


Social Media Marketing Strategies of Football Clubs: Limitations of Social Influence

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ABSTRACT

Sports organisations, including football clubs, are using social media to connect with spectators. The aim of this study is to examine whether social influence on social media can increase attendance at matches. In particular, it aims to examine the effect of negative comments on consumer behaviour and how social influence differs across fans of varying levels of fandom. Eighty-nine respondents were randomly allocated to three groups. Respondents in the control group were exposed to a Facebook page of a football club without any comments while respondents in Experimental Group 1 and 2 were exposed to the same Facebook page but with additional positive and negative comments respectively. A one-way between-groups analysis of variance showed no statistical difference between the three groups on perception of quality of the players and the coaches, and intention to watch future matches. While earlier studies have shown that social influence on social media can affect consumer behaviour, this study found that social influence may be limited in affecting spectator perceptions and behaviour.

KEYWORDS

Attendance, Experiments, Football Fans, Negativity Bias, Perception of Quality, Singapore, Soccer, Sports Spectators

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites are defined as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Many people are now on social networking sites, accessing them on a regular basis (Duffett, 2015; Gangadharbatla, 2008; Ting, Wong, de Run, & Lau, 2015). As a result, while social media was initially created to be a means of communication between individuals, commercial organisations are now leveraging on the platform to market themselves. Marketing communications can be sent to specific targets based on disclosed interests and demographics on social network sites. As members of a social network site have a relationship with each other in a virtual community, messages are also perceived to be more credible and a potential source of influence on consumer behaviour (Phua & Ahn, 2016; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002).

Sport organisations and athletes are also leveraging on this new platform to communicate with spectators and their fans (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Seguin, 2019; Castellano, Khelladi, Chipaux, &

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Kupferminc, 2014; Frederick, Pegoraro, & Smith, 2021; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Yan, 2020; Thorpe, 2017; Wallace, Wilson, & Miloch, 2011). In particular, given the popularity of football and the high levels of commitment to the sport displayed by their fans, football clubs are well-placed to leverage on social media to engage with their fans (McCarthy, Rowley, Ashworth, & Pioch, 2014). They can also use social media to achieve commercial goals including drawing spectators to the games (Nisar, Prabhakar, & Patil, 2018; Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Parganas, Anagnostopoulos, & Chadwick, 2015; Vale & Fernandes, 2018).

While there are differences across countries and demographic groups, studies have suggested that there are several factors in motivating spectators to watch a match including the presence of drama, skill of players, team attachment and player attachment (Funk, Filo, Beaton, & Pritchard, 2009; Mahony, Nakazawa, Funk, James, & Gladden, 2002; Won & Kitamura, 2007). Consequently, football clubs are providing information that is demanded by fans and encouraging their attendance at the games (McCarthy et al., 2014; Parganas et al., 2015; Vale & Fernandes, 2018). However, whether this can be a viable strategy remains unknown. This is because fans may not rely solely on social media for information as they are still dependent on traditional media for information (Clavio & Walsh, 2014).

Football is a popular sport in Singapore. In a national survey conducted by the government in 2011, football was the most popular sport watched by Singaporeans across platforms including television, event venue and online (Sport Singapore, nd). Yet somewhat surprisingly, attendance at local matches had been poor. From 2010 to 2012, the average number of spectators was only about 1,150 spectators per match (Dan, 2014; Selvam, 2015). This is of concern as low attendance at matches can affect the financial viability for the clubs in the league. In the financial year ending March 2017, gate receipts for the league was reported to be only \$68,456, contributing less than 1% of total revenue (Football Association of Singapore, nd).

Football clubs in Singapore have also embarked on social media marketing strategies to attract spectators. Past research have demonstrated that social influence on social media can affect consumer behaviour. The aim of this paper is to examine whether social influence can be generalised to social media marketing strategies for football clubs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marketing on social network sites is different from traditional marketing. Members on social network sites are not only passive receivers of marketing messages but can also actively create shared meaning of the brand with other members (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009; Geurin & Burch, 2017; Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). Specifically, social network sites allow members to raise brand awareness, influence brand image and state their preferences for specific brands. As such, they can be a source of social influence as members may rely on the perception and judgment of other members in consumption choice (Ruiz-Mafe, Bigne-Alcañiz, Sanz-Blas, & Tronch, 2018).

Social influence can come in the form of informational or normative influence. Informational social influence is defined as an influence to accept information obtained from another as evidence about reality (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Individuals are thus susceptible to social influence because they seek to learn about products through seeking information from others. In contrast, normative social influence is defined as an influence to conform to the positive expectations of another (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Consumers are thus also susceptible to social influence when they seek to acquire specific products in order to conform to the expectations of others or to identify themselves as a member of a specific group. The more uncertain a person is about the correctness of his judgment, the more likely he is susceptible to social influences in making his judgment (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955).

The effect of social influence on consumer behaviour has been examined much earlier (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975; Pincus & Waters, 1977). Recently, there has been some interest in examining the effect of social influence on social network sites. These studies have shown that social influence can affect consumer behaviour by influencing the perception of quality and purchase intention (Chew &

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