Views from the 6: Analyzing Engagement Within the Twitter Communities of Professional Sport Teams

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As the social media and sport discourse has matured, there has been a tendency to focus on social media as a mechanism to initiate or enhance the relationship between users and organizations (Abeza, O’Reilly, & Reid, 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Though many sport organizations are known to offer simplistic, one-way communication to their publics (Naraine & Parent, 2016), those in the professional sport industry have found value in initiating and stimulating conversation with users, many of which are considered fans (Abeza, O’Reilly, & Séguin, 2017). However, despite this view, there has been a lack of understanding about these users’ engagement, pertinent information to the relationship building process. As such, the purpose of this research was to analyze user engagement from professional sport teams’ Twitter communities.

Grounded in relationship marketing theory (Berry, 1985; Grönroos, 2000), this study posits that analyzing user engagement – how users access social media, when users are active, and what topics are of interest – are the necessary antecedents to relationship building in the social media space, and follow Achen’s (2017) framework of examining the consumption element of relationship marketing. To do so, the researchers examined users who actively followed each of Toronto, Canada’s four major professional sports teams: Blue Jays, Maple Leafs, Raptors, and Toronto FC. Using Affinio, a cloud-based social media marketing intelligence platform (Yan, Pegoraro, & Watanabe, 2018), the Twitter communities of each team were extracted resulting in 1,756,345 users for the Blue Jays, 1,295,328 users for the Maple Leafs, 1,125,874 users for the Raptors, and 273,458 users for Toronto FC under examination. The results confirm the 25-34 age cohort is the largest in each of the four networks, and that users predominantly utilize Twitter for iPhone and Twitter for Android to access Twitter content (although others including Spotify and PlayStation 4 also emerged as salient options). Further, users are most engaged between Mondays and Wednesdays, 3 PM and 6 PM Eastern Standard Time, in the lead up to sport events and not when there is more available leisure time (e.g., weekends). Finally, it was ascertained that users seek to engage with rival teams to the Toronto franchises (e.g., Montréal Canadiens, Brooklyn Nets) and high-profiled politicians and news sources (e.g., Justin Trudeau, CBC News).

These findings highlight the need for sport teams to (re)consider when they post on social media versus when their followers are likely to engage. Moreover, the results emphasize the need to continue to engage with other brands with witty banter (Armstrong, Delia, & Giardina, 2016), as well as to develop new partnerships with brands in the music and video game industries that align with the interests of these users. Theoretically, this work extends the notion of relationship marketing in the social media and sport space, and offers an opportunity for future discovery of how users from different cities and leagues engage. Additionally future research should begin to evaluate the engagement level of specific team content and seek to determine the monetary value associated with said engagement.