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Electronic Word-of-Mouth for Mobile Fitness Applications: An Action Case Study

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Research Background

There is a limited research on how the Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) evolves to expand the wide adoption of emerging technologies such as mobile fitness tracking. Significant studies in the e-WOM literature (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al, 2004; Goldsmith, 2006; Cheung et al, 2008) offered a limited insight on "*who are the key influencers on the e-WOM*" and "*how to map them*". Also, they did not define "*the extent to which e-WOM is leveraged to expand the adoption of emerging mobile applications*".

Our study tends to fill these gaps and offers a systematic framework of e-WOM and the way it flows between different nodes that have been created by key influencers a virtual community (Porter et al, 2013). It helps enhancing the user's involvement as a key driver for innovative delivery and wide adoption (Füller et al, 2014). In doing so, it bridges between three territories in the e-business and e-marketing literature, namely; e-*WOM*, *Social Capital*, and *Influencer marketing theory* (See Figure1).

e-WOM literature point out to customers as the key- influencers within online conversation, where they can make, break or drive the success and adoption of products (Barrutia and Echebarria, 2013). Sports clubs are increasingly using social media and a platform for e-WOM to *communicate with consumers and monetise their brands, engaging* existing fans and reaching out to new audiences (SAP Network, 2013). Clubs strategically leverage their content to drive brand success which gives these socially connected clubs clear advantages over their rivals. They retain more attention from existing fans and increase engagement with new and potential supporters, while generate revenues from content marketed those fans (Ioakimidis, 2010). Being a fan involves sociability; e-WOM and sharing the game experience increases interaction between fans and engages them. As mobile usage increases the feeling of match day emotion can be available faster than ever before driving real time debate between supporters. Fans using social media are engaging with their teams in real-time with a constant flow of two-way communication (Fans Nation, 2015).

Influencer marketing theory is the second are of literature that refers to *two-step flow of communication* that can be mapped using the *"Multistep Flow Model"* (Batinic & Appel, 2013). This model study the extent to which are equally influential or there are groups of opinion leaders (nodes) who sit between the media and end consumer (Li et al., 2010).
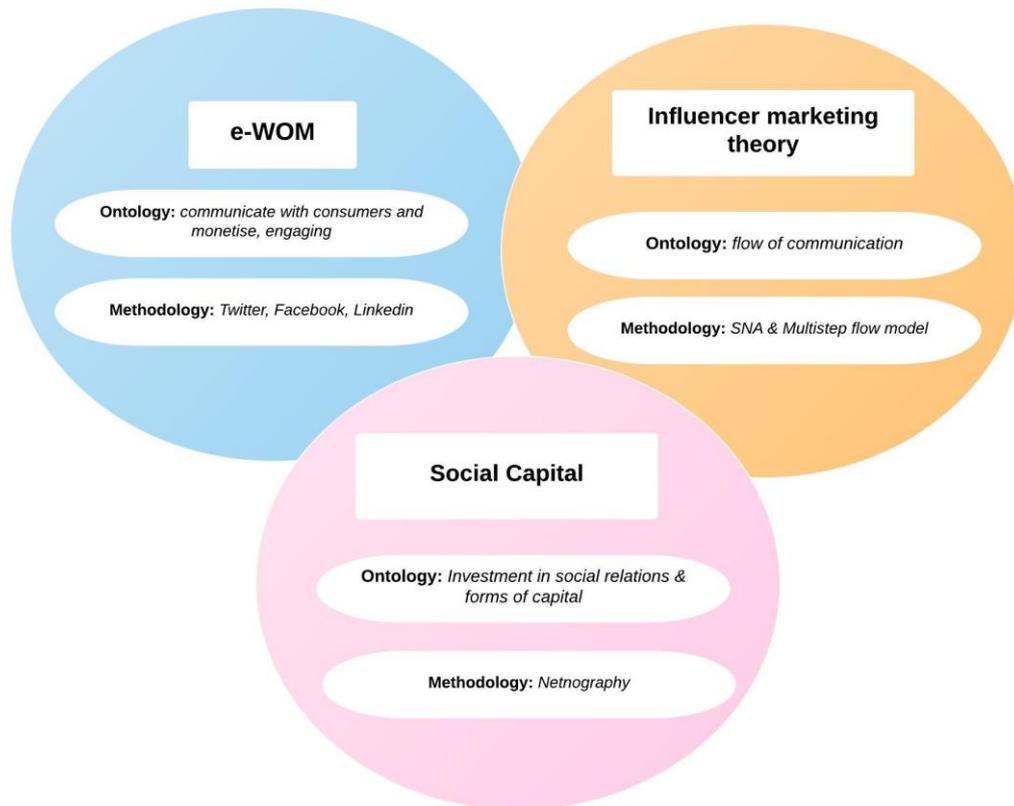
Figure 1: Theoretical framework

Social Capital (SC) is a sociological theory that examines potential collective or commercial benefits derived from cooperation between actors in a network (Quan-Haase et al., 2015). Increasing academic discussion of SC theory since the1980s has not lead to a "circus tent of definitions". Bourdieu's *"forms of Capital"* declared that a network can be seen as connected relationships of acquaintance and mutual respect, where SC "*is the aggregation of the actual and potential resources within the network*" (Bourdieu, 2011: 83). Taking a different view, Adler and Kwon (2002) stated network relationships add value to its actors through allowing them access to the combination of resources of the network. Linking back to the aims of this paper, it is essential to consider "*the SC value of opinion leaders' e-WOM discussions and how these drive commercial success and product adoption*".

Research Approach:

A team of two academics and three postgraduate and candidates get together to help expand the adoption of *Footy Fit*, a newly developed mobile application for fitness tracking. It has been conceived primarily for use by football clubs to promote engagement and fitness in players and fans. It is a smartphone driven application with future possibilities to add wearable devices. Once adopted, this technology helps users to self-challenge and track the trend of their exercise against other fellow fans and players.

Filling the research gaps requires a mix of understanding and transitional change in the way a fitness mobile application can be widely adopted. Reaching this middle space requires a mix

of action case study including *qualitative interviewing*, *Social Network Analysis (SNA)*, and *Netnography* (Vidgen and Braa, 1997). It offers a pragmatic ontology where we can link the wide digital space with the social context of users (Hughes and Wood-Harper 1999; Chan et al, 2015). SNA has been used to offer subjective assessment of the impact that key-influencers have on the use of a mobile Footy fit (Woods et al, 2015). Netnography offers advantages of speed and scalability for large networks, while still achieving naturalistic data collection for those involved.

Following the SNA and netnography, results were linked to the thematic analysis of a snowball sample of semi-structured interviews that have been conducted with managers of support clubs in European Sports Clubs (Golbeck, 2013).

Research Contribution

Theoretically, our study offers a systematic framework of e-WOM and the way it flows between different nodes that have been created by key influencers a virtual community (Porter et al, 2013). To leverage e-WOM influencer marketing for *mobile fitness*, official academic nodes are not always the most influential (Duan et al, 2008). Maximising results and reach would involve a combination of commercial, forums and informed individuals (Granovetter, 1973).

Key-influencers' choice of social media platforms indicate where the highest levels of professional discussion and e-WOM debate occurs (See Appendices 7a-f).

Our analysis reflects that *self-challenging exercise* enhances the player's enthusiasm and encourages spreading e-WOM. Then, *commercialisation* and wide spread of a mobile fitness tracking requires matching and cooperation with key-influencers to engage the largest possible customer base. Maximising results and reach would involve a combination of commercial, forums and informed individuals (Granovetter, 1973) (See Appendixes 1-6).

Empirically, this research helps sport clubs to maintain fans' engagement during the season and throughout the summer using social media and video feeds from the club into the application interface, with the potential to switch between different club feeds. The commercial focus for Footy Fit could be shifted from football to the general engagement of sports teams and supporters where there is sufficient social media data flow. Such a contribution seems significant in European Sports Clubs, where a number of sport clubs led the world sport.