

Adopt an Anthropological Approach to Examine an Online Latent Content: A Case of Major League Sport Teams' Use of Social Media

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(including questions)

Research Background

The magnitude and extent of the use of social media (SM) has been significant in the sport industry over the past decade (Rowe & Hutchins, 2014). In professional sport, various stakeholders are increasingly embracing different SM platforms. These include professional sport teams (Meng, Stavros, & Westberg, 2015), leagues (Hambrick & Kang, 2014), professional athletes (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2012), professional sporting events (Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012), and sport fans (Williams, Chinn, & Suleiman, 2014). As the scope of SM consumption grows among the various stakeholders of professional sport (Dixon, Martinez, & Martin, 2015), marketers are using SM as a medium to implement a variety of marketing communication elements such as news updates, sales, advertising, public relations, internal communication, and relationship marketing (Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015). While SM is a valuable resource for realizing these marketing communication elements, it appears to be an ideal tool for achieving relationship marketing (RM) goals (Hambrick & Svensson, 2015).

Relationship marketing is defined as “the process of identifying and establishing, maintaining, enhancing, and when necessary terminating relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties involved are met, where this is done by a mutual giving and the fulfillment of promises” (Grönroos, 2004, p. 101). As a process, building a long-term relationship requires communicating and interacting, and thereby engaging in dialogue with customers so that relationships are established, maintained, and enhanced on an ongoing basis (Williams & Chinn, 2010). To ensure successful communication and dialogue, businesses are required to employ effective communication platforms (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Among these, SM platforms are rapidly becoming an ideal tool for ongoing two-way dialogue (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015), and are providing new directions and benefits to RM. Furthermore, SM platforms are making the RM approach practical and affordable (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Reid, 2013).

While SM has clearly become an important RM tool (Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015), most studies have focused on the conceptual benefits of SM as an RM tool (Dixon et al., 2015). Within the sport marketing literature that addresses SM's role, the medium has been discussed as a valuable conduit, capable of building meaningful relationships between two parties (e.g., Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Meng et al., 2015; Wang & Zhou, 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010). However, within the context of major league professional sport teams, the use of SM in achieving RM goals has not yet been empirically supported. Therefore, producing empirical evidence showing how teams in major leagues use SM as an RM tool will be imperative.

To address the purpose of the study, three specific research questions were developed:

- (i) How do professional sport teams use social media for relational marketing purpose?
- (ii) What are the values, if any, professional sport teams create on social media as a relational marketing tool?
- (iii) What discernible differences and shared features exist in professional sport teams' use of SM as an RM tool?

Research Contribution

2017 Sport Marketing Association Conference (SMA XV)

In addressing the three research questions, this study empirically investigates the use of SM as an RM vehicle in a professional sport setting, and contributes to the existing literature by filling the information gap on the use of SM as an RM tool. The study also extends and augments previous SM studies in the context of professional sport. The findings provide an up-to-date understanding of the topic, which has the potential to help marketers develop informed marketing strategies in the realization of an effective use of SM as an RM tool.

Research Method

This study adopted a netnographic method to investigate professional sport teams' use of Twitter as an RM tool. The study intended to go beyond treating the SM messages/content as a manifest content; it aimed to adopt an anthropological approach to examine the online latent content as embedded expression of meaning through the researcher's immersion into the 'culture', and extensive and deep exposure to the setting. In this regard, netnography allows the researcher to gain insight into the way professional sport teams' use of Twitter as an RM tool. The netnography is based on data gathered from the official Twitter account of 20 professional sport teams in the four major North American leagues over a period of six months. The data was gathered using Open Broadcaster Software (OBS), an open source software for live streaming and recording (Zhang & Liu, 2015). In the data analysis, an inductively derived thematic analysis, along with an anthropological approach of data immersion, was used.

Research Findings

The study will produce empirical evidence showing how teams in major leagues use SM as an RM tool. The study findings will be presented at SMA conference.

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