An Empirical Examination of an Online Team Community and its Consequences

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A great stream of research has been developed in the marketing literature about consumers’ interactions through brand communities (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Based on the perspective that a brand community is consumer-centric, McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) proposed the Integration Brand Community Scale (IBCS) as a tool to examine and strengthen brand communities. These communities often play an important role in promoting consumer-brand relationships, and this is particularly relevant for online brand communities (Yan, Yang, & Wang, 2014). An online brand community refers to “a specialized, non-geographically bound, online community, based on social communications and relationships among a brand’s consumers” (de Valck, van Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2009), and it is often suggested that being a member of an online brand community tends to influence future consumption behaviors towards brand products or services (e.g., Köhler, Rohm, de Ruyter, & Wetzels, 2011; Laroche, Habibi, Richard & Sankaranarayanan, 2012). Recent studies in sport settings have focused on the development of brand communities and its role to understand spectators’ future behaviors towards the teams such as increased attendance frequencies and/or merchandise purchases (Heere et al., 2011; Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015). However, little is known about how to conceptualize team communities in the online context and its subsequent impact on fans’ future responses towards the team. Ruihley and Hardin (2014) suggest that it is important to understand the development of online team communities because sports fans spend much of their time in online activities related with their teams, while Hedlund (2014) mentions that it is imperative to understand the role of fans’ participation in communities on their future behavioral intentions. Thus, the purpose of the current study is twofold. First, using the IBCS (McAlexander et al., 2002) as basis, this study attempts to measure online team community in the sport setting. Second, this study seeks to examine the effect of fans’ participation in an online team community on their behavioral intentions towards the team.

This study was conducted with fans from a Portuguese soccer team of the top professional league, and data were collected through an online survey. With the support of the marketing department, a link was activated on the official facebook page of the team inviting visitors to access a survey. The IP address was recorded and further access from these IP addresses was denied to avoid redundant participants. The online survey was available for three days with a total of 609 visitors responding. After data screening, 503 responses were deemed usable. The IBCS (McAlexander et al., 2002) was adapted to assess online team community and included 14 items that were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1=Strongly Disagree, to 7=Strongly Agree). This scale includes the constructs of fan-product relationship (i.e., fans’ relationships with sport products and services associated to the team), fan-team relationship (i.e., how fans relate with their team via online community), team-fan relationship (i.e., fans’ perception of how their team relates with them through online community), and fan-other-fan relationship (i.e., fans’ relationships with other fans in the online community). The construct of behavioral intentions included four items adapted from Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, Marôço, and Ross (2012). These items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1=Not Likely at All, to 7=Extremely Likely). Data were submitted to a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to examine the appropriateness of the online team community model using AMOS 21.0. A structural model estimation was performed to examine the relationships between the online team community construct and behavioral intentions.

The results of the CFA for the first-order model of online team community showed that the factor loadings of two items of fan-team relationship and one item of team-fan relationship failed to exceed the cut-off point of .50 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009), and as such, these items were eliminated. After this scale refinement, the model indicated an acceptable fit to the data \[\chi^2(38)=101.96 \text{ (p<.001)}; \gamma^2/df=2.68; \text{CFI}=.96; \text{GFI}=.94; \text{TLI}=.95; \text{RMSEA}=.07\]. Internal consistency of all constructs were above .70, varying from .73 (fan-team relationship) to .85 (team-fan relationship). The AVE values were greater than the .50 standard for convergent validity, varying from .51...
Discriminant validity was accepted given that AVE for each construct was greater than the squared correlation between that construct and any other (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The fit indices produced for the second-order construct of online team community also indicated an acceptable fit to the data \( \chi^2(40)=141.91 \) (p<.001); \( \chi^2/df=2.87; \) CFI=.96; GFI=.94; TLI=.94; RMSEA=.07. The paths between online team community and the four proposed dimensions indicated that all relationships were positive and significant (p<.05), varying from .73 (team-fan relationship to .86 (fan-other-fan relationship). Next, the results of the model including online team community and behavioral intentions were equal and found to be acceptable for both the measurement and structural models \( \chi^2(85)=318.82 \) (p<.001), \( \chi^2/df=3.75, \) CFI=.92, GFI=.92, TLI=.91, RMSEA=.07. The composite reliability value for behavioral intentions (.77) and the AVE value (.46) indicated acceptable construct validity, and discriminant validity between this construct and online team community was also accepted (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The analysis of the path coefficient in the structural model indicates that online team community have a significant positive effect on behavioral intentions \( (\beta=.60, p<.001). \) The ability of the hypothesized model to explain variation in the outcome variable was assessed by R2 values and approximately 36% of the variance of behavioral intentions \( (R^2=.36) \) was explained by online team community.

The findings are in line with the idea that the IBCS (McAlexander et al., 2002) is an appropriate instrument to use in the online sport scenario, and suggest that online team community could be measured through the constructs of fan-product relationships, fan-other-fan relationships, fan-team relationships, and team-fan relationships. Based on the findings, teams should maintain regular contact with fans via online platforms and provide them with opportunities to share rituals and traditions with other fans. Also, it would be important to customize products and services for online team community members in order to strengthen interpersonal ties and increase their sense of belonging to the online team community (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008; McAlexander et al., 2002). Additionally, the results of the structural model provide support to previous studies suggesting that fans’ participation in online team communities tend to have a vital role at enhancing behavioral intentions towards the teams (Carlson & O’Cass, 2012). It means that the more a fan feels a positive connection with the online team community, the more he/she will contribute to the maximization of team profits via future game attendance, recommendations of team games to others and purchases of team-related products and services (Biscaia et al., 2012). These findings should be considered by sport managers and provide opportunities to continue advancing our knowledge about how to manage online communities in sports scenario.