Understanding the Effects of Team- or Fan-generated Content and Communication on Fan Engagement and Relationship Quality

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Marketing - Other (Online Community)
Poster
Abstract 2020-204

In the field of sport management, there are two major sources of content and communication in social media: teams (i.e., team-generated content or communication; TGC) and fans (i.e., fan-generated content or communication; FGC). In TGC platforms, only the social media manager can make postings on behalf of the team (Watanabe et al., 2015) and fans passively react/interact to it. In FGC platforms (e.g., Reddit), however, postings are generally created by fans as they actively initiate discussions and engage in sharing their feelings or game-day experiences (Geurin & Burch, 2017).

It is therefore imperative for sport marketers to effectively manage these two types of communication in order to facilitate dialogue between teams and fans, but little attention is paid to understanding the different roles and consequences of those communications. In this study, we propose a comprehensive theoretical framework by combining interdependence theory, social presence theory, and relationship quality (RQ) constructs. Specifically, we examine (1) the effects of the types of communication on RQ between teams and fans and (2) the mediation effect of fans’ engagement through social media.

A large body of marketing research identifies RQ as a critical concept for evaluating customer loyalty and predicting consumer behavior (Kim et al., 2011). While the appraisal of TGC is based on the attributes of the team, appraisal of FGC builds social approval by the active fan community (McAlexander et al., 2002). Based on these different characteristics of TGC and FGC, we assert that the effects of content and communication on RQ will vary. Considering interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), three interdependent factors (i.e., satisfaction level, investment size, and quality of alternatives; Rusbult et al., 2011) are integrated into our framework. RQ between teams and fans can be maintained or strengthened when (1) the generated content or communication meet the fans’ level of satisfaction; (2) individual fans invest their time and money to engage with the social media accounts; and (3) the perceived quality of an alternative is weak compared to what they are currently engaged with (e.g., alternative accounts or teams).

In the causal chain of interdependent factors, fans’ investment and engagement can be multidimensional. Consistent with social presence theory in mediated environments (Biocca et al., 2003), three types of engagement can affect fans’ commitment and loyalty (Lim et al., 2015): (1) functional engagement (e.g., liking or hash-tagging), (2) emotional engagement (e.g., posting or expressing their feelings), and (3) communal engagement (e.g., sharing useful community information). Thus, the three types of engagement are suggested as mediators on the path from TGC and FGC to RQ.

This proposed framework contributes to the advancement in the current knowledge base of social media in sport management by illuminating the antecedents, consequences, and underlying mechanisms. In specific, causal paths are specified using the interdependent factors and types of engagements in mediated environments. It provides sport marketers with novel insights into the effective management based on two discrete types of communication in order to build and maintain a better relationship with their fans.