media that promotes a sense of belonging through the engagement opportunities provided by these platforms. Therefore it is important for marketers to know who is engaging with their activations on a SNS platform leading to the following question:

RQ2: Which stakeholders are engaging with and driving the conversation on marketing hashtags?
Twitter averages 500 million tweets per day (Twitter, 2014) and as a result, ideas, opinions, and products must compete with all other content for the scarce attention of the user community. There are many studies (e.g. Romero et al., 2011; Razis & Anagnostopoulos, 2014) that have tried to determine how certain topics gain popularity on Twitter with most identifying two important aspects of information transmission that seem to determine which content receives attention: the popularity and status of members of these social networks, (i.e. number of followers) and the influence of these members, which is determined by the actual propagation of their content through the network (Razis & Anagnostopoulos, 2014). Therefore, the third research question asks:

RQ3: What is the influence of the stakeholders identified in creating eWOM?

Using the 2014 World Cup as the research context, hashtag data was collected for both official sponsors and non-sponsors wishing to associate themselves with the event. The hashtags were tracked throughout the period of the World Cup, resulting in the collection of 1,950,680 tweets; 1,529,111 from hashtags created by official sponsors and 421,569 from non-sponsors.

As this study is ongoing, the following describes the analysis that will be undertaken on the data collected. To answer RQ1, content of each tweet on a hashtag will be analyzed through basic pattern matching, to elucidate a more detailed pattern of tweeting activity on the hashtag (e.g. original tweet, retweet, reply, edited retweet). The sentiment of each tweet data set will also be analyzed for positive or negative eWOM using LIWC software. To answer RQ2, the relative rank of each user will be used to identify a user's relative commitment to the hashtagged exchange. Further analysis will be conducted by dividing the data set into three groups: the top 10% most active or most visible users are placed in a different group from the remaining 90%, with a further distinction between the top 1% and the next most active 9%. Additionally, the twitter bios of top users will be included in the research to identify which stakeholders are engaging with the hashtags (e.g. sponsor, non-sponsor, PR firm, fan) to uncover who is really driving the conversation. RQ3 will investigate the influence for top users through visibility measures as outlined in Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013 and the influence measures developed by Razis & Anagnostopoulos (2014). Additionally, data will be compared from the sponsors and non-sponsors data sets to identify any differences or similarities in the engagement and use of these hashtags.

As the body of Twitter scholarship grows, more comprehensive comparative approaches to hashtagged communicative exchanges are required for the body of research to move beyond general descriptive methodology and “advance our knowledge of the metrics for evaluating influence” (Billings, 2014, p. 5). This study will contribute to the growing body of research on Twitter by increasing our understanding of the metrics for evaluating influence.