EXPLORING THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY SPORT ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

Research Questions
This study explores the use of social media by sport organizations and its potential impact on fan identification. By analyzing the social media used by the 30 teams participating in the National Basketball Association (NBA), this research addresses the following questions:

- What forms of online social networks are being utilised?
- How do the teams use these online social networks?
- How can sport administrators use social media to enhance fan identification?

Literature Review
Sport fans that identify with a particular sport entity are perceived to have a greater degree of association, commitment and emotional involvement (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Sutton, McDonald, Milne & Cimperman, 1997). Fans with high levels of identification behaviour can have a positive and direct financial impact on sport organizations (Foster & Hyatt, 2007; Mangold & Faulds, 2009), therefore it is important for these organizations to engage fans in new ways to ensure their identification levels remain high or, where possible, increase.

With the explosion of social media into everyday lives, consumers have been seen to shun traditional sources of information in preference of real-time communication and information sharing over the internet. Sport fans in particular are able to check up-to-the-minute scores, results, news and even communicate directly with teams and players. As such, it has been recognised that social media should be included in the marketing mix for any business (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

With work in sport in this area now emerging, a pertinent study by Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh and Greenwell (2010) examined Twitter posts by professional athletes and identified six main categories pertaining to the subject matter. These categories were "Interactivity", "Sport Information", "Promotion", "Diversion", "Fanship" and "Content".

Methodology
The NBA is considered the elite level of professional basketball and is made up of 29 teams from the United States and one team from Canada. Data was collected from official online social networks associated with each of the 30 NBA teams for a two week period during the offseason in the latter half of 2010. A content analysis, using a netnographic methodology, was used to elicit themes and categories from the text. Categories developed by the aforementioned study by Hambrick et al. (2010) were used as a guide in classifying data and will be outlined in the conference presentation. To increase validity, categories were examined and reviewed by multiple researchers. Overall, 1900 posts by all 30 NBA teams were collected and evaluated, with the results analyzed in relation to the research questions.

Results
Social media clearly has the potential to positively impact upon fan identification. This study revealed that all 30 NBA teams have embraced social media to connect with fans and actively use multiple and emerging platforms. The teams primarily used online social networks to interact directly with their fans however there were also instances of the team directing supporters to external sites, highlighting promotions, providing information regarding team members and employees and, to a lesser extent, communicating non-basketball related information and affinities for aspects outside of the sport. This study also confirmed the validity of the previously developed categories used to classify posts from sporting individuals or organizations by Hambrick et al. (2010), however two new subcategories were posited and extended from the original "Sport Information" category, these being "Direct Information" and "External Activity".

This study also indicated that fans have a greater response to information provided on social networks by the teams themselves as opposed to other fans. To increase activity teams must therefore take the initiative to facilitate interaction and discussion. Similarly by creating a more personable front for the online mediators as representatives of the team, fans may respond more positively and consequently increase online activity and identification as well. To raise alternative revenue streams and increase traffic to social networking sites, partnerships could be made with related external sites to create a mutual agreement of posting useful information and links. This may also help fill the activity void during the off-season, ensuring fans have access to recent news and information and remain connected throughout the year.

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