

Additional social media reach from international player transfers

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Introduction

Player transfers are an important business area in professional football – also in an economic way. 2013 the FIFA determined the volume of international player transfers up to 2.71 billion Euro (Focus, 2014). Next to well-known benefits such as higher competitiveness and increasing market value the new club faces some additional consequences. Within the current developments of social media management some clubs realized that their online community, for example on Facebook or Twitter, increased in a specific relation with the engagement of a new player.

Research question

The overall research objective of this study is to deliver information for football clubs about the consequences which result from player transfers regarding the social media community. Therefore, the first research question in this context is: To which extent follow fans a player during a transfer to a new football club and what does this mean for the development of the online community of the club? There are some underlying questions to this regarding the demographics and the fan segmentation as well as the potential reasons of those fans who follow the player to the new club within the social networks.

Theoretical background

No empirical research could be found on the social media potential of player transfers so far. Different approaches exist in the literature towards fan loyalty. For example, Tapp (2004) found five different fan segments – collectors, fanatics, repertoire fans, committed casuals, carefree casuals – and identified different behaviour patterns for each group. Crawford (2003) also analysed club supporters and their behaviour. He came up with a theorization of fan careers and found that the social interaction with others via face-to-face and mass media is important for the behaviour of supporters as well. Those research areas are relevant for the underlying understanding of this study. The existing fan segmentations need to be analysed with particular consideration of fan loyalty towards a player instead of a club. In this context it is relevant to look into the development of player branding as this has emerged with international popular players such as Beckham or Ronaldo (Chadwick and Burton, 2008).

Methodology

The exploratory study design includes case studies among five of the nine professional German football clubs of the 1st Bundesliga, that in the recent transfer windows (July/August 2015 and January 2016) acquired players with more than 100.000 Facebook Likes or fans respectively (club selection criteria). In total 13 player transfers (all transfers of players with more than 10.000 Facebook Likes of those clubs; i. e. player selection criteria) have been compared – especially analyzing the 'anomalies' in the clubs' Facebook Likes curve that could be linked to the announcement of a player transfer.

Results

Two sets of results were defined: the attachment quota and the impact quota. The first describes the share of a player's Facebook fans liking the new club, the latter the club's additional Facebook fans (assumingly resulting from a player transfer) compared to the club's overall Facebook Likes or fans respectively.

Analyzing individual players and their transfer announcements, three categories of the attachment quota were identified:

1. No attachment (5 cases): only few fans following the player to the new club on Facebook (0.1 per cent to 0.9 per cent)
2. Moderate attachment (5 cases): moderate number of fans following the player to the new club on Facebook (1.0 per cent to 5.0 per cent)
3. High attachment (3 cases): high number of fans following the player to the new club on Facebook (more than 5.0 per cent)

Not surprisingly, a trend was found that the attachment quota decreases with the player's absolute number of Facebook fans. But as the impact for the new club finally results from the player's absolute number of Facebook fans, from the player's attachment quota and from the club's number of already existing Facebook fans, the highest attachment quota doesn't necessarily lead to the highest impact for the club. The top impact quota found was 4,5 %, which is not a negligible social media impact of only one incident compared to the average monthly growth rate of a club's Facebook Likes of 1,9 % during transfer windows and 1,6 % during the rest of the season.

Further research will try to introduce player and club characteristics that allow to explain the variance of the attachment quota mentioned above.

References

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