
SOCCER PLAYERS AND RELATIONSHIP MARKETING DURING THE FIFA WORLD CUP 2014 – HOW TOPIC AND TYPE OF COMMUNICATION INFLUENCE FAN REACTIONS ON FACEBOOK

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Synopsis:

Abstract:

1. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Relationship Marketing (RM) is an important part of the marketing efforts of enterprises, brands and individuals (Bruhn, 2001; Payne & Frow, 2005; Christopher et al., 2013). When done correctly, RM can help entities gain more satisfied and profitable customers (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Therefore, this approach seems adequate as well for athletes – whose fans can be regarded as customers under these considerations – who want to manage their self-marketing and boost their advertising value (Pedersen, 2012). RM efforts can be judged as successful when the fan becomes an active participant in this communication and identifies with the athlete.

Social Media are a rather inexpensive and effective set of tools for conducting RM. These communication plat-forms appear to be capable of generating affinity, communicating authenticity, and enhancing emotional connections with specific target groups (Frederick et al., 2014). While the majority of the present studies regarding athletes have focused on Twitter (e.g. Clavio & Walsh, 2014), there exist only few which focus on Facebook (e.g. Wallace et al., 2011; Waters et al., 2011, Pronschinske et al., 2012). Compared to Twitter and other Social Media, Facebook offers more presentation opportunities, due to its more graphical nature and the lack of an arbitrary space limit on messages posted.

2. METHODS, RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS

This paper analyzes to what extent football players utilize Facebook to communicate with their fans, with the 2014 FIFA World Cup (WC) as a backdrop. To do so, the study first focuses on whether soccer players from

various nations use Facebook during the WC, in which way these players use it, and about which topics they use it. Second, this study examines whether or not different kinds of posts (e.g., topic, type of communication) induce different amounts of user reactions. To answer these questions, a total of 44 verified players' Facebook profiles from the teams of Germany (19), Spain (15), the United States (5) and Italy (5) were examined by content analysis during the WC 2014. After an initial evaluation of the profiles, a list of categories was generated via qualitative analysis. These categories, which relate to topics discussed and types of communication utilized, were then used to evaluate the players' profiles quantitatively. Throughout the analysis period, which lasted from 2nd June (day of FIFA deadline for the squad announcement) until 16th July 2014 (three days after the final), 816 posts were evaluated. More than half of the posts were issued by the German team (439), with Spanish (182), Italian (135) and US players (60) showing considerably lower levels of activity.

3. PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The players' posting activity was fairly heterogeneous. German player Lukas Podolski was the most active, whereas players like Gerard Piqué and Philipp Lahm were rather silent. German midfield players Mario Götze, Bastian Schweinsteiger and Toni Kroos were above average in activity. Regarding the type of communication, posts with text and photo were the most popular method of communication (60% out of the total posts), followed by the sharing of content. Furthermore, it was found that WC-related posts were the most prominent topic discussed, with much of this topic focused on reviewing past events. Posts relating to private issues, advertisements, and charity/raffle were observed, but these topics did not occur often. Chi-Square was used to evaluate the relationship between topics used and reactions, as well as between type of communication and reactions. WC topics induced the highest amount of likes, shares and comments – especially those regarding the own squad (e.g., WC review, WC preview) and personal WC information. Text with photo is the type of communication that induces the most reactions, whereas sharing content (e.g., links) is less effective.

4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

From a communication management perspective, the data let us conclude that users are most interested in player posts focusing on sports-related issues, particularly with regard to the squad or a specific player. Topics which are unrelated to football, such as advertisements, charity or raffle, are unpopular. The text/photo combination is both most utilized by the players and most responded to by the consumers. In terms of RM, the proper choices of topic and type of communication appear to positively impact the posts' number of likes, shares and comments on an athlete's official Facebook page. Players appear to gain the most attention and adulation on Facebook from the utilization of exclusivity (i.e., personal information instead of sharing content) and visual elements (photos). To discuss communicational implications, it seems especially interesting to have a closer look on the number of reactions for (socio)economically relevant issues like advertisement, charity and raffle that normally gain a lower amount of reactions.

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