

Mobile Apps and Sports: Driving Fan Engagement Through Sports Communication

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Abstract:

The study assessed mobile apps and sports: driving fan engagement through sports communication. These mobile apps are social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. The study was anchored on the Uses and Gratifications theory. The Library Research method was adopted for the execution of the study. Previous studies on the same scope were empirically reviewed to provide more insight on the topic of discussion. There are numerous social media platforms which sports organizations use in driving fan engagement and they include but not limited to: Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, YouTube, etc. The study concluded that fans feel emotionally connected and a sense of physical connection despite the distance, with their favorite teams and athletes. In addition, sports fans are able to use their platforms to engage in their favourite teams post by voicing out their opinions and perceptions. The study recommended among others that sports brands should consider using their platforms for live reports of their sporting activities.

Keywords:

Mobile Apps, Sports, Fan Engagement, Sports Communication, Media Platforms.

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Introduction

The term "social media" describes the application of mobile and web-based technology to transform communication into an interactive conversation. Social media can take many different forms, such as podcasts, wikis, magazines, online forums, weblogs, social blogs, microblogging, photos, videos, ratings, and social bookmarking. It goes without saying that social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, Skype, and others are widely utilized for communication in this day and age of social media revolution. The majority of individuals these days, especially the younger generation, are addicted to various social media platforms in order to stay in touch with their friends. As a superset above social communication, social media is media for social engagement.

In the digital age, the intersection of sports and social media has transformed the way fans interact with their favorite teams and athletes. From real-time updates and behind-the-scenes glimpses to interactive fan experiences, social media platforms have become indispensable tools for sports organizations and athletes alike (Wood, 2024). Social media has a huge impact on sports. It's fundamentally changing fan engagement as fans want to connect with real people, not brands. The new fan engagement challenge for sports marketers is to turn their athletes, staff and superfans into influencers. It's hard not to notice that social media is influencing the sports industry profoundly — and its impact is only just the start. From the COVID-19 pandemic to a recovering world, more and more fans have been taking to platforms like Instagram and TikTok (Greenfly, n.d). There, they banter and discuss their favorite sports topics, especially when they can't attend games or events in person.

Others watch sports primarily — or even exclusively — on social media now. The impact of social media on fan engagement and the business of sports is advancing more rapidly than the adoption of TV broadcasts. It's creating new business models that will make it harder for sports organizations to compete for fan attention.

Balamurugan, Yoshida, Varshnev, Pathak and Pingali (2021) posit that social media brand pages act as excellent means for engaging consumers. While most sport clubs use social media such as Facebook to enhance fan engagement, extant research has given limited attention. Sport fans develop unique and engaging relationships with their favourite sport teams, both offline and online (Vale & Fernandes, 2018). However, research on sport fan engagement is still limited in relation to social media. The purpose of this research is to understand why and how sport fans engage with clubs on social media.

Marklinger (2024) defines social media engagement as an umbrella term for actions that reflect and measure how much your audience interacts with your content. It can include (but is not limited to) metrics such as likes, comments, and shares. Sports fans now interact with their favorite teams in different ways than they did a few decades ago. Social media is used by fans to interact with their favorite players and

teams, and real-time data monitoring is used to track athletes' performances. Social media gives supporters a voice, which benefits clubs, fans, and players by enabling them to reach a larger audience. Consider the controversy that erupted on social media when Paul Pogba and Cristiano Ronaldo opposed the usage of carbonated drinks during a press conference for Euro 2020 and used the hashtag #DrinkWater to do so.

Upon this backdrop, the problem is that we are now faced with questions like do online presence of sports brands drive fan engagement? Are mobile apps veritable tools for sports communication?

Platforms driving Fan Engagement

Every sports team has a different size and level of audience participation. Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram are the most widely used social media platforms in the United States, while Wechat and Weibo are utilized in China. In essence, the clubs must adjust to their specific locality. Social media platforms have become the go-to source for fans seeking real-time updates and interactive content during sports events. With platforms like Twitter, fans can follow live commentary, track game scores, and participate in discussions using event-specific hashtags. According to a study by Twitter, sports-related tweets see a significant surge in engagement during live events, with fans actively sharing reactions, opinions, and highlights in the heat of the moment. This real-time interaction fosters a sense of community among fans, creating virtual stadiums where enthusiasts from around the world can come together to celebrate victories, commiserate defeats, and share their passion for the game (Wood, 2024).

Facebook: To share their immediate live updates, sports teams have a special Facebook page. The "This is American Rugby" Facebook page is owned by the American rugby squad. Here, they provide information on players and games, as well as tease fans about an impending event.

Instagram: Sports teams have found success posting high-quality material and gaining fan followers on Instagram. With short clips of matches, player bios, and images of their stadiums, Liverpool FC has almost 39.5 million followers. Additionally, they have showcased each athlete individually through interviews, nutrition programs, and gym fitness tutorials.

YouTube: As of 2022, there were 2.6 billion users worldwide on YouTube, making it the largest platform for sharing videos (Statista, 2022). Like Chelsea, FC Barcelona (Barca) is among the most well-known football teams. With 14 million subscribers, FC Barcelona is the most subscribed YouTube channel. Videos featuring Messi's greatest moments, Champions League highlights, player interviews in-depth, and much more are updated frequently.

X (formerly Twitter) A lot of sports personalities and sports institutions are also on the microblogging platform X, formerly known as Twitter. They communicate updates like injury, new signings, and other

information about players and the club in general to their teeming fans. These usually drive fan engagement as the fans would usually drop their comments airing their opinions and perceptions.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the Uses and Gratification theory. This theory, according to Agbo, Ojobor and Ezinwa (2010), attempts to answer the questions: why do people use the mass media and what functions mass communication performs for the people? (p.152). Folarin (1998, p.65) adds that the theory perceives the recipient as actively influencing the effect process, since he selectively chooses, attends to, perceives and retains the media messages on the basis of his/her needs, beliefs, etc.” This theory is audience centred, asking what people do with media rather than what the media do to people. Uses and gratification theory discusses how users deliberately choose media that will satisfy given needs and thus allow the users to enhance knowledge, relaxation, social interactional, companionship, diversion or escape (Okoye & Oparaugo, 2019).

Yahaya (2003, p.61) concluded that the theory explains the contents of the mass media and how an audience member uses the media. This theory is chosen on the premise that the fans of football clubs who use social media to get updates about the football clubs perceive the social media posts of those clubs and retain this perception/message on the basis of their beliefs, as it satisfies their need of commenting as a sign of their contributions to the club. However, this theory is applicable to the study because fans/social media users are influenced by the posts they see on the social media. The texts, pictures and videos easily attract the social media users and captures, as well as retain their attention to the posts.

The study is grounded in the widely used Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory and it explains how brands use social media effectively. Content type and content vividness of social media posts of sport clubs affect fan engagement. These relationships are affected by factors such as team performance and seasonality, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of online social media driven fan engagement.

Empirical Review

Vale and Fernandes (2018) studied “*Social media and sports: driving fan engagement with football clubs on Facebook*”. The purpose of this research is to understand why and how sport fans engage with clubs on social media. Following the Uses and Gratifications approach and the Consumers’ Online Brand-Related Activities framework, seven motivations (Information, Entertainment, Personal Identity, Integration and Social Interaction, Empowerment, Remuneration and Brand Love) and three dimensions of online engagement behaviours (Consumption, Contribution and Creation) were considered. A web-based survey was conducted among football club fans of a major UEFA league on Facebook, resulting in 562 responses. The need for Information, Empowerment and Brand Love mainly drive Consumption,

Contribution and Creation, respectively, while the need for Integration and Social Interaction emerged as the second most important motivation overall. This study contributes to the emerging research on social media use in the sport marketing literature, thus revealing additional opportunities for managers to engage their fan base online.

Balamurugan, Yoshida, Varshnev, Pathak and Pingali (2021) assessed “*Social Media Content Strategy for Sport Clubs to Drive Fan Engagement*”. This study aims to understand the impact of content type and vividness of Facebook content shared by sport clubs, on fan engagement. The findings are based on a netnography study on the Facebook platform among six cricket clubs of a major league – the Indian Premier League, covering approximately 4000 club-generated posts and recording more than 76 million impressions on the six sport clubs’ official fan pages over a span of 3 years (2015–2017). The volume of likes, comments, shares, and the valence of comments, on the Facebook fan pages, are used to measure fan engagement. We found that the social content garnered maximum contribution, while the remuneration-related content resulted in the least contribution. Photos, representing low vividness content, garnered the maximum number of likes and comments, while high vividness content (i.e., videos) were shared most often. Furthermore, the moderating impact of team performance and seasonality on the relationship between content type and fan engagement are explicated. This study contributes to the emerging research on social media in consumer engagement and sport marketing literature and provides practical prescriptions for sport clubs to enhance their ability to engage their fan base online.

Allison (2013) examined “*Going Beyond on-Pitch Success: Fan Engagement As a Catalyst for Growth*”. This research investigates the case of fan engagement as a strategy for long-term growth for football clubs. Through an exploratory methodology this study gains a valuable insight into the current perceptions and usage of fan engagement, with a particular focus on social media. Whilst the subject of social media is growing in academic journals, there is very little understanding of how sport organisations are using this platform. 14 semi-structured interviews with key industry personnel and a fan focus group in addition to a content analysis of the Twitter feeds of 10 Premier League football clubs was undertaken to offer new insight to the academic conversation in this subject area. The research findings suggest that clubs need to develop ways to build and create long-term loyalty through fan engagement in preference to unsustainable growth strategies based exclusively on winning and on pitch performance. Since winning is only possible for a select few every season, a strategy that places the fan at the centre of the club will prove beneficial to most clubs at all levels in the long term. With the incoming financial controls being implemented across the English football leagues in addition to UEFA’s Financial Fair Play legislation, the significance of developing long-term profitability has never been more evident. Those clubs which place Customer Relationship Management (CRM) as an overriding philosophy throughout the organisation and develop social media platforms effectively as part of a CRM strategy are best

placed to improve their understanding of fans and adapt their marketing strategies to build loyalty and advocacy to the brand, which in time will deliver profitability and long-term growth.

Pradhan, Malhotra and Moharana (2019) investigated “*When Fan Engagement with Sports Club Brands Matters in Sponsorship: Influence of Fan–Brand Personality Congruence*”. Drawing on congruity theory, the study examines the influence of fan personality–sponsor brand personality (FP–BP) congruence on fan engagement with sport clubs, sponsor brand attitude, and purchase intention towards the sponsor brand. Data were collected from stadium spectators during professional football games (n = 503) in India. The findings indicate a positive influence of FP–BP congruence on sponsor brand attitude and brand purchase intention. The study reveals that in-role behaviours (such as buying tickets, watching club games, and BIRGing) and extra-role behaviours (such as wearing club apparel, displaying logo of club) are two necessary yet distinct components of fan engagement. Consequently, the study demonstrates that only in-role fan engagement with clubs significantly contributes to the formation of a favourable attitude towards the sponsor brand, whereas surprisingly, extra-role fan engagement does not. This study extends the stimulus–organism–response model to brand management literature by linking the brand personality and fan engagement concepts. Overall, this aids brand managers and sports clubs in cementing the engagement of fans with sponsor brands and clubs, respectively.

McAvoy (2013) examined “*The Factors of Awareness and Fan Identification of Soccer Fans*”. The author identified the factors of awareness and fan identification of soccer fans. I plan on surveying people through social media to see how they became soccer fans. I believe that through this research I will help identify the factors that lead people to become interested in soccer.

Santos, Correia, Biscaia and Pegoraro (2019) carried out a study on “*Examining Fan Engagement through Social Networking Sites*”. The purpose of this paper is to conceptualise and measure the construct of fan engagement through social networking sites (SNS). Design/methodology/approach A multi-stage procedure was completed to validate the proposed fan engagement through SNS model with three first-order constructs (fan-to-fan relationships, team-to-fan relationships and fan co-creation). First, a preliminary analysis of the proposed items to capture fan engagement through SNS was conducted through expert review. Second, an assessment of item reliability and construct validity was completed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Finally, CFA and subsequent structural equation model were conducted to review the psychometric properties and to test the relationships between the proposed construct with online and offline behavioural intentions. Findings The results indicate good psychometric properties of the constructs of fan-to-fan relationships, team-to-fan relationships and fan co-creation, and these three constructs were significantly related with the second-order construct of fan engagement through SNS. Additionally, the construct of fan engagement through SNS was significantly related to both online and offline behavioural intentions. Practical implications These findings suggest

that teams should use SNS to interact with fans, to allow fans to share experiences and to involve fans in co-creation processes aimed at increasing engagement and subsequent positive behavioural intentions towards the team. Originality/value This study extends previous research by measuring fan engagement through SNS as a multidimensional construct, and testing its predictive effect on fans' online and offline behavioural intentions. Several suggestions for future studies and strategies for increasing fan engagement can be drawn from this study.

Social Media and Sports Communication

Online communication tools also have the potential to increase our awareness of the movements of our professional or social contacts. Twitter, for instance, offers us an update of things people we know happen to be doing at a particular point of time. Social media platforms enable sports organizations to create interactive fan experiences that go beyond passive consumption of content. From interactive polls and quizzes to virtual meet-and-greets with players, teams are leveraging social media to engage fans in innovative ways and make them feel like active participants in the sports conversation (Wood, 2024).

1. **Team News Update:** Before match, football teams usually update fans on the team news. These team news include injured players, players out due to suspension, players coming back from injury
2. **Match stats:** The teams through social media platforms provide vital statistics like number of goals, assists, chances created, off sides, yellow cards, red cards, throw-ins, corner kicks, penalties, saves, clearances, duels won, heat map, etc.
3. **Sports Leagues' Global Reach"** Premier League has continually used social media platforms, especially Facebook, to reach to Premier League fans beyond the United Kingdom. They post even videos of players on national team duties who are not British players but play for a Premier League club. Sports leagues can communicate directly and in real time with fans all over the world thanks to social media. International supporters can stay connected to their favorite teams no matter where they reside because to this connection. Teams also profit from having access to a wider fan base. For instance, despite the fact that Americans are huge basketball enthusiasts, the NBA really has a larger following in China, Germany, and the United Kingdom.
4. **Live Streaming:** Social media platforms can also be used to stream live matches for those who are not disposed to watch it in front of the television or live in stadiums.
5. **Social Media's Increased Revenue Opportunities:** There is the possibility of Page monetization, which helps sports clubs generate money from social media platforms.

6. Gaining and retaining audience: Social media helps sports clubs to gain new fans and followers as well as retain the existing ones.

7. Connecting with teams, athletes and other fans: Social media helps clubs to connect with other teams, athletes and fans. During birthdays, sports clubs posts their former players and tag them. Sports clubs can also post fans and tag them just to make them feel special.

Social Media and Sports Fan Engagement

Social media has completely changed the game, both in society and within the sports world. It has given us the opportunity to connect to people across the world in different ways, while also being able to reach so many people at once (Dea, 2023). For the sports industry, social media gives teams and organizations new and unique opportunities to explore engagement with their fanbases (Swarm, 2018). Teams are now able to maintain, connect and grow their fanbase in a much simpler and easier fashion than ever before.

Out of the top ten trending topics on X (formerly Twitter) in 2023, four of them were related to sports. Athletes also tend to be some of the most followed people on social media (Barnhart, 2023). A quick search to find the most followed accounts on Instagram shows that the top two (not including the Instagram account itself) are professional soccer players Cristiano Ronaldo with 614 million followers and Lionel Messi with 494 million followers. The 6th most followed is Dwayne Johnson, a retired wrestler who has 394 million followers, and 15th is a cricket player, Virat Kohli, with 265 million followers (GeeksForGeeks, 2023). This data shows us how important sports are to our society and popular culture at large, but how has social media affected this? What role does social media play in the growth of sports culture and fanbases?

Conclusion

Social media platforms have continually been used for the growth of the sports community. Sports organizations such as football clubs, organization bodies as well as players and fans alike, are able to increase their visibility and grow and maintain their fan bases through the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, YouTube, etc. Fans feels emotionally connected and a sense of physical connection despite the distance, with their favorite teams and athletes. In addition, sports fans are able to use their platforms to engage in their favourite teams post by voicing out their opinions and perceptions. Generally, social media have had a great impact on how the sports world is run, by helping these organizations create a warmer and more impactful environment.

Do social media influence fans' opinions on sports brands? Do sports brand portray only the positives of the brands on social media? Do fan engagements on social media contribute to the popularity of sports brands?

Recommendations

The following practical recommendations are made:

1. Sports brands should consider using their platforms for live reports of their sporting activities.
2. Sports brands should consider creating mobile apps for livestreaming of their sports events.
3. Sports brands should consider using their mobile apps to ask fans questions on their thoughts regarding the organisation's intended or past actions towards the club

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