Focused World Engagement: Twitter Activity of the International Basketball Federation

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Social media has become a key communication avenue for many professional sport entities. Despite the call by some researchers to shift from a traditional exchange paradigm to a relationship paradigm when planning marketing efforts (Kim & Trail, 2011), many organizations within and outside sports are involved in predominantly one-sided relationships with their consumers (Sanderson, 2011; Labrecque, 2013). Such parasocial interaction is not necessarily bad for brands; rather, it can be used to design successful social media strategies (Labrecque, 2013; Ashley & Tuten, 2015). The International Basketball Federation (FIBA) has allowed one of the authors of this paper to analyze their Twitter activity. This paper presents some aspects of the performance of the second-best international sports federation on social media (Sportcal, 2015) that are applicable to sports organizations of different sizes and scopes.

Twitter users can create their own online persona but rather than simply “liking” a page, they actively follow specific companies or users as if they were part of a group. The network’s primarily use is to draw attention to the activities of the individual or brand through a steady stream of posters from each user. “Retweets” can cause its users to come across “cross-ideological” content (Himelboim, 2013). On Facebook, authenticity and perceived user engagement attract and maintain a fan base (Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012). In college sports, fans exhibit relatively low social media participation and rather use traditional media for informational purposes (Clavio & Walsh, 2014). Institutions of higher education use Twitter as a news feed rather than to converse with students (Linville et al., 2012). Similarly, national governing bodies in sport use it as a communication rather than marketing tool (Eagleman, 2013). FIBA operates in a similar manner. The National Advertising Division (NAD) considers the number of “likes” that a company receives on Facebook as a social endorsement (Baker et al., 2013); the same can be inferred for Twitter.

Most of what we know about organizational usage of social media in sport focuses on North American sport. FIBA is the world’s governing body of basketball so studying their Twitter content provides clues on its influence on social media engagement on a global level. The following research questions were developed to guide this study:

How does content focus on gender (RQ1), selected top nations by continents (RQ2), selected competitions (RQ3), and the presence of content features (RQ4) influence engagement levels of Twitter followers?

How does publication in different dayparts (RQ5) influence engagement levels of Twitter followers?

The content of 4441 original tweets published on FIBA’s official Twitter account, @FIBA, between April 1 and December 31, 2015, was analyzed by four student coders. Variables included gender focus (male, female, both, none); nation(s) mentioned; competition(s) referenced; content features (graphic, infographic, hyperlink, picture(s), video, none); “@” mentions of other accounts; hashtag(s); time of publication. “Retweets” were not included in the analysis. “Engagement” was determined by adding up the number of “likes” and “retweets” for each individual tweet. Differences between types of tweets were determined using analysis of variance; correlation was determined using Pearson’s correlation coefficient; likelihood of feature inclusion was identified using chi-square analysis.

The number of “likes” (M = 34.71, SD = 94.15) and “retweets” (M = 31.42, SD = 99.41) as criteria of engagement are highly correlated (r(4439) = .932, p < .001) so references to “engagement” indicate significant differences in both categories, as well as in the newly computed variable (M = 66.15, SD = 190.28), unless otherwise specified.

Tweets focused on men (N = 2745, M = 90.25, SD = 232.67) attract greater engagement (F = 59.637, p < .001) than those referencing women (N = 1569, M = 25.08, SD = 59.82). A comparison of the most “engaged” countries on each continent to global averages shows that references to the Philippines (M = 269.17, SD = 473.66; F = 236.659, p < .001) and China (M = 108.43, SD = 209.95; F = 11.399, p < .002) drive engagement among Asian countries. In Africa, mentions of Angola (M = 50.68, SD = 117.78; F = .753), Nigeria (M = 62.55, SD = 122.77; F = .038), and...
Senegal (M = 51.91, SD = 81.53; F = .544) generated average engagement compared to global figures. In Europe, France (M = 94.91, SD = 304.23; F = 10.646, p < .002), Spain (M = 107.16, SD = 299.32; F = 25.017, p < .001), and Serbia stood out (M = 84.29, SD = 195.17; F = 4.276, p < .05). In the Americas, Argentina (M = 96.65, SD = 186.01; F = 6.497, p < .02) was more likely to attract all types of responses, whereas Canada (M = 88.59, SD = 173.60; F = 3.733, p = 0.053) and the United States (M = 82.08, SD = 125.27 F = 1.253) did not differ significantly from global averages.

In terms of tweet features, pictures drove engagement (M = 103.65, SD = 251.37; F = 166.136, p < .001) while videos (M = 35.00, SD = 107.51; F = 45.812, p < .001) and “plain” tweets (M = 17.05, SD = 38.36; F = 35.952, p < .001) reduced it.

Men’s European (M = 156.77, SD = 335.20), Asian (M = 134.93, SD = 341.26), and pan-American (M = 114.64, SD = 201.86) continental championships were the most likely to attract engagement (F = 31.313, p < .001). In turn, all tweets about women’s games were less likely to contain pictures (χ²(1) = 58.57, p < 0.01) and hyperlinks (χ²(1) = 30.81, p < 0.01) than messages about men, yet more likely to include graphics/infographics (χ²(1) = 92.40, p < 0.01) or be limited to text (χ²(1) = 21.15, p < 0.01).

Despite Twitter’s dominance in North America and Western Europe, FIBA’s messages were resounding world-wide. France, Serbia, and Spain placed among the top-four teams in continental championships for both genders. China’s popularity is curious given the network’s ban in the Middle Kingdom. Top African countries placed within average in terms of engagement—curiously, as did the United States.

In terms of content production, tweets about men exceeded those about women in both number and resulting engagement. The latter derives at least in part from content differences: Tweets about women were more likely to include (relatively unappealing) sheer text and less likely to include (demonstratively engaging) pictures.

Despite the original text-only nature of Twitter, such messages are the least engaging. Pictures generate far greater engagement than video clips—even after the auto play feature was introduced. More crucially, FIBA still uses social media largely as a one-way news feed (Sanderson, 2011; Labrecque, 2013) despite the engagement generated by informal messages such as birthday graphics.

Findings show that social media can be used by international federations to publicize less prominent nations and competitions effectively (cf. Rogers, 2003). While the inclusion of video content is appealing and justified in some cases, its impact is limited in terms of mere promotion of the sport.