The Building Blocks for Online Communities

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The use of online and social media platforms has garnered much attention from both sport practitioners and researchers. Given the number of fans engaging in these platforms, understanding the interaction between a sport organization and fans is critical from a management and marketing perspective. Sport managers are realizing more strategic planning is needed to administer the social media accounts (Stoldt & Vermillion, 2013) and optimize important consumer interactions. To understand social media, researchers have studied the use of different online platforms from a user and organizational perspective (e.g., Clavio & Walsh, 2013; Frederick, Clavio, Burch, & Zimmerman, 2012; Pedersen, 2014; Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012; Sanderson, 2013; Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly, 2013). This research is often framed in uses and gratifications theory or relationship marketing theory. However, the theoretical development in this area from a strategic organizational perspective is limited (Abeza, O’Reilly, Seguin, & Nzindukiyimana, 2015; Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). A clear gap with the literature in terms of understanding how a sport organization can achieve its goals and provide an online arena that consumers desire exists. One area that sport organization can improve upon is the strategic approach used to develop community among users. The means to engage fans in a consistent and strategic manner that develops a sense of community across multiple online platforms is clearly an end goal for both the organization and consumer.

Many studies indicate that individuals’ desire a sense of community and sport is frequently cited as a means to delivery this need to fans (e.g., Fairley & Tyler, 2012; Warner, Shapiro, Dixon, Ridinger, & Harrison, 2011; Warner, Dixon, & Leierer, 2015). From a marketing standpoint, the development of fan community and fan-to-fan interaction has been found to be key to consumer experience (Katz & Heere, 2013; Holt, 1995; Swanson et al., 2003). In fact, Yoshida and colleagues (2015) found that fan community attachment was the only construct in their study that predicted attendance frequency. Community does not just happen; rather it is result of intentional management and design (Warner, 2012; Warner & Leierer, 2015). Therefore, we propose a model of how a sense of community develops in the online environment.

For this conceptual framework, we operationalize social media using Filo et al.’s (2015) and Shilbury, Westerbeek, Quick, Funk, and Karg’s (2014) definition, which includes social networking sites, blogs, micro-blogs, online communities, and discussion forums. Further, our conceptual model answers the call of Filo et al. (2015) and Abeza et al. (2015) for a more theoretical driven research paradigm related to social media implementation. Through applying and using existing theory as a guide, the establishment of a conceptual model on how a sense of community is developed online would advance the literature. Therefore, our model utilizes Warner and Dixon’s (2010, 2013) Sport and Sense of Community theory and applies it to an online setting. The results highlight the operationalization of each of the theory’s factors in an online setting and the online community building, marketing, communication, and consumer behavior research that would support the theory factors in this setting. The conceptual model includes: Administrative Consideration (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Grönnroos, 1994; Williams & Chinn, 2010), Common Interest (Adams & Smith, 2008; Blanchard et al., 2010; Blaszka, Frederick, Burch, Clavio, & Walsh; Tajefel & Turner, 1979), Competition (Havard, 2014; Heere, 2015; Tyler & Cobbs, 2015; Warner & Dixon, 2015), Equity in Administrative Decisions (Goodwin & Ross, 1992; Sartore & Warner, 2013), Leadership Opportunities (Funk & James, 2001, 2006; Gibbs et al., 2014; Hambrick et al., 2010), Social Spaces (Bale, 1998; Fairley & Tyler, 2012), and Voluntary Action (Katz & Heere, 2015; Kankanhalli et al., 2005; Wasko & Faraj, 2000). The resulting conceptual model provides a clear guide for sport managers who desire to more strategically optimize online organization and consumers’ interaction in such a way that fosters fan communities and an enhanced sense of community for all users.