Social Media Marketing in Sports: The Rise of Fan Engagement through Instagram

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Abstract

Background: The rapid growth of social media has profoundly impacted on how sports is being consumed by fans worldwide and the emergence of social media platforms such as Instagram which has become an increasingly popular tool used by sports organization for sharing visual content has increased fan engagement among sports fans. However, research on sports fan engagement through social media is still minimal. The purpose of this research is to determine how Instagram has risen to become one of the most popular tools used by sports organization as a medium of engaging fans worldwide.

Methods: A comparative analysis of the total number of comments and likes/reactions from videos posted by Liverpool Football Club on their official YouTube, Facebook and Instagram channel for the month of January was conducted in order to gain more insight into which of the above-mentioned social media platforms fans interact and engage more with their team.

Conclusion: The findings offered significant insight into how Instagram has more engagement as compared to Facebook and YouTube.

Keywords: Fan Engagement, Instagram, Sport Marketing, Social Media

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1. Introduction:

The development of the phenomenon of web-based social networking has reshaped the approach made by various sports associations to reach out to their fans or customers with the new tools and strategies introduced through social media. Digital media technologies that are emerging particularly the internet and different social networking sites have brought about a large change in market and business activities by creating a shift in the competitive position of companies, and by increasing consumer power. Online channels are a large part of social media and this has changed the way brands communicate with their attractive audience segments to share and engage them in various activities.

The last decade has seen an advancement in internet technology fueling the rise of social media. In today’s world having a discussion on Facebook, tweeting on Twitter, viewing an online video “liking an image or video on Instagram or scrolling down through TikTok videos are some of the daily practices of many individuals around the world; especially among the younger generation. The emergence of these various social media platforms has changed the communicating approach of organization worldwide as Constantinides & Fountain has put it that social networking sites has become the most appropriate platform for users to interact, share information and post their own brand-related material.

The emergence of the Internet generally, and more specifically, social media has shifted the game in sports parlance. The growing usage of social media in recent years have given fans unprecedented access to their favorite teams and athletes and has seen an exponential rise in communication level worldwide. As per the numbers in April 2020, there are approximately 3.8 billion social media users globally, which represent 49% of the world’s population.

Although scholars focus on how multiple industries of brand management could benefit from social media contributions, the foremost prominence and attractiveness is given to sports brands.
and their strong bond with the fans making them a perfect setting to utilize social media to reach out to their fans and encourage an intuitive and long haul relationship. McGillivray has suggested that it is the creativity and modern content of digital and social media that has affected the sport world as much as other circles of social life and this is mainly down to the new cultural mindset of the people especially amongst teenagers.

While social media have gained a pivotal role in the sports media ecosystem and organization and athletes increasingly turn to it to communicate with their fans and draw them in, before it became popular, there were very little form of information available to fans and they had to only depend on Television, Print Media and Radio Stations for information about their sports organization and it was more of a one-way communication. But now social media platforms have become major places for encountering news and information related to sports teams and athlete’s with different news media, sports organization and athletes making the most use of several form of social media to interact with their followers and gain substantial followings. The proliferation of social media have had implications for both the producer (the sports organizations, athletes, and different sport related bodies) and consumers i.e. the fans and followers as the communication have become increasingly faster and more instantaneous and are networked in a two-way communication rather than the more 'controlled' rationale broadcasting model.

The influence of various social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook are continuing to grow as a primary source of sports information among sports fans. However, Instagram and Snapchat are visually based platforms whose popularities are increasing exponentially, with Instagram being positioned as the fastest growing social media platform by industry analysts. Thus, Instagram was selected as the social networking site for this study to determine how fan engagement through visual content shared by different athletes and sports organization on Instagram differs from the rest of the social media platforms.

1.1 Social Media
Over the past few years, several authors made an effort to explain people about the uses of social media from their point of view. According to studies of Kaplan and Hoenlein, they defined social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content". As social media have gained immense importance it has become more interactive due to its certain abilities and tools it is able to create an impact on the individuals and firms which has in return helped getting loyal customers when it comes to content generation and have been successfully able to satisfy the needs of the customers.

Social media is a platform which is not only restricted to watching videos and pictures but has also helped people to interact with each other through videos, pictures, calls and messages. The online engagement, particularly through various social media platforms has received increased attention among the sports industry. Hence, different sports organizations have integrated multiple social media handles into their marketing model as it has seen that the existence of various social media pages or presence is important in their own unique way. Now most sports organizations have a presence on at least one or multiple social media platforms which allows their fans to engage and communicate with the club through comments, tweets and direct messages.

According to the research papers and articles about social media and its practices for sports organizations, these articles and papers have majorly focused on Facebook and Twitter. Although Facebook and Twitter rely heavily on written content as the key medium to increase their customers base, only recently have researchers proved visual content to be of significant importance as a mode of communication.

1.2 Instagram
It has become a very common thing for sports fans to discuss sports related topics on different social media platforms and connect with their club and athletes especially among the younger generation and Instagram has gained popularity by becoming one of the mostly used social media applications.

Instagram, a photo and video sharing application grew rapidly in popularity after its launch in 2010, which saw 2 million registered users in two months and 10 million registered users in a year. In an article by Statista, it reported that as of April 2020, Instagram has more than one
billion monthly active users and making it one of the most popular social media apps in the current generation\(^{(22)}\) and have attracted athletes and sports organizations from throughout the world\(^{(23)}\).

Instagram’s popularity grew among Sports Organization for sharing instantaneous images, news and videos. Recent studies and arguments have shown that Instagram can be used and is being used to engage sports enthusiasts, to generate business and as well as to achieve social objectives\(^{(24)}\). All twenty Football teams in the Premier league 2019/20 season have established Instagram presence, and it has been proven through research that visual content boost fan engagement.

### 2. Material & methods:

#### 2.1. Selection of the subject:

Since there is very less research done on Fan Engagement through Instagram, we have chosen an Exploratory method based on a single case study. Given that Football or soccer is one of the most popular sport in the world, we considered that choosing a well renown football club with a great social media following would be appropriate for this study. In regards to that, we have selected Liverpool Football Club as the subject of the study. Liverpool is one of the most prominent football club in the world and had just recently won the 18/19 UEFA Champions League, considered as the most prestigious trophy within European football\(^{(33)}\) and also have a social media following of 85.7 million (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube). Furthermore, considering the high brand value of the club, Liverpool is also YouTube highest earning football club with 3.1 million subscribers\(^{(34)}\) and was the most engaged Sports Organization on social media (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and Tiktok) in the first quarter of the year 2020 (January-April) with 499 million engagements across the four social media platforms\(^{(35)}\). Liverpool Instagram followers have grown at a speedy rate in the past couple of years, from approximately
8.3 million followers on August 2018 to 25.5 million followers on May 2020 with a daily average of 15k follower\(^{(36)}\). In addition, Liverpool also have a large following on Instagram, Facebook and YouTube which will make the comparative analysis more significant. Hence, Liverpool social media videos was chosen as the subject.

2.2 Data Collection:

Data collection in research deals with the data being collected by the researcher for the study. Data Collection can be done by two methods, i.e. Primary and Secondary method. For this study, data collected was secondary as it was from Liverpool FC official Instagram, Facebook and YouTube pages.

With a view to compare where fan engagement on Instagram stands among the famous Facebook and YouTube social networking sites, the three mentioned social media pages of Liverpool football club were considered for it. The videos were taken from the month of January 2020 from their respective official social media pages for comparative analysis. Such an approach is appropriate because Liverpool played their greatest number of matches in a single month on January and hence their fan engagement on different social media posts was at its peak.

Sample collected for the study consisted of 214 videos posted in the month of January, 2020 from across all three mentioned official social media platforms of Liverpool FC. For each of the social media page, fan Engagement was measured by collecting data of videos posted from 1st to 31st of January, 2020. Data collected included the feedback from fans in terms of Likes/Reactions and comments from each video posted on the three mentioned Social Media platforms during the same time period. For each video post, along with its likes/reactions and comments video link and its upload date were also copied into an MS Excel workbook on separate worksheets for each social media platform. Further, only videos were collected for the study because it is more appropriate to compare, as video is the only means that is common across all three social media platforms.

2.3 Statistical Technique:

Statistical technique was used to provide a further insight into how fans engaged across the three mentioned social media platforms. The statistical technique used for this study was Welch Two Sample T-Test through R programming software.

3. Results and Discussion:

Fan Engagement was measured by the data collected for the study which were 214 videos and their responses of the fans in terms of comments, likes/reactions. In the data collected, Liverpool posted more videos on Facebook with 121 as compared to Instagram and YouTube with 72 and 21 respectively. Facebook got responses of 51,70,546 while Instagram and YouTube got 2,45,95,599 and 8,29,411 respectively.

Interestingly, despite having less followers and less content posted, as shown on Table 1, Instagram has a higher average fan engagement (N= 2,45,95,559, M= 42,731.79) than Facebook (N=51,70,546, M=42,731.79) and YouTube (N= 8,29,411, M=39,495.5). The statistical analysis also confirms this observation. In Table 2, it can be observed that the p-value for the test is < 0.05, thus with 95% accuracy we can say that we reject the null hypothesis that the responses for Instagram = YouTube, and responses for Instagram = Facebook. The author accepts the alternative hypothesis that responses for Instagram > YouTube and Facebook both. This is because the test was one tailed in nature. Hence, it can be concluded with significant evidence that Instagram has the most amount of fan responses among the three social media platforms based on the given data.
Table 1: Frequencies of fan responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media</th>
<th>No. of Videos (N)</th>
<th>Likes/Reaction (X)</th>
<th>Comments (Y)</th>
<th>Total Engagement (X+Y)</th>
<th>Mean (M)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>50,54,500</td>
<td>1,16,046</td>
<td>51,70,546</td>
<td>42,731.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>2,44,86,335</td>
<td>1,09,264</td>
<td>2,45,95,599</td>
<td>3,41,605.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7,90,000</td>
<td>39,411</td>
<td>8,29,411</td>
<td>39,495.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Statistical analysis of fan responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instagram &amp; YouTube</td>
<td>10.087</td>
<td>84.668</td>
<td>&lt;0.0002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram &amp; Facebook</td>
<td>10.46</td>
<td>73.653</td>
<td>&lt;0.0002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As social media has taken over the sports ecosystem by storm, it has also been viewed as a suitable tool by sports organizations for developing fan engagement\(^{37}\). This study aims to investigate on how Instagram rose to fame and overtook almost all other social media platforms for fans to engage with their sports teams in terms of comments and likes/reactions. Instagram for sports fans has become a source for match highlights, breaking news, exclusive videos from different sports clubs, and a glimpse into athletes’ personal lifestyle.

For the study, the author had chosen Liverpool FC, one of the most renowned sports brands globally by analyzing and comparing their fan responses on videos posted on their official Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook. Most of their videos were related to training, matchday build-ups, sponsors advertisement, history and tradition of the club, and highlight matches. That is somewhat a logical factor, whereby, the club's records or the home stadium consolidates the team's brand\(^{38}\) and are foundations upon which the football club and fan relationships are fabricated and can assist with conquering the high points and low points brought about by wins, misfortunes, the switching of players and replacing of managers\(^{39}\). Liverpool also posted a couple of community service activities videos such as promotion of local social initiatives, players surprising old aged fans at their homes and visiting children’s hospital. Such posts raise the approval of fans as they are provided with an insight into different aspects of the team and its players off ground and by incorporating both team-related information and service activities, fans connect more personally to the club and the relationship intensifies\(^{40}\).

It is pretty evident from the comparative analysis that Instagram has become one of the most engaged social media platforms. From the collected data, significant difference was observed in terms of videos posted on the three social media platforms as the comparative analysis revealed that Liverpool posted more videos on Facebook with Instagram and YouTube second and third on the list respectively. Whereas, in terms of engagement per video, Instagram had more likes and comments as compared to their Facebook and YouTube channel. That is, although comment reflects a stronger type of interaction\(^{41}\), likes are just as critical, as the reach keeps multiplying with every like a post generates, thereby increasing brand recognition\(^{42}\). In addition, videos posted by Liverpool on Instagram were more related to engaging fans rather than their more traditional self-match highlights and brand marketing post on Facebook and YouTube.

Social media has often been regarded as particularly suitable for the establishment of customer relationships and generating the need for a focused research effort on the phenomenon of online consumer engagement. While social media continues to evolve, it is important for sports organizations to give it the most attention to all social networking sites, but to also figure out which social media platforms are of the best interest for fans as this will help them in generating more engagement and help attract more consumers which will ultimately result in generating more revenue from social media streams. The maintenance and enhancement of customer relationships is an important factor that needs to be promoted by sports organizations\(^{43}\).
4. Conclusion:

After a thorough study conducted and the respective findings obtained, we observed that sports organization across the industry are currently trying increase fan engagement and establish stronger connection with their current fan base and are also trying to tap into new market to attract more new fans. Social media holds the key to this as it plays a crucial role in connecting and developing relationships with people all across the globe.

This study was focused on how much Instagram influence sport fan engagement as compared to other social media platforms. In particular, the research sought to help us understand how a professional football club uses multiple social media platforms to engage their fans and which among these social media platforms are the fans using more for engagement with their team. In addition, after conducting a comparative method, we found out that fans use Instagram more for engaging with their sport team as compared to Facebook and YouTube as they prefer visual instant information and interactions than the traditional written method. Further, there is a growing evidence that fans have move on from the traditional way of consuming sports where there is only one-way communication and are more into social networking sites where communication are instantaneous and are networked in a two-way communication. The sports organizations have recognized the significance and benefits of fan engagement and have considered the strategic value of social media, as the study proves that instantaneous virtual content information and engagement through Instagram are mostly prefer by fans as compared to Facebook and YouTube.

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Source of Funding: Self-funded

Conflict of Interest: There is no conflict of interest among the authors

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