The Value of Social Media for Sport Fans: A Sequential Focus Group Design Exploration

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Social media (SM) use is a phenomenon that has grown rapidly in the sport industry over the past decade (Pedersen, 2014). Its popularity and acceptance by athletes, coaches, managers, teams, leagues, fans, events, and sport governing bodies is widespread (Hutchins, 2014; Pedersen, 2014), and the expansive reach of SM’s use in sport has presented a multitude of opportunities to different stakeholders in the industry (Abeza, O’Reilly, Seguin, & Nzindukiyimana, 2015). Today, with the ability to reach greater numbers of audiences at a time, place, and frequency that is convenient to consumers (Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly, 2013), marketers are using SM as a medium to implement a variety of marketing communication elements such as news updates, sales, advertising, public relations, internal communication, and relationship marketing (Schultz & Peltier, 2013; Vernuccio, 2014). While SM is a valuable resource to carry out these marketing communications elements (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010), it predominantly appears to be an ideal tool to achieving relationship marketing (RM) goals (Williams & Chinn, 2010). This seems particularly relevant in sport marketing as SM is believed to be a conduit capable of building meaningful relationships between two parties (e.g., Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Stavros et al. 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010).

While SM seems to offer numerous opportunities for relationship building (at least conceptually) (Abeza, O’Reilly, & Reid, 2013), there is only a limited understanding in the literature as to how sport fans see the value of SM in maintaining and enhancing relationships with their favourite sport teams: (i) a number of sport related SM studies centering on sport fans have contributed to our understanding of fans’ motivation, behaviour, and attitude in using SM for purposes other than RM (e.g., Clavio & Walsh, 2013; Gibbs, O’Reilly & Brunette, 2014; Mahan et al., 2014; Wang, 2013); and (ii) close to a dozen of sport-related SM studies can be identified that grounded their research in RM as a theoretical framework or as a management approach (e.g., Abeza, O’Reilly, & Reid, 2013; Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012; Stavros et al., 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010; ). Notably, the latter have made significant contributions to the theoretical framework of RM through the lens of SM in sport context. However, a gap remains in the literature regarding the perspective of sport fans on the value of SM as a channel to communicate, interact, and co-create value with their favourite sport teams, which are (per Gronroos, 2004 and Williams & Chinn, 2010) the core intent of RM.

Research Objectives and Questions

Given that SM is suggested to be an ideal RM tool and given that sport consumers are primarily active collaborators in SM, this study attempts to gain a deeper and empirically informed understanding of the value of SM as a RM medium from the perspective of sport fans. Three research questions guide the study: (i) what are professional sport team fans’ purposes for using social media platforms?; (ii) how do professional sport team fans see the value of SM in enhancing a long-term relationship with their favourite sport team?; and (iii) how do professional sport team fans see the challenges of SM as RM medium?

Theoretical Framework

RM, both as a theoretical framework and as a management approach, is the management of customer relationships (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Its central purpose is retaining customers through long-term mutual beneficial relationships between businesses and customers (Gronroos, 2004). To do so, businesses need to communicate, interact, and engage in two-way dialogue with customers on an ongoing basis (Gronroos, 2004; Williams & Chinn, 2010). It is through a two-way continuous dialogue that businesses are able to listen to and understand customer needs, to deliver a co-created product, to build long-term relationships, and, eventually, to secure a long-term profit (Gronroos, 2000; Gummesson, 1998). By extension, the dialogue enables businesses to achieve goals such as increased loyalty, reduced marketing costs, and increased stability and security (Christopher, Payne, & Ballantyne,
In this regard, SM has become an ideal medium to achieve RM goals (O’Brien, 2011; Williams & Chinn, 2010).

Method

This study employs a sequential focus group research design to explore the value of SM as a RM medium from fans perspective. The focus group is a useful exploratory data collection method when little information exist on a specific topic of interest, as is the case with the topic at hand (per Krueger, 2009; Nassar-McMillan & Borders, 2002). A focus group is also particularly effective in eliciting new insightful information on how target respondents think about an issue and articulate it in their own words (Willgerodt, 2003; Morgan, 1997). Focus group discussions reveal unexpected insights that were not identified through conventional means such as literature review or expert advice (Willgerodt, 2003). Therefore, due to a lack of previous research on the topic, conducting sequential focus group design is deemed an appropriate approach. In adopting a sequential focus group design, this study’s questions for each focus group after the first will build on the results that emerge from preceding focus groups within the study itself, as opposed to the traditional practice of using the same questions for each focus group. Initially, six focus groups (per Nassar-McMillan & Borders, 2002; Morgan, 1997) will be considered, and the total group number will be determined at the stage where adding more groups no longer generates new understanding (saturation stage).

In selecting focus group participants, the goal will be on background homogeneity as opposed to homogeneity in attitudes (as per Morgan, 1997). This is mainly because what determines participants’ willingness to discuss a topic together is their perception of each other having common ground (Nassar-McMillan & Borders, 2002). Homogeneity in the composition of focus groups not only allows for more free-flowing conversations among participants, but also facilitates an analysis of the differences in perspectives among groups. According to Morgan (1997), the most common background variables that are considered in running mixed instead segmented groups are sex, race, age, and social class. These variables, as well as sport related specific variables such as season versus non-season ticket holders, will be considered in identifying participants. For this purpose, Canadian professional sport team’s fans will be considered, due to the investigators’ access to potential discussants in this domain.

Research Findings

The study will produce empirical evidence that demonstrates the value of SM as an RM tool from fans’ perspective. Such empirically informed understanding will allow sport managers to be more proactive and purposeful in the use of their SM platforms, and in formulating informed and adaptive strategies. Also, gaining a rich sense of fans’ perspective on the value of SM as an RM tool will make a contribution to the advancement of the theory of RM through SM in the context of sport, specifically by examining the unexplored component of the theory—the value element—alongside the two preceding stages: communication and interaction. The study is in-progress, and findings will be presented at NASSM conference.

References


