Does Identification Equal Interaction?

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Abstract 2018-372 Room: Sable C

For sport teams, social media can be used to enhance the brand, encourage social interaction, promote sales, and enhance fans’ online experience (Miranda, Chamorro, Rubio, & Rodriguez, 2014). If used to understand customer needs, increase satisfaction, and enhance relationship value, social media channels can provide value to business from a marketing standpoint (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Reid, 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Because researchers in sport have suggested marketers use social media to build relationships with customers (Abeza et al., 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010), this study uses relationship marketing as a theoretical framework. Armstrong, Delia, and Giardina (2016) suggested sport teams could create brand community by prioritizing the relationship with the active audience and engaging fans in communication on Twitter. Based on a case study of the LA Kings twitter account, they suggested sport brands move beyond traditional marketing strategies on social media and try to build relationships with customers using these networks.

Brands now use social media networks to connect with consumers and create valuable relationships (Nisar & Whitehead, 2016). Because social media allow sport fans to build on their sport experience and identities and express this connection to others (Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly, 2013), they are potential relationship marketing tools, and thus should be continually studied to explicate their utility as such. These channels are interactive and can facilitate conversations between customers and businesses, allowing businesses to better serve customers’ needs (Sashi, 2012). Effectively encouraging interactions on social media to increase identification is one benefit social media provide (Stavros et al., 2013).

Funk and James (2001) suggested that this highly developed connection to a team was a guide for consumer behavior impacting consumption and purchase behavior. Thus, it would seem intuitive that highly identified fans would be more likely to interact on social media and have a stronger relationship with the team. However, while social media have been found to positively impact relationship quality (Achen, 2016; Hudson et al., 2015) and business outcomes including purchase intentions and actual purchases (Goh et al., 2013; Hutter et al., 2013; Rishika et al., 2013; Seng & Keat, 2014), limited research has examined how team identification impacts social media consumption and relationship quality. In one study, Park and Dittmore (2014) found that the more often individuals consumed social media, the higher their team identification. They also determined that team identification mediated the relationship between social media consumption and word-of-mouth and attendance intentions. Watkins (2014) similarly found that Twitter and Facebook involvement positively impacted fan identification, although the relationship was weak.

This study is different in that it is concerned with whether team identification impacts social media interaction and relationship quality, instead of the reverse. In line with the suggestion of Abeza, O'Reilly, Seguin, and Nzindukiymana (2015) and Filo, Lock, & Karg (2015) that sport management researchers expand research on social media in sport by conducting more empirical analyses, this study sought to examine the effects of team identification on Facebook interaction, relationship quality, purchase intentions, and referral intentions, and the moderating effects of team identification on the relationships between these variables.

Method

This study used a cross-sectional survey research design, an essential method for examining consumer perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs (Rea & Parker, 2012) rarely used in social media in sport research. Survey participants were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Participants were required to be at least 18 years of age, sport fans, and social media users to be able to participate. After two rounds of data cleaning and the deletion of incomplete surveys, 425 useable responses were collected. Facebook interaction was measured using the scale previously used by Achen (2016). Respondents were asked to rank the frequency of their Facebook interactions including likes, comments, page visits, reads, and shares measured on an 8-point scale (never, a few times a year, once a month, a few times a month, once a week, a few times a week, once a day, and a few times a day). This study used an existing
scale, created by Kim et al. (2011), to measure relationship quality. The Sport Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale (SCTRQS) includes five constructs: trust, commitment, intimacy, identification, and reciprocity. Each construct is measured using three items. The final two measures used in this study, purchase and referral intentions, were adapted from Poyry et al. (2013). Each construct was measured using 3 items each. The survey was created using measures from previous studies and was coded into Qualtrics. Then, an anonymous survey link was posted to MTurk and participants were invited to take the survey, which began with the qualification questions. Data were uploaded into SPSS Version 22 for analysis. Descriptive statistics were calculated and regression analysis was conducted in SPSS Version 21. Data analysis is currently being conducted.

Potential Implications
It is anticipated the results of this study will provide information about the impacts of identification on relationship quality and interaction on Facebook in the professional sport industry. From a theoretical perspective, these results will help researchers understand if highly identified fans are more likely to interact with teams on Facebook. If so, this provides useful strategic implications for sport managers. Although they are already more likely to make purchases, highly identified fans are an important market to consistently build relationships with on social media networks as new sports and leagues, such as lacrosse and Major League Soccer, increase in popularity. Consistently targeting highly identified fans, as opposed to using social media networks to cultivate new fans, could be a necessity in the future. If there is not a significant relationship between identification and interaction or relationship quality, this could help sport marketers create content that is targeted toward more than highly identified fans. It also could legitimize social media marketing channels as useful for customer acquisition.