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, &

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 &

Leng, 2014; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Duffett, 2015; Koh & Leng, 2017; Phua & Ahn, 2016; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015; X. Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012). Comments on social network sites become a conversational human 'voice' and these can positively affect purchase intention through social influence (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, & de Vries, 2015; Chew & Leng, 2014; Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008). Interestingly, due to negativity bias, more attention is given to negative comments made online (Sen & Lerman, 2007). However, the effect of this on social influence remains inconclusive.

Recent studies have also suggested that the effectiveness of social media marketing can differ across different types of social media. For example, while social influence in the form of comments by members of a social media network site can affect perception of quality and purchase intention on Facebook, the effect of social influence is more limited on a visual-centric social media platform such as Instagram (Teo, Leng, & Phua, 2019). Other studies have found that there are also differences in the motivation and gratification sought in using different types of social media (Billings, Broussard, Xu, & Xu, 2019; Lewis, Brown, & Billings, 2017; Machado, Martins, Ferreira, e Silva, & Duarte, 2020; Su et al., 2020). Consequently, social media is not a single, universal platform but a broad spectrum of tools, each effective for different purposes. Effective social media marketing thus require the use of more than one social media (Abeza et al., 2019).

Many of the studies on social media marketing have examined physical products and fictitious brands. It is unclear whether the findings can be generalised to the marketing of real football clubs even though they have been using social media to engage with fans. Watching a football match is different from purchasing a pair of football boots as the experience is intangible and differ among spectators. With a real football club, spectators may have existing beliefs and attitudes towards the clubs (McCarthy et al., 2014). Hence, whether social influence has an effect on perceptions and behaviour remains to be tested. Finally, the majority of studies have not examined the effect of negative comments even though it has been postulated that the effect may be greater than positive comments (Sen & Lerman, 2007). This is a gap that will need to be addressed. The first research question is thus as follows.

RQ1: How does positive and negative comments on social media affect spectators' perception and behaviour of a football club?

The effect of social influence also varies across individuals. Consumers who are highly involved in the purchase situation or product category possess high levels of motivation to acquire and process information (Lord, Lee, & Choong, 2001; Q. Wang, Cui, Huang, & Dai, 2016). Extending to the sports industry, it is expected that highly involved consumers will spend more time searching for the correct sports product or equipment as they are active product information seekers (Dickson & Pollack, 2000; Ko, Kim, Claussen, & Kim, 2008). Consequently, they are more likely to be susceptible to social influence in the form of informational influence when compared to consumers who are less involved (Chew & Leng, 2016). In particular, fans of varying levels of involvement may process information differently (Potter & Keene, 2012). Hence, it will be interesting to examine the effect of social influence across fans of varying levels of involvement.

RQ 2: How does the effect of social influence differ across fans with varying levels of involvement?

METHOD

Over a three month period, spectators watching soccer matches involving a football club in the Singapore league, the Home United Football Club (HUFC), at various stadiums were approached to participate in the study. The respondents were randomly categorised into one of three groups. In the Control group, respondents were shown a mock-up Facebook page of the club without any comments. In Experimental Group 1, respondents were shown the same Facebook page as the Control Group but with additional positive comments from members on the social network site. Positive comments were adapted from real comments made by fans on social media accounts of football clubs. Examples

of positive comments include "Home united…you guys rock!" and "Well done coach Aidil. Team effort and individual brilliance of all players". In Experimental Group 2, respondents were shown the same Facebook page as the Control Group but with negative comments made by members on the social network site. Similar to Experimental Group 1, negative comments were also adapted from real comments made by fans. Examples of negative comments include "Such an embarrassment for local club!!! Being thrashed by U-21 University students" and "1 of the worse home utd game I've seen". After viewing the Facebook page, respondents completed a survey on a computer tablet via Google Form. At the end of the survey, respondents were given S$5 as a token of appreciation.

The survey collected demographic information including age, gender, frequency in watching a soccer match during the season and the number of years that the respondent had been a fan of the football club. Respondents also indicated their perception of quality of the club's players and coach on a single-item 5-point Likert scale. Intention to watch future matches played by the club were determined by a four-item 5-point Likert scale adapted from earlier studies. The items were "It is very likely that I will watch a match played by the club in future"; "If my friend wants to watch a football match, I will recommend him to watch a match played by the club"; "I am willing to spend more money on the club over other clubs in the league"; and "I will promote the brand of the club to my friends and relatives". The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the scale was .89, suggesting good internal consistency reliability for the scale.

RESULTS

A total of 89 spectators participated in the study. 27 of the respondents (30%) were females with the majority of respondents (43%) aged between 21 to 29 years of age. There were 30 respondents in the Control group, 30 respondents in Experimental Group 1 and 29 respondents in Experimental Group 2. The profile of respondents is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondents' Profile

		Total ($n=89$)	Control ($n=30$)	Experimental 1 ($n=30$)	Experimental 2 ($n=29$)
Gender	Female	27 (30%)	6 (20%)	11 (37%)	10 (34%)
	Male	62 (70%)	24 (80%)	19 (63%)	19 (66%)
Age	21-29	38 (43%)	15 (50%)	13 (43%)	10 (34%)
	30-39	26 (29%)	7 (23%)	9 (30%)	10 (34%)
	40-49	14 (16%)	4 (13%)	5 (17%)	5 (17%)
	50 and above	11 (12%)	4 (13%)	3 (10%)	4 (14%)
Attendance frequency per season	1 time	16 (18%)	6 (20%)	5 (17%)	5 (17%)
	2 to 4 times	22 (25%)	7 (23%)	8 (27%)	7 (24%)
	5 to 10 times	23 (26%)	9 (30%)	8 (27%)	6 (21%)
	Above 10 times	28 (31%)	8 (27%)	9 (30%)	11 (38%)
Duration as fan of the club	< 1 year	27 (30%)	13 (43%)	7 (23%)	7 (24%)
	1 to 3 years	25 (28%)	6 (20%)	8 (27%)	11 (38%)
	4 to 5 years	11 (12%)	4 (13%)	3 (10%)	4 (14%)
	> 5 years	26 (29%)	7 (23%)	12 (40%)	7 (24%)

A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was carried out to investigate the impact of the type of comments on perception of quality of the players and the coaches. Participants were divided into three groups according to the type of comments viewed when they were doing the survey i.e. no comments, positive comments and negative comments. There was no statistical significant difference across the three groups in their perception of the quality of players, $F(2, 86) = .41$, $p = .67$. There was also no statistical significant difference across the three groups in their perception of the quality of the coaches, $F(2, 86) = .44$, $p = .64$. This suggest that social influence did not affect the perception of quality of players and coaches.

In addition, a one-way between-groups analysis of variance was carried out to investigate the impact of the type of comments on intention to watch future matches played by the club. There was no statistical significant difference across the three groups in their intention to watch future matches, $F(2, 86) = .61$, $p = .55$. This suggests that social influence in the form of comments did not affect intention to watch future matches. The results are detailed in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for one-way between-groups ANOVA across groups

		Mean (SD)	*F*	*p*-value
Quality of Players	Control[a]	3.60 (.86)	.41	.67
	Experimental 1[b] (Positive)	3.77 (.90)		
	Experimental 2[c] (Negative)	3.59 (.83)		
Quality of Coach	Control[a]	3.60 (1.00)	.44	.64
	Experimental 1[b] (Positive)	3.37 (1.13)		
	Experimental 2[c] (Negative)	3.52 (.74)		
Intention	Control[a]	3.73 (.85)	.61	.55
	Experimental 1[b] (Positive)	3.66 (.81)		
	Experimental 2[c] (Negative)	3.90 (.89)		

[a]*n* = 30; [b]*n* = 30; [c]*n* = 29

Further analysis was conducted using Spearman rho to examine the relationships between perceptions of players and coaches with intentions to watch future matches across groups. As expected, there were positive, moderate to strong relationships between perception of the quality of players with intentions across all three groups ($\rho_{Control} = .43$, p < .05; $\rho_{Experimental 1} = .60$, p < .01; $\rho_{Experimental 2} = .59$, p < .01). Respondents who rated players to be of higher quality were more likely to watch future matches. In addition, there were also significant moderate relationships between perception of the quality of coaches with intention to watch future matches across all three groups ($\rho_{Control} = .36$, p < .05; $\rho_{Experimental 1} = .42$, p < .05; $\rho_{Experimental 2} = .47$, p < .05). Respondents who rated coaches to be of higher quality were also more likely to attend future games. In part, this may be due to the strong positive relationships between perceptions of the quality of players with perceptions of the quality of the coaches across all three groups ($\rho_{Control} = .88$, p < .01; $\rho_{Experimental 1} = .58$, p < .01; $\rho_{Experimental 2} = .67$, p < .01). Respondents who perceive players are of higher quality are also more likely to perceive the coaches to be of higher quality. This is detailed in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Correlation between Respondents' Profile using Spearman rho

		1	2	3	4	5
Control	1 Attendance frequency	1.00	.55**	.24	.08	.22
	2 Duration as fan of club		1.00	-.09	-.07	.17
	3 Quality of players			1.00	.88**	.43*
	4 Quality of coaches				1.00	.36*
	5 Intention to watch matches					1.00
Experimental 1 (Positive)	1 Attendance frequency	1.00	.32	.38*	.16	.22
	2 Duration as fan of club		1.00	.22	.40*	.09
	3 Quality of players			1.00	.58**	.60**
	4 Quality of coaches				1.00	.42*
	5 Intention to watch matches					1.00
Experimental 2 (Negative)	1 Attendance frequency	1.00	.32	.48**	.38*	.27
	2 Duration as fan of club		1.00	.15	.40*	.13
	3 Quality of players			1.00	.67**	.59**
	4 Quality of coaches				1.00	.47*
	5 Intention to watch matches					1.00

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

Interestingly, Table 3 also showed that there were other differences across the three groups. In the Control group, frequency of attendance at games and duration as a fan of the club did not have any significant relationships with perception of quality of players and coaches. However, respondents in Experimental 1 who were exposed to positive comments, reported a positive moderate relationship between attendance frequency and perception of quality of players ($\rho_{Experimental\ 1} = .38$, $p < .05$) and a positive moderate relationship between duration as a fan of the club with perception of quality of coaches ($\rho_{Experimental\ 1} = .40$, $p < .05$). This suggests that for respondents who were exposed to positive comments, there is a positive relationship between fans who were more involved and the perception of quality of the players and coaches of the football club.

As for respondents in Experimental 2 who were exposed to negative comments, they reported a positive strong relationship between attendance frequency and perception of quality of players ($\rho_{Experimental\ 2} = .48$, $p < .05$); a positive moderate relationship between attendance frequency and perception of quality of coaches ($\rho_{Experimental\ 2} = .38$, $p < .05$); and a positive moderate relationship between duration as a fan of the club with perception of quality of coaches ($\rho_{Experimental\ 2} = .40$, $p < .05$). This suggests that for respondents who were exposed to negative comments, there is a positive relationship between fans who were more involved and the perception of quality of the players and coaches of the football club.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to examine the extent of social influence in the marketing of football clubs on social media. Respondents did not differ in their evaluation of the quality of players, coaches and intention to watch future matches whether they were exposed to positive or negative comments on social media. This suggests that social influence in the form of comments on social media did not affect perception of quality of athletes and coaches. More importantly, they also did not affect intention to watch future matches. This result is unexpected as the literature has suggested that social

influence can exist on social media, affecting both perception of quality and purchase intention of sports products and services (Chew & Leng, 2014; Koh & Leng, 2017). In addition, as respondents exposed to negative comments did not differ in their responses when compared to the control group, there did not seem to be any empirical support for the suggestion of a negativity bias on social media (Sen & Lerman, 2007).

There are two possible reasons for this finding. Firstly, sports fans may not rely on social media for information (Clavio & Walsh, 2014). As such, social influence on these platforms may be limited. Secondly, earlier studies have used fictional brands. As the brands are unknown to the respondents, they may be more susceptible to social influence (Bearden et al., 1989; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). In this study, a real football club is used as the subject. Hence, respondents may already know about the club and hold existing beliefs and attitudes towards the club (McCarthy et al., 2014). Consequently, they may rely less on comments on the social media to make an evaluation on the quality of the players and coaches, and intention to watch future matches of the club.

Further analysis on the correlations between various variables yielded additional insights. Firstly, there were positive relationships between perception of quality of the players and coaches with intention to watch future matches. This is not surprising given that several studies have suggested that spectators are motivated to watch matches when there is drama in the form of a competitive match between players who are highly skilled (Funk et al., 2009; Mahony et al., 2002; Won & Kitamura, 2007).

Secondly, there was an interesting difference in the correlations between the control and experimental groups. In the control group where respondents were not exposed to any comments, there was no correlation between fan involvement, either in the form of attendance frequency or duration as a fan, with the perception of the quality of the players and coaches. However, when exposed to either positive or negative comments, respondents who were more involved in the form of attendance frequency or duration as a fan, reported higher levels of perceived quality in the players and coaches. Fans who are highly involved may process information differently (Potter & Keene, 2012). In this case, fans who were more highly involved may react to comments by providing a higher rating on the perceived quality of players and coaches. Interestingly, the effect seems to be limited to only affecting perception of quality but not intention to watch future matches.

CONCLUSION

With the popularity of social media, many sports organisations including football clubs are leveraging on social media marketing strategies. This study has shown that comments on social media did not affect either perception of quality or intention to watch games. Hence, social influence on social media of football clubs seems to be limited.

There are several limitations in this study. As respondents in this study was presented with only a single exposure to the social media page, it is not known whether prolonged exposure can affect respondents differently. As such, this remains a limitation of this study and should be examined in future research. In addition, earlier studies have suggested that social media marketing differs across social network sites (Teo et al., 2019). As this study is conducted on Facebook, future research should examine whether other types of social network site can be more effective in changing perceptions and behaviour.

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