How social media engagement leads to sports channel loyalty: Mediating roles of social presence and channel commitment

Joon Soo Lim [a,*], YoungChan Hwang [b], Seyun Kim [c], Frank A. Biocca [d,e]

[a] Syracuse University, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Department of Public Relations, 215 University Place, Syracuse, NY 13244, United States
[b] SBS (Seoul Broadcasting System), Public Relations Department, 161 Mokdongseo-ro, Yangcheon-Ku, Seoul 158-051, Republic of Korea
[c] Dankook University, Department of Sports Management, Republic of Korea
[d] Director of Media Interface and Network Design (M.I.N.D.) Labs, Newhouse Endowed Chaired Professor, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University, 215 University Place, Syracuse, NY 13244-2100, United States
[e] Department of Interaction Science, 25-2 Sungkyunkwan-ro, Jongno-gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Social TV is defined as real-time backchannel communication on social networking sites (SNSs) during a live television broadcast. Despite some pessimistic forecasts concerning the impact of social TV on viewing behaviors, broadcasters have found that the social TV phenomenon plays a positive role in boosting television ratings. We examine whether television viewers' backchannel communication during a mega-sporting event has a positive effect on their sports channel loyalty. A survey of a randomly drawn sample ($N = 500$) from national panel data in South Korea was conducted right after the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games. On the basis of theories in web interactivity, emotional attachment, and company–consumer identification, we proposed three levels of social TV engagement. Results of a confirmatory factor analysis yielded the tripartite dimensions of social media engagement (i.e., functional, emotional, and communal) among viewers of social TV. A test of the structural equation model (SEM) revealed that functional engagement had a direct impact on social presence and that the communal engagement had a direct effect on channel loyalty. The effect of emotional engagement on channel loyalty was mediated by channel commitment. The social presence led to channel loyalty mediated by channel commitment.

1. Introduction

The social media such as Twitter have expanded the boundary of mediated relationships that a user can experience. Users can now interact quickly with geographically dispersed people through the social media, which is an emerging topic in social presence research (Schroeder, 2002). In this trend, a notable phenomenon is the convergence of spectatorship and virtual interactions that occurs when passive behavior, television viewing, meets an active engaging behavior, the use of social networking sites (SNSs). A viewer of a mega-sporting event can perceive socialness, "the ability to elicit social interaction and social links among people" (Tuan-Anh, Ee-Peng, Achananuparp, Jing, & Loo-Nin, 2011, p. 344), in interacting with others online due to the functional elements, or social cues, embedded in the current SNSs (Johnson, Marakas, & Palmer, 2008). Those functional elements of socialness can be identified in three dimensions inherent in SNSs: likability (e.g., favorites, likes,

retweets), communicability (e.g., the frequency of posts, hashtags, mentions), and recognition within the virtual community (e.g., followers, online friends) (Tuan-Anh et al., 2011).

These socialness elements allow SNS users to meet other television viewers and engage with them in real-time sharing of their own and others' opinions and emotional reactions while watching televised sports events (Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2013). This second-screen activity, or using SNSs during the television viewing experience, is called social television (TV) (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012; Shin, 2013). Television producers and sponsors are increasingly interested in how television viewers' second-screen activity would affect viewers' channel selection and switching behaviors as well as their television viewing habits (Highfield et al., 2013).

An emerging question is what impact the social TV will bring about when the social TV enhances the perceptions of socialness and feelings of belongingness (Gantz & Lewis, 2014). In this regard, researchers of social web (Dabbish, Farzan, Kraut, & Postmes, 2012; Farzan, Dabbish, Kraut, & Postmes, 2011) showed that enhanced socialness in the social website could increase the commitment

to the channel or the site as well as attachment to the members of the virtual community.

In recent years, several researchers examined the mechanism in which consumers' virtual experiences led to brand loyalty (Cheng, Chieng, & Chieng, 2014; Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012). This line of research has revealed that the users' virtual engagement with a brand ultimately created brand loyalty and/or purchase intent mediated by perceived social presence (Johns, 2012; Moon, Kim, Choi, & Sung, 2013) and commitment (Chan & Li, 2010; Hechelmann, 2012; Wirtz et al., 2013).

Despite the growing adoption of social TV in the broadcasting industry, little scholarship has been undertaken to understand the users' behavioral patterns in using social media during live events such as sports, especially mass events like the viewing of the Olympics. Using a randomly drawn sample from national panel data in South Korea, this current study aims to explore this uncharted territory. To do that, this study examine the different types of social TV engagement during the 2014 Winter Olympic Games and the impact of such engagement on social TV users' feelings of social presence, their channel commitment, and channel loyalty.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Three dimensions of social media engagement

The participatory forms of television viewing are not an entirely recent cultural and technological trend as Deery (2003) earlier reviewed the state of art in participatory viewing on the Web. The current form of social viewing, however, is unique. Users' communication and interactions are taking place on the small mobile applications. Their engagement is gradually evolving, as technology is continuously expanding the scope of user interaction through backchannel communication. For instance, current apps of television shows allow users to instantly send their comments and feedback to the show and also to interact with other viewers through the apps. In other words, social TV users these days are experiencing entirely synchronous interactivity, and their social media engagement via backchannel communication has become more communal than functional.

The engagement experience via social TV is best observed during the sports viewing since sporting events have a lot of downtime and drama, which motivates viewers of televised sporting event to search for more information, share their feelings, and to connect with other sports fans (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012). In this study, we aimed to categorize various social TV-related activities into three levels of social media engagement and explicate the relationship between different levels of engagement and the sports channel loyalty. The framework draws on three research approaches to customer engagement on social media with sports channel brands.

2.1.1. Functional engagement

Functional engagement is focused on the online users' real-time participation in the social media platform to modify the format and content of such mediated environments, which was previously defined as interactivity (Steuer, 1992). In recent years, researchers have expanded the concept of interactivity to reflect more relational types of interactivity than merely interface-based interactivity (Kim, Spielmann, & McMillan, 2012). This approach to interactivity is more centered around human-to-human interactivity that aims to facilitate communication between the organization and other members of the public that are affected by the organization's operation of its business (Kim et al., 2012).

In this regard, the functional engagement can be defined as a social media user's interactions with other users in the process of co-creating, conversing and sharing the content. The functional engagement is the most sought key performance indicator (KPI) to evaluate the effectiveness of an organization's endeavors to engage social media users (Neiger et al., 2012) since an organization can exert a certain control over the flow of communication by inviting users for their feedback, encouraging them to share the content, and creating the topic-specific hashtags.

In particular, number of retweets, replies to others using @mentions of specific users, and hashtags are increasingly counted as important indicators for information sharing and active conversations during the real-time social media conversation (Bik & Goldstein, 2013; Neiger et al., 2012; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). These features of retweets, replies using @mentions, and hashtags are considered as a set of variables that represents "interactive functionality of Twitter" (Herrera-Damas & Hermida, 2014), which drives SNS users to be more interactive and engage in conversation (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015).

Scholars of sports communication regard interactivity as the main impetus that makes sports fans gather around social media while viewing the televised sporting events (Hull & Lewis, 2014; Tang & Cooper, 2011).

2.1.2. Emotional engagement

The second approach to social TV engagement explicates the emotional feelings a viewer has with the commentators as well as with other viewers on the social media streamline. While watching the mega-sporting event, users are often inclined to express their own joy and excitement, frustration or even disappointment when watching the games (Johns, 2012). Naturally, viewers of sporting events want to share their feelings with many other fans, which is the most basic aspect of users' emotional engagement. Viewers are also emotionally engaged when they feel amity or animosity toward other viewers' posts and opinions or when they like or dislike the comments from either the announcers or commentators (Hull & Lewis, 2014).

The concept of emotional engagement has often been used interchangeably with the concept of flow (Brockmyer et al., 2009) or immersion (Baños et al., 2004). However, emotional engagement is different from flow or immersion in that the former is in the realm of behavior, while the latter is an emotional state. The emotional engagement approach to social TV can be explained by the emotional attachment view of online users' engagement with a brand (Mollen & Wilson, 2010; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). The emotional attachment a user has toward a brand is a key aspect of consumer engagement that can affect consumer behaviors (Park et al., 2010).

2.1.3. Communal engagement

Social TV engagement during the mega-sporting events allows users to feel a sense of community while communicating with other fans (Hull & Lewis, 2014; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). According to a recent study commissioned by Viacom (Viacom., 2013), this communal engagement is the second most common reason that users of social TV engage with other fans and television shows while consuming the same media. In a mega-sporting event context, the communal engagement occurs due to sports fans' tendency to interact more with like-minded individuals who root for the same team (Hull & Lewis, 2014).

From the sports channel management point of view, engaged viewers become advocates who collaborate with other viewers in the value adding process to better serve the sports channel community's needs as well as the needs of general viewers. Hull and Lewis (2014) argued that Twitter enables users to transform the functional engagement into a broader connection with a great multitude of