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Review

Sport and social media research: A review

Kevin Filo [a,*], Daniel Lock [a,b], Adam Karg [a,b]

[a] *Griffith University, Australia*
[b] *Deakin University, Australia*

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of social media has profoundly impacted the delivery and consumption of sport. In the current review we analysed the existing body of knowledge of social media in the field of sport management from a service-dominant logic perspective, with an emphasis on relationship marketing. We reviewed 70 journal articles published in English-language sport management journals, which investigated new media technologies facilitating interactivity and co-creation that allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between brands and individuals (i.e., social media). Three categories of social media research were identified: strategic, operational, and user-focussed. The findings of the review demonstrate that social media research in sport management aligns with service-dominant logic and illustrates the role of social media in cultivating relationships among and between brands and individuals. Interaction and engagement play a crucial role in cultivating these relationships. Discussion of each category, opportunities for future research as well as suggestions for theoretical approaches, research design and context are advanced.

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1. Introduction

Social media have garnered a great deal of attention from academics and practitioners due to their pervasiveness and cultural impacts. Consumers can interact with social media during multiple stages of the consumption process including information search, decision-making, word of mouth, and the acquisition, use, and disposal of products and services. Social media use is an increasingly popular activity for Internet users. In Australia, 88% of 15–17 year olds and 86% of 18–24 year olds use social media (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2011). In the United States, 73% of Internet users actively engage with social media platforms (Pew Research Center, 2013). Due to the popularity of social media, sport brands invest significant time and resources to drive engagement and relationships online. Events such as the Super Bowl, FIFA World Cup and the Olympics; professional teams such as Manchester United and Real Madrid; and brands including Converse, Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo expend significant resources to integrate social media practices into their marketing strategy. Such organisations face challenges developing social media policies that leverage the opportunities afforded by these technologies while mitigating the complications stemming from social media usage by athletes and consumers (cf. International Olympic Committee, 2012; Mossop, 2012).

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[*] Corresponding author at: Department of Tourism, Sport and Hotel Management, Business 2 (G27), Room 3.32, Gold Coast Campus, Griffith University, Parklands Drive, Southport, QLD 4214, Australia. Tel.: +61 07 5552 8719; fax: +61 07 5552 8507.

E-mail address: k.filo@griffith.edu.au (K. Filo).

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As social media use has developed, businesses and brands have evolved practices to communicate with consumers, and generate revenue through interactive online tools. This has led to a specific role for social media, distinct from traditional media or communications tools. Most prominently, social media present a cost effective medium that: embraces interactivity, collaboration and co-creation above one-to-many communication; integrates communication and distribution channels; provides opportunities for customisation; and delivers superior speed to the delivery of information communication and feedback (Shilbury, Westerbeek, Quick, Funk, & Karg, 2014).

The opportunities and challenges inherent to social media practices in sport have catalysed academic research in this area. Research to date provides sport management academics and practitioners with insight regarding how to optimise social media usage from strategic and operational standpoints. However, organising these insights is challenging due to the dynamic and broad nature of the digital world in general and social media technologies, specifically. Accordingly, the purpose of this review is to provide an examination of sport management research conducted on social media to date.

For the purposes of the present review, we define social media as:

> *New media technologies facilitating interactivity and co-creation that allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between organisations (e.g. teams, governing bodies, agencies and media groups) and individuals (e.g. consumers, athletes and journalists).*

Traditionally, definitions of social media within the context of sport have focused on the distinction between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 technologies (e.g., Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). However, social media predate Web 2.0 considerably (Harrison & Barthel, 2009); thus, we have excluded this distinction from our definition to focus on the components of social media that differentiate from other mediums. Specifically, our definition of social media encompasses platforms within the following new media categories: social networking sites, blogs and micro-blogs, online communities and discussion forums (Shilbury et al., 2014). Importantly, this definition does not include new media categories such as: broadcasting and content extensions, fantasy sport or eCommerce. The rationale behind this delimitation is that these technologies and offerings may facilitate interactivity, but the user-generated component is not core to the service or experience. Additionally, the latter groups are excluded here as desired outcomes from these platforms are less about mutual exchange and relationship building, with the content and/or platform largely controlled by one organisation or stakeholder.

We structure the review as follows. First, we describe the basis upon which relevant research was selected, along with a brief introduction to the literature. Next, existing research is categorised into three groups (strategic, operational and user-focussed). From there, we outline theoretical frameworks that could be applied to future research on social media in sport along with suggestions for the direction and design of forthcoming academic inquiry. The approach taken within this review is derived from a method employed over a period of significant development for sponsorship research. Accordingly, we acknowledge Cornwell and Maignan (1998) and Walliser (2003) for the direction provided.

2. Theoretical framework

To provide structure, we locate this review within Service-Dominant (S-D) logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The S-D perspective provides an organising framework that overlays the work published in sport management on social media. In this section, we first introduce the S-D perspective and the concept of value co-creation. Second, we outline approaches to relationship marketing (Abreza, O'Reilly, & Reid, 2013; Grönroos, 1994, 2004), which exist as part of the S-D marketing paradigm. Third, we introduce the concept of engagement and identify this as the catalyst to the formation of meaningful relationships with brands.

The S-D approach formalised a transition in the field of marketing that built from origins in service marketing. Underlying the shift to S-D logic, Vargo and Lusch (2004) argued against traditional economic approaches to marketing, which focus on a goods-based exchange of tangible resources via transactions. Instead, they advocated for a revised paradigm, concentrating on the interactive nature of services and relationships, in which consumers' role in the value exchange process assumed primacy. Value co-creation is a central concept within the S-D framework (Lusch & Vargo, 2006). In contrast to the goods-dominant approach, value is created through the process of consumption. As such, organisations or brands offer value propositions, which consumers then evaluate in their own terms (Ballantyne & Varey, 2008). Due to the interactivity of social media, S-D logic provides powerful insights for sport management research that we use to frame the articles included in this review.

The S-D perspective draws heavily on service-orientated work, delineating the benefits of fostering meaningful, long-term relationships with consumers and other stakeholders (Grönroos, 1994). Relationship marketing refers to the efforts of brands to build and maintain bonds with customers and other stakeholders through mutual exchange and interactivity (Grönroos, 2004). An array of research on social media and sport has been framed and conducted from a relationship marketing perspective, illustrating its relevance to the topic (e.g., Abreza et al., 2013; Garcia, 2011; Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012; Williams & Chinn, 2010; Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012). This acknowledges the pertinent strategic and operational role that social media platforms provide for building relationships with consumers. Furthermore, relationship marketing involves a variety of disciplines including services, consumer behaviour, communication, and strategy (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995), and each of these represent areas relevant to sport management education and research. Hence, this perspective can provide opportunities for collaboration across sport management sub-disciplines.

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