Online Sport Consumers Segmentation: Examining the Differing Psychological Connections of a Team's Online Following

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Sport consumers are represented by heterogeneous cohorts characterized by diverse attitudinal and behavioural responses (Stewart, Smith, & Nicholson, 2003). Certain individuals may only casually observe a team's circumstances, whilst others progress to become fans who possess favourable attitudes towards the team, and engage with the team in multiple ways (Funk & James, 2001). As these behaviors enable teams to generate sustainable operating revenue, one of the most important objectives for sport organizations is to develop fans that display a wide variety of behaviors conducive to supporting the team (James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002). Social media platforms provide opportunities for sport organizations to engage with consumers, yet little empirical research is available to inform marketers how consumers use these communication channels (Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012). Thus, the purpose of this research is to examine the use of social media within a professional sport team's social media community and explore how connectivity may vary between the team's fan cohorts.

Sport consumers are avid users of technology (Kelly, 2013) and express themselves and access information using a myriad of different devices, including assessing information while watching a match, whether that be on television or in the venue. Sport organizations were early adopters of social media and have embedded its benefits into marketing (Eagleman, 2013), communications (Thompson, 2013), CSR (Scott, Bruffy, & Naylor, 2015), and other areas of organizational focus. Social media gives organizations (teams, leagues, or other), athletes, and consumers an unfiltered voice in an ever-increasingly cluttered media-marketplace. Traditionally, media content was vetted by journalists and producers or editors who had the final decision on whether a story was newsworthy. However, the adoption of social media platforms by sport organizations has enabled all users to have complete control over their message (Scott, Hill, & Zakus, 2014). As this relatively new approach continues to grow, it is important for those involved in sport communication and marketing to understand social media from a consumer standpoint.

To date, much of the research in social media has had its focus on content analysis of social media consumer posts through content analytic methodologies on Facebook (Evans, 2010; Scott, Bradshaw, & Larkin, 2012), Twitter (Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012; Frederick, Lim, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2014; Pegoraro, 2010), and blogs (Clavio & Eagleman, 2011; Kwak, Kim, & Zimmerman, 2010). Further, studies on social media have recently begun to be criticised by a variety of sport scholars. Some of these criticisms will seek to be addressed in this study. Billings (2014) suggested that social media studies, in particular Twitter, overextend their claims about both the reach and the power of social media and generalise social media content to the general population rather than the online population. Hardin (2014) suggested that many studies on social media did not advance or extend theory or were not sufficiently grounded, while Pedersen (2014) also commented that studies on social media were easy to crank “out numerous social media thematic/content analyses and surveys”, which are “not overly taxing or time consuming” (Pedersen, 2014, p. 114). This study seeks to mitigate the criticisms of social media research by analysing a professional sport team’s social media community using a robust theoretical framework to segment the team’s social media users and to understand user behaviors into why consumers choose to follow a team online.

Data were collected from fans of the Canberra Raiders, a professional team participating in National Rugby League (NRL). The NRL is the top professional rugby competition in Australasia with teams in Australia and New Zealand. The NRL is one of the most attended sport leagues in Australasia and its State of Origin and Grand Final matches are generally in the top-10 most viewed programs annually in Australia. The Canberra Raiders entered the NRL in 1982 and have experienced mixed success in its history. It has reached the Grand Final five times and winning three times, but it has also finished out of the finals many times. A link to an online survey assessing fan’s social media
engagement was posted by the team to its various online platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, the team’s website, and in the team’s electronic newsletter. The online survey was active for several weeks during the second half of the 2015 season and collected 738 usable responses.

In addition to questions that generated demographic profiles, the survey collected mixed method data which assessed the social media platforms fans used to engage with the team, the frequency in which this engagement occurred, and qualitative data explaining how this experience could be improved. The survey also included nine involvement items (Beaton, Funk, Ridinger, & Jordan, 2011; Doyle, Kunkel, & Funk, 2013) assessing the individual’s psychological connection to the team, which were used to segment the sample into the four stages proposed by Funk and James’ (2001) Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) - Awareness, Attraction, Attachment and Allegiance.

Segmentation results placed 33 people in Awareness, 87 people in Attraction, 255 people in Attachment and 366 into the Allegiance stage. This distribution confirmed the majority of the sample was highly engaged consumers. Preliminary results indicate that individuals in the higher PCM stages interact with the team across a broader spectrum of social media channels, view more types of content on these platforms and do so for longer periods than those in the lower stages. Interestingly, individuals in the Allegiance stage engaged with the team on social media significantly more than those in the Attachment stage. Qualitative analysis indicated that consumers across the stages perceived the team could improve their experience by augmenting the content posted (e.g., more insights from coaches, players and more competitions) and by establishing more online identities (e.g., Snapchat, Vine). Additionally, there were suggestions that more co-creational activities (e.g., polls, fan feedback) would help enhance the connection the between the consumer and the team (e.g., Uhrich, 2014).

The main outcome from this study will be an extension of an existing theoretical framework into the analysis of online consumers, who may not live in a geographic proximity to the team and also whose fandom to the team may be variable. In addition, this study helps to bridge the gap between studies on social media and the use of theories that will help information marketing practice. Additionally, this research provides implications for sport organizations who can augment their content, and online presence based on these findings to develop fans that display a greater range of behaviors which benefit sport organizations.