

Chapter 22

Rivalry Influences on Fan Engagement Within Twitter: A Case Study of Manchester United

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ABSTRACT

Rivalries and social media influence the way individuals consume, produce, and experience sport. Thus, the purpose of the study was to understand the effects of sport rivalries on fan engagement within Twitter for segments of the Manchester United Football Club's business ecosystem (i.e., team brand, news-based fan club, unofficial fan club, and firm). First, the authors examined how specific Twitter content affected fan engagement during rivalry matches. Second, the authors compared fan engagement and virtual maltreatment within the segments of the Manchester United ecosystem. An analysis of 2,750 tweets from Manchester United's ecosystem during the 2015-2016 season was conducted. Results demonstrated a significant rivalry effect on fan engagement across all segments of Manchester United's ecosystem, and a significant virtual maltreatment effect on fan engagement during rivalry matches for the news-based fan club, unofficial fan club, and firm. Findings from the study provide practical and theoretical implications for marketing competitive relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Sport rivalries are a fundamental aspect of the culture of sport (Shropshire, 2006). A rival or disliked competitor (Dalakas & Melancon, 2012) exists when one places greater emphasis on the outcomes of competition compared to outcomes of traditional opponents (Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw, 2010). For many fans who watch sports, group membership in their favorite European football team provides them a sense of identity and community (Armstrong, 1998), and with "other" groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) or

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rivals to root against. While many sport fans passionately root against their opponents, rivalries provide a unique opportunity for teams to engage fans and deliver impactful marketing content that capitalizes on the strong identity felt by sport fans towards their teams. Specifically, social media is a distinctive communication platform that can exponentially expand the reach, engagement, and connection of a brand (i.e., a team; Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) by providing a marketing platform where content can be generated by both the team and the fans.

The use of social media by the sport industry has become an integral aspect of marketing campaigns for organizations (Clavio, 2013). Sport teams are generating thousands of tweets a year, and Twitter consumption by fans to gain information on sport products increased to approximately 70% in 2015 (Pew Research, 2015). With the vast increase in the use of social media by the industry and consumers, the examination of the use of social media and its effect on fan engagement is an important area of research (Abeza, O'Reilly, Séguin & Nzindukiyimana, 2015). According to Sanderson (2011), the majority of professional sport organizations keep fans informed through social media platforms (typically Twitter and Facebook), which has impacted on the way individuals consume, produce, and experience sport. Within the new age of multi-screen consumption by consumers and the massive amounts of online content sent to consumers, sport marketers need to maximize their communication message through social media and ensure fans encounter meaningful engagement with sport brands online (Pearson, 2013). The variety of methods by which fans can engage with content, whether by sharing (i.e., retweeting), commenting, or liking is what makes social media platforms versatile networks for marketers (Simply Measured, 2017) and important for academia to understand.

The user-generated content on unrestrictive social media platforms has the potential to contain more aggressive behavior (Price et al., 2013, Kavanagh, Jones, & Sheppard-Marks, 2016) allowing deviance in sport to be even more visible and public (Bass, Vermillion, & Putz, 2014). As such, Kavanagh and colleagues (2016) coined the term virtual maltreatment, which refers to comments that are directed towards a social group and are “stated in an aggressive, exploitative, manipulative, threatening or lewd manner and can be designed to elicit fear, emotional or psychological upset, distress and alarm” (p. 790). In general, virtual maltreatment has become part of the leisure social world experience and is upsetting or abusive for some (Kavanagh et al., 2016). While a few researchers have examined the effects of sport rivalries and antisocial behaviors (Dalakas & Melancon, 2012; Havard, 2014; Lee, 1985; Raney & Kinnally, 2009), no research on the effects of rivalries and virtual maltreatment within the social media context exists. Therefore, the purpose of our research is to understand the effects of sport rivalries on fan engagement within Twitter for segments of the Manchester United Football Club (herein referred to Manchester United) business ecosystem. The first objective of the authors was to examine how the specific content presented in Twitter affects fan engagement when the team plays a rivalry. Second, the authors compared the segments of the Manchester United business ecosystem (i.e., team brand, news-based fan club, unofficial fan club, and firm) in regards to virtual maltreatment and fan engagement.

BACKGROUND

Below is a historical review of Manchester United, rivalries associated with Manchester United, and the team's business ecosystem. Relevant literature is focused on the frameworks of sport rivalries, social identity theory, and virtual maltreatment are reviewed, followed by a description of the methods. Finally,

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