

The Footy Girls of Tumblr: How Women Communicate in the Online Football Fandom. Insights from US, UK and Germany

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Aim

This paper studies how female football [soccer] fans use the social network service Tumblr to connect and talk about their fandom. The study analyses what purposes Tumblr serves for female fans (e.g. entertainment, group affiliation, see Wann 1995), and what distinguishes their experience of the use of Tumblr from other online and offline platforms or forums. This is especially relevant in the light of women often being marginalised in offline and online sports discourse.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Online sports fandom has been studied in many contexts, for example on sports teams' websites and on social media (e.g. Clavio, Walsh & Coyle 2013). A result worth highlighting is that women are often found not to be welcome in sports discussion forums, the main reason being that the offline discourse of sports as a masculine domain is replicated online (Hardin, Zhong & Corrigan, 2011). Moreover, women are underrepresented in many studies on sports fandom, meaning that their opinion on sports is not widely assessed in research (Clavio, Walsh & Coyle 2013, p. 4). Following Hardin and Whiteside (2012) on how female sports fans communicate in the online sphere, this study puts the social media platform Tumblr in its focus, which has been found to be used by marginalised groups to form their own small public sphere. As Tumblr's user population is overwhelmingly young and female (McGrath 2016), it is suitable for studying how women use this platform to talk about their football fandom.

Research Design and Data Analysis

The study makes use of in-depth semi-structured interviews with women football fans using Tumblr. Tumblr is a microblogging social network service with over 400 million blogs, allowing its users to post text and multimedia content on their personal profiles. A range of functionalities such as 'tagging' and sending 'asks' allows users to connect with each other. In total, 15 women from Germany, the US and the UK were interviewed, ranging from their early twenties to their early forties, following snowball sampling. Representative sampling was not possible because the size and overall of the female football fandom are unknown. Interview questions concerned the women's involvement in the football sports fandom in general, their use of Tumblr for football-related matters (group affiliation, entertainment, and also information, see Wann 1995), the emotional value of Tumblr for them, and other digital and offline fandom activities. The interviews were conducted online, whereas the interviewee was free to choose the means, i.e. audio or video chat, or instant messaging. Even though the interviews followed a semi-structured guideline, the coding allowed further categories to emerge, and thus additional aspects found entry into the study.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary results indicate that the women interviewed value the community aspect of Tumblr, which gives them a sense of belonging. This is most evident when looking at the individual football teams' sub-fandoms, as the interviewees mainly interact with other fans of the same team. The interviewees also express a sense of belonging because the users they

interact with are overwhelmingly female, and thus they see Tumblr as a safe space from male prejudice regarding sports. But, this comes with a caveat, as many interviewees feel that they have to deal with conflict, often a result of fan rivalries played out on the Tumblr blogs, and in which posts expressing strong opinion are of high prevalence (e.g. posts calling others “bad fans” when they compliment a rival team).

Opinion was also an issue when using Tumblr as a source of information. Even though many interviewees value Tumblr as a source for issues that the traditional media only pick up late or not in detail (e.g. information on the players’ lives), they take opinionated posts with a pinch of salt and would rather verify that respective piece of information with another source. All in all, many points from Wann’s (1995) sports fan motivation scale were raised, e.g. group affiliation, entertainment, and eustress. Albeit studying a different fandom on Tumblr (TV shows), Hillman, Procyk and Neustaedter (2014) come to similar conclusions regarding the importance of social belonging. However, the experiences found in the football fandom were not always positive. Some interviewees consciously stay away from discussions to avoid possible or ongoing conflict, with one interviewee even attesting the female football fandom a general underlying “cattiness”.

Conclusion Contribution and Implications

This study sheds new light on how women sports fans interact with each other in the online fandom. What sets this study apart is that the users of the chosen platform Tumblr are not only quite young, but also mostly female, so that the interactions on Tumblr may be classified as a ‘safe space’ for female sports fans. But, as the evidence shows, discussions expressing strong opinion are to the detriment of the fandom experience for many of the interviewees.

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