Exploring Antecedents of Word-of-Mouth in Teams’ Social Media: A Perspective of Information Value

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Word-of-mouth (WOM) is “informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers” (Westbrook, 1987, p. 261), which could be product-related discussions, share usage information, make recommendations, or merely mention products. It has been considered a more credible and trustworthy marketing communication tool than conventional advertisement (Liu, 2006; Murray, 1991). With the high penetration of internet technology in society, online WOM has been widely adopted by sport teams in nowadays marketing communications. Popular social media like Facebook enables fans’ WOM behavior (e.g., LIKE and SHARE) spread in a much faster speed than traditional face-to-face WOM. Accordingly, how to promote online WOM is highly demanded by sport marketing practitioners and has been garnering great research attention. Building upon the value theory, this study aims to explore manipulable antecedents of online WOM in the context of teams’ Facebook.

Perceived value is the “consumer’s overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given” (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 14). The positive influence of high product value on consumer behavior including WOM intention has been intensively identified (e.g., Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000; Overby & Lee, 2006; Smith & Colgate, 2007; Woodall, 2003). Similarly, in the context of communication, high information value often leads to people’s positive attitudinal responses (Bauer, Reichardt, Barnes, & Neumann, 2005; Szymanski & Hise, 2000). Since positive perception and attitude are major antecedents of WOM (Brown, Barry, Dacin, & Gunst, 2005; De Matos & Rossi, 2008), it is reasonable to propose that high information value will promote fans’ online WOM behavior.

Game attractiveness, the degree to which an event is noteworthy, has been wide considered the foundation of spectator sports (Hansen & Gauthier, 1989; Schofield, 1983; Zhang, 1995; Zhang, Smith, Pease, & Jambor, 1997) and therefore is expected to be a crucial factor determining the value of sport information. In sport marketing literature (Byon, Zhang, & Connaughton, 2010; Greenwell, Fink, & Pastore, 2002; Zhang et al., 1997; Watanabe, Yan, & Soebbing, 2015), following indices were frequently used to assess the pre-game attractiveness: league standing measured by the weekly standing of home team (Independent Variable-1) and rivalry team (IV-2), presence of star players measured by the number of all-star players in two teams (IV-3), competitive balance measured by rankings difference of two teams (IV-4), and game schedule (IV-5) (i.e., home game, away game, and no game). Differing from the behavior of game attendance that stops with the completion of an event, online WOM usually continues after the event and therefore is subjected to the influence of post-game attractiveness measured by win or lose (IV-6) and score difference of two teams (IV-7).

“Content is king” is a widely-spread tenet in the context of online communication, which upholds the importance of content in determining information value (Pedersen, Miloch, & Laucella, 2007). In the current study, teams’ Facebook posts was grouped into following six categories: team status (e.g., honor records, trade information, injury report, and team practice), game promotion (e.g., game reminder, incentives for game attendance, fans dressing code, and broadcast information), play highlight (i.e., replaying one or multiple wonderful plays), game summary (i.e.,, replaying one or multiple wonderful plays), game summary (i.e., summarizing a team’s performance in one game or recent multiple games), community relations, and other off-court promotion (e.g., coupon promotions, interactive questions, ceremonies information, and other non-basketball events). Different content categories (IV-8) are expected to impact fans’ online WOM at different degrees. In addition, the service of information provision, such as timing of information release measured by day of week (IV-9) and content format measured by image or video (IV-10), also constitutes the information value.
Three NBA teams’ (i.e., Atlanta Hawks, Houston Rockets, and Phoenix Suns) Facebook data in the first week of November, December, March, and April (in 15/16 season) were collected. One Facebook post was coded as one subject in data entry. A total of 319 Facebook posts was retrieved. To avoid the function-bias of a specific media platform, LIKE and SHARE which are available in major social network sites were chosen as two dependent variables. Aforementioned 10 observed variables underlying pre-game attractiveness, post-game attractiveness, information content, and service of information provision were independent variables. A path analysis conducted with Mplus 7.0 with estimator of MLR.

Given that all variables are observable in the path model, goodness of fit indices were excellent: RMSEA = .00, CFI = 1.00, SRMR = .00. Among variables of pre-game attractiveness, the influence of all-star players on LIKE was marginally significant (B = 583.74, p = .11); Compared with no game, the influence of home game on SHARE was marginally significant (B = 284.90, p = .07). Among variables of post-game attractiveness, score difference negatively impacted LIKE (B = -170.25, p < .01) and SHARE (B = -10.63, p < .01); Compared with lose game, win game positively impacted LIKE (B = 2059.51, p < .01) and SHARE (B = 161.55, p < .01). Compared with the content of community relations, team status (B_LIKE = 3061.73, p < .01; B_SHARE = 100.09, p = .79), play highlight (B_LIKE = 3270.37, p < .01; B_SHARE = 252.87, p < .01), and game summary (B_LIKE = 4184.15, p < .01; B_SHARE = 268.39, p < .01) exerted significant or marginally significant influences on LIKE and SHARE. Compared with Monday, people were less likely to have LIKE and SHARE behavior on Tuesday (B_LIKE = -1293.88, p = .17; B_SHARE = -175.91, p = .09), Wednesday (B_LIKE = -1123.38, p = .33; B_SHARE = -190.15, p = .11), and Thursday (B_LIKE = -2002.63, p = .06; B_SHARE = -252.29, p < .05). Compared with video format, image format was more powerful in promoting LIKE behavior (B = 2066.98, p < .01).

These findings indicated that fans’ online WOM behavior was more subjected to the influence of post-game attractiveness and confirmed that the information pertaining to sport competition was a driving force for fans’ online WOM behavior. A true surprising finding here was that people kept a high level of engagement in online WOM on the first day of a week, which might be explained by people’s needs of socialization. That is, professional sports as widely-accepted social proxies would facilitate people to improve their group identity or to reinforce their connections with other stakeholders (e.g., colleagues and friends) which might be impacted by the non-contact weekend. The findings offered practical references for social media specialists to effectively and efficiently promote online WOM and deliver appealing social media content.