Bridging the Gap between Social Media and Behavioral Team Loyalty: The Mediating Role of Team-Related Social Media Engagement

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In the past decade, professional sport teams have devoted considerable efforts into the management of social media in order to provide interactive communications between their fans. A key construct in this management is social media engagement (SME), defined as a consumer’s behavioral manifestations that have a social media focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers (Dolan, Conduit, Fahy, & Goodman, 2015). Consumers’ brand engagement in the social media context reflects several actions (e.g., sharing, contributing, socializing, advocating, and co-creating) that motivate consumers toward the brand-related use of social media (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011).

Despite the advances that have been made regarding SME, at least two important concerns with previous research limit our understanding. First, although past research suggests brand-related SME enhances brand loyalty (Brodie et al., 2013), evidence for this relationship has been produced primarily for the impact of brand-related SME on consumer conative loyalty (also called loyalty intentions: Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel, 2009; Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie, 2014). The relationship between team-related SME and behavioral loyalty toward a sport team still remains unclear. Second, it is uncertain how team-related SME is related to other psychological variables. Previous research has examined the impact of content (e.g., social, entertainment, and economic benefits), user (e.g., self-concept value) and dyadic (e.g., social interaction value and brand interaction value) characteristics on SME (Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, & Pihlström, 2012; Jahn & Kunz, 2012). However, these studies have focused on the basic norms and values perceived by social media users and have largely ignored other psychological constructs that may enhance the impact of the content, user, and dyadic characteristics on brand-related SME. In light of these concerns, the purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of team-related SME on behavioral team loyalty in relation to theoretically relevant antecedents and mediators in the context of professional sport teams.

Recently, marketing researchers explicitly define customer engagement as a customer’s contribution to a company or brand’s success. Harmeling, Moffett, Arnold, and Carlson (2017) deem customer engagement to be voluntary in nature, going beyond a transactional, financial exchange, and adding to a firm’s marketing capacity. Similarly, Pansari and Kumar (2017) view engagement as a value-additive function through direct and/or indirect contribution. Applying this conceptual understanding to the social media context, we define team-related SME as an individual’s voluntary contribution to the interaction between his or her favorite sport team and other team followers by sharing, activating, and co-creating information related to the team.

We focus on three theoretical perspectives for hypothesis testing. First, drawing on opinion leadership theory (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996) and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), we identify user (opinion leadership and seeking) and content (entertainment value) characteristics as antecedents of team-related SME. Second, we draw on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) and customer-based brand equity (Keller, 1993) to explain how users’ identification with other members of an online community influences the amount of knowledge and the level of engagement the users have with the team-related use of social media. Third, we build on customer engagement theory (Harmeling et al., 2017; Pansari & Kumar, 2017) to propose how team-related SME enhances consumers’ repeated sport consumption.

We collected data from panel registrants of a Japanese online research panel service provided by Macromill, Inc.
First, the Internet research company randomly sent an invitation email entitled “Sports Fan Survey” to panel registrants who were interested in professional sport teams in Japan. Three baseball teams and three soccer teams were included in this study because they had official accounts of both Facebook and Twitter and their official Facebook pages were the top three sites in terms of the number of “likes” in each league. Eighteen hundred questionnaires were returned over several days. Second, we eliminated subjects who had never visited their favorite teams’ official social media sites. Through this procedure, we gathered data on 309 subjects. Of the total sample, 58.9% of the respondents were male. Age was measured in years and transformed into a categorical variable. Approximately, one-fourth of the subjects were in the 30-39 (25.9%) and 40-49 (26.9%) age ranges, 20.1% were 50 and 59 years old, 13.6% were 60 years old and above, 12.0% were 20 and 29 years old, and 1.6% were 18 and 19 years old.

A global measure based on the latest definition of SME has yet to be developed (Harmeling et al., 2017; Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Therefore, an initial pool of seven items was generated on the basis of the construct definition. A panel of three expert judges established the content validity of the items. Also, we adapted items from previous research to measure opinion leadership (Schreier, Oberhauser, & Prügl, 2007), opinion seeking (Schreier et al., 2007), entertainment value (Chandon, Wansink, & Laurent, 2000), online brand community identification (Keller, 2003), and knowledge acquisition (Kleijnen et al., 2009). Behavioral team loyalty was measured by asking the number of games attended by each respondent in the last eight months (Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015). Finally, we included three control variables: team identification, television sports viewing, and the length of time as a fan.

Through a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using LISREL 8.8, we assessed the psychometric properties of the scale items. The fit indices indicate the measurement model is an acceptable fit to the data (chi-square = 830.07, df = 254; CFI = .98; NNFI = .97; RMSEA = .086; SRMR = .052). Follow-up analyses based on the recommendation of Fornell & Larcker (1981) provided support for the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement model. With respect to hypothesis testing, opinion seeking had positive effects on online brand community identification (gamma = .16, p < .01), knowledge acquisition (gamma = .17, p < .01), and team-related SME (gamma = .26, p < .01). Also, the effects of entertainment value on online brand community identification (gamma = .70, p < .01) and knowledge acquisition (gamma = .32, p < .01) were positive and significant. Moreover, we found that team-related SME (beta = .21, p < .01) and team identification (beta = .31, p < .01) positively influenced behavioral loyalty (beta = .21, p < .01), while the effects of the other antecedents on behavioral loyalty were not significant. The R-squared values for online brand community identification, knowledge acquisition, team-related SME, and behavioral loyalty were .66, .59, .60, and .14, respectively.

Our results indicate that to enhance behavioral team loyalty, fostering identification with other users of online brand communities and creating customer knowledge through social media are not enough. Individuals’ engagement in the team-related use of social media is an important prerequisite of actual purchase behavior. In line with this thinking, this study adds to the existing literature by testing the simultaneous effects of team-related SME and team identification on behavioral team loyalty, while previous research investigated these effects separately and focused primarily on the relationship between brand-related SME and loyalty intentions. Based on the results, practitioners can expect that creating social interaction opportunities with compelling topics will lead to higher levels of knowledge acquisition and team-related SME, and eventually direct sport consumption.