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Management Whitepaper

Sharing is Caring

An Exploration of Motivations for Social Sharing and Locational Social Media Usage among Sport Fans

Galen Clavio and Evan Frederick

I. Research Problem

The purpose of this paper is to examine the phenomenon of social sharing via locational social media in sport and to examine what motivations sport fans have for sharing of information in a public manner via these social media. Social sharing and locational social media are an area of growing importance to both sport organizations and their fans due to the interactive nature of the involved media and the ability of teams to simultaneously foster fan community initiatives as well as monetary incentives. This research contains information that reveals reasons why fans of college athletics share sport event-related information via social media, the likelihood of fans sharing certain types of information via social media, and the types of incentives that might increase fan participation in social sharing via social media. This research also evaluates the factors that underlie social sharing by college sport fans, discovering that these fans share sport event-related information for purposes of event/team promotion and fandom, rather than personal monetary gain. This article would be useful to any sport marketing or communication department personnel who are interested in increasing their organization's online community initiatives among fans, providing key insights into what is a little-understood dimension of social media and sport.

II. Issues

Social media has become an important part of the sport marketing and communication landscape over the past decade. The introduction and expansion of services such as Facebook, FourSquare, Twitter, and other such media have altered the way fans consume and interact with the sport product. Since 2008, several studies have been conducted on the usage of social media by both sport organizations and sport fans, with some of these studies conducted by private industry and some by academic scholars. These studies have focused a variety of issues, including the usage of Twitter by teams and athletes to communicate directly with

fans, the reasons why Twitter is used by fans in conjunction with sport, the way in which fans coalesce as communities on blogs and websites, and the ways in which athletes are perceived through the public lens of social media conversation and commentary.

Social media usage among fans has been found to follow two primary avenues, those of interactivity and information gathering. Interactivity has been found to involve direct communication with players and teams, direct communication with other sports fans, direct communication with journalists and media members, and the creation of user-generated content (UGC). Social media usage on the part of athletes has tended to focus on a similar mix of information gathering and interactivity, with athletes choosing between direct (or social) communication with fans and indirect (or parasocial) communication with fans. Organizational use of social media has tended to focus on traditional marketing and communication roles, which are often heavy on information but short on interactivity. While there are some exceptions in the sport world, most organizations have used their social media channels in a one-way, mediated capacity, presenting information to the public in much the same way that a television channel or newspaper article would present information.

Social media can be broken down into three primary areas. The first is data-rich social media, which presents a wide variety of images, video, and other material to the consumer, and is best exemplified by the social media of Facebook and YouTube. The second is streamlined social media, which focuses on small packets of information delivered to many users. The best exemplars of this type of social media are Twitter and Instagram. Both of these social media archetypes have received considerable study in both the professional and academic worlds, primarily due to their age and ease of data collection.

The third social media type is called locational social media, and it focuses on the utilization of GPS-enabled smartphones for a person to “check in” to an event, and to share their opinions and experiences about that event. This is a relatively new phenomenon in social media, with the best-known example of this type of social media, FourSquare, only having been launched in 2009. However, other major social media outlets, including Facebook, Twitter, and Google, have introduced locational social media elements into their architecture. This type of social media usage has grown very popular since its introduction, with FourSquare alone averaging well over 3 million check-ins a day. Despite this popularity, there has been very little research, scholarly or otherwise, into the uses of locational social media or the larger concept of social sharing among sport fans.

III. Summary

This study found that college sport fans are motivated to engage in social sharing and use locational social media for promotion and fanship and personal gain. The promotion and fanship factor indicated that fans are highly motivated

by the social benefits that social sharing provides. In other words, fans were found to be utilizing social check-ins to engage with their friends and further validate their fandom. While promotion and fandom was a more prevalent motivation for fans' current usage trends involving social sharing and locational social media, fans were also motivated by personal gain. The personal gain factor contained items related to earning prizes, discounts on merchandise, and online recognition. When asked how they could be incentivized to use locational social media and engage in social sharing in the future, fans revealed two motivations: recognition and monetary. The recognition factor contained items related to receiving online recognition through the team's website or social media site, as well as gaining additional access to check-ins where they could engage in further interaction with fans. The recognition factor indicated that fans would be more willing to engage in social sharing online if their loyalty and dedication was rewarded in more non-tangible ways. The monetary factor, which contained items related to receiving deals on tickets, merchandise, and concessions, was far less prevalent motivation compared to receiving recognition for their sharing behaviors. Overall, this study found that fans engage in social sharing to display their fandom and feel like they are part of community. Additionally, fans would be more likely continue this online behavior if they were recognized by teams and organizations for their loyalty and displays of fandom. In this particular instance, college sport fans appeared to be more motivated by the psychological benefits that social sharing provides rather than the financial benefits.

IV. Analysis

Social media continues to play an increasingly important role in the game-day experience for sport fans, and unfortunately many sport organizations do not recognize that their stakeholders are interested in this process. The proliferation of smartphones, social media accounts, and new location-based apps have created a scene of fandom which exceeds the traditional parking lot tailgate or friends-and-family-only characteristics that dominated sport for the past century. This research takes a first step in exploring the reasons why fans are using social sharing and locational social media in the specific context of the sport event, and provides athletic departments and others in the sport business with an insight into the uses sought and gratifications achieved by fans from the process.

The first step in effectively utilizing the materials presented in this research is for sport teams to acknowledge that social sharing and locational social media usage are important to their fans. This has been a surprisingly difficult step for many sport organizations, and it is unclear why. The likelihood is that many key decision makers in both college and professional sport are either unaware of the wants and desires of fans in these areas, or are unaware that these areas exist due to not using social sharing or locational social media in their own personal communication lives.

Decision makers in sport organizations should realize that the publicity generated from fans who socially share information from sport events is free, and often targets others who are geographically proximal to the sharer. As noted in the research findings, sport audience members engaging in social sharing are already very interested in promoting the sporting event they are attending, and that attitude is very promising to athletic departments and other sport organizations in terms of utilizing social sharing for marketing and sales aims. The benefits to sport organizations of promoting social sharing and the usage of locational social media at their venues are many.

V. Implications

There are multiple recommendations for sport management practitioners that can be gleaned from this study. Specifically, the findings of this article would be most helpful to administrators within college athletic departments. First, it is recommended that college athletic departments looking to make more efficient use of their locational social media check-ins should strongly consider fostering a sense of community among the fans who engage in that behavior. This would involve promoting and discussing the team's locational social media check-ins on their Twitter feed and Facebook page. By cross-promoting social media outlets, an organization could increase feelings of connectivity among fans who utilize multiple platforms to engage with their favorite teams. Additionally, teams should encourage or invite others to join in who have not previously utilized the services.

Second, college athletic departments would be wise to engage their fan bases through recognition-rich practices rather than by simply rewarding them with discounts on tickets or merchandise. This could involve creating specific web pages or sections on the team's website dedicated to recognizing frequent fan check-ins. Creating sections where fans could comment on these recognition pages would also augment the fan experience by creating a communal space for communicating one's fandom. Additionally, links to these recognition pages could be placed on the team's Twitter feed and Facebook page to enhance interconnectivity.

Third, given the overall interest in social sharing and locational social media observed in this study, it would be advisable for college athletic departments to invest significant resources in publicly accessible Wi-Fi and cellular phone service in and around stadiums and arenas. Many university athletic departments across the country have already seen improved Wi-Fi and phone services as a needed amenity in their stadiums (Steinbach, 2013), including the schools of the Southeastern Conference spending a reported \$2 million per stadium to upgrade these services (Barnhart, 2013). As noted by the athletic director at the University of Tennessee, "Our next generation of fans is used to staying connected. They should be able to communicate in real time with somebody on the other side of the stadium" (Barnhart, 2013, ¶18). Despite these efforts, many stadiums in both college and professional sport lack an effective digital infrastructure to allow for on-site social sharing and locational social media usage by fans, thereby eliminating valuable

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opportunities for effective fan-to-team or team-to-fan on-site communication. Providing an appropriate and effective digital platform for fans and organizations to effectively utilize social media during a game or event would be a logical step.