Social media has become a ubiquitous tool for the marketing and promotion of sports organizations. Through the interconnectivity of social media platforms, sports organizations have been able to expand the salience and connection between their brands and consumers. However, online video sharing—specifically through websites such as YouTube and mobile applications like Snapchat—is often overshadowed in discussions of social media marketing in favor of text based platforms such as Twitter. This is in spite of the fact that nearly every major professional and intercollegiate sports organization in the United States, Canada, and Europe use video sharing as a component of their marketing strategies. Under-utilization of YouTube as a social media platform is supported by statistical data, as there are no North American sports teams represented in the list of the 100 most subscribed to sports related channels on YouTube (Vidstatsx, 2015). This research project focuses on the communication and marketing strategies utilized by Manchester City, one of the most popular YouTube channels operated by a sports team. Utilizing digital ethnography and content analysis, the researcher uncovers the effective communication strategies utilized in Manchester City’s video sharing, specifically emphasizing the creation of brand personality and horizontal flows of communication between fans and the brand.

Previous research on the use of social media in the sporting context reflects the unique ability of the medium to affect communication of the brand to and between fans of a team (Boyle & Whannel, 2010; Hutchins, 2011). Social media allows for horizontal flows of information between consumers, meaning that information flows freely between consumers and producers of information as opposed to the traditional vertical flow of content where information flows unidirectionally from producer down to consumer (Jenkins, 2006, Marwick & Boyd, 2010). Armstrong, Delia, and Giardina (2014) demonstrated in their analysis of the Los Angeles Kings’ Twitter feed that operationalizing the horizontal flow of information in sports marketing can create a more personal connection with sporting brands. Their analysis noted that the interactions and personality of the Kings’ social media generated increased brand salience and deeper connections with the brand among fans (see also, Norman, 2012, Murthy, 2011, Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001, Khan & Vong, 2014). Video sharing platforms, particularly YouTube for the purposes of this research, remain under-theorized in this regard. While researchers such as Kuppelweiser and colleagues (2013) have acknowledged the brand building potential of YouTube, this has yet to be applied to the unique conditions of sport marketing (see also, Voss & Kumar, 2013, Bonson, et. al, 2013).

Manchester City’s YouTube account provides an ideal object of analysis for understanding the marketing potential of video sharing technology. The club’s account is the most popular (as measured by number of subscribers) English speaking sports channel operated by a single team on YouTube, and only FC Barcelona has more subscriptions among team-owned channels (VidStasx, 2015). As a case study, Manchester City is worthy of academic interest because of the channel’s global popularity. Since the purchase of the club by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan in 2011, the club has heavily invested in video production, publishing original online video content in lieu of game highlights which the club cannot share on YouTube due to licensing restrictions (Sawers, 2011). In producing original content and creating a popular digital video platform without using game highlights, Manchester City has created a unique and successful brand which has been recognized globally. By focusing on the work of Manchester City, this research provides a framework for the success which that club has found which can be replicated, in whole or in part, by other sporting organizations looking to successfully utilize online video sharing as part of their digital marketing strategy.

For this study I have operationalized two different qualitative research methods. I begin with a traditional content analysis of the material placed on the website which is used to categorize the different types of video content provided by Manchester City. The results of this analysis are counted to establish a ratio of content production, demonstrating which types of videos are produced most often and the rate at which content is produced. This content analysis will be used to supplement the digital ethnography conducted on the YouTube page. Digital
ethnography has been the method of choice for analyzing social media marketing exchange in sports (see Norman, 2012, Murthy, 2011, Armstrong, Delia, & Giardina, 2014) because it allows the researcher to analyze the process of communication of exchange between fans and the organization, effectively embedding them within the process of brand communication. This method utilizes open-ended research questions without hypothesis so that the researcher enters the digital field without preconceived conceptualizations of the content of communication between fans and teams. While this diminishes the replicability of this type of research, the constructs and concepts uncovered using this methodological framework are important for informing larger quantitative studies which could possibly address larger questions about the use of video sharing in the sport marketing field.

This methodological framework is used to address the following two open ended research questions:

RQ1: What categories of content are being produced on YouTube by Manchester City?

RQ2: How are horizontal communication strategies being operationalized to create a marketable persona for Manchester City’s YouTube account?

Preliminary analysis of the research project (which is ongoing), has revealed that the popularity of the Manchester City YouTube account is largely based on its ability to create personalized conversations between team officials (players, coaches, etc.) and fans. By opening a digital video dialogue between the fans and the team, Manchester City has personalized the relationship the fan-team relationship, resulting in greater appreciation, empathy, and attachment to the brand identity of the team.

References


