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TALKING ABOUT SPORTS BRANDS - HOW OUR SOCIAL MEDIA CONVERSATIONS REVEAL WHAT WE SAY

ABSTRACT

Aim

With the volume of social media posts each day continuing to proliferate on a daily basis, these are crucial issues for many aspects of business and management. In this context, this paper, in general, examines how social media users talk about brands. Specifically, we explore: who leads brand conversations on social media platforms (people and/or organisations we label as ‘influencers’); how communications are structured; and what factors determine this structure (Berkman, 2013).

Theoretical background and literature review

In order to address the central focus of our work, we analysed social media conversations pertaining to a high engagement brand. We see brand engagement as being cognitive and behavioural in nature (Kane, 2015). High engagement brands attract large numbers of social media posts, which in turn involves users actively reading, thinking about and acting upon posts made by the brand. At one level, this may simply involve ‘liking’ or ‘retweeting’ a post; at another level, this may entail formulating additional content that supplements existing brand content or creates a thread in conjunction with a brand post.

Research design, methodology and data analysis

We employed a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2015). The brand we selected for the purposes of our study was English soccer’s Premier League (EPL). The EPL is one of the most popular, commercially successful sports leagues in the world, regularly attracting large social media audiences. Twitter was selected as the focus for our data collection because it is well used by brands, is an open social network, and provides access to its data via its open Application Programming Interface.

We selected the official Twitter accounts of the brands in this case for consistency. There were other hashtags associated with the brand, but in this case, the official account provided the unit of analysis. This also meant that we could compare one brand with the next on an equal footing. Although the official accounts were used, this still provided scope to analyse the conversations with and around the official brands.

For the EPL brand, data was captured on the same day each week, every week, for five months. This generated twenty sets of data. We used NodeXL to capture and analyse the data, which enabled us to qualitatively observe key influencers in conversations about the brands and the connections between both the people and the conversations which arose from the brands’ Twitter posts (Hansen et al., 2010; Hansen et al., 2012). In turn, we were able to compare network shapes to those identified in the literature. We also analysed quantitative data behind the diagrams to provide further insight, which enabled us to find which accounts were most influential numerically.

The type of visualisation, which NodeXL generates depicts a central node (or nodes) responsible for generating the initial social media communication – in this case, a tweet by a brand (depicted on the left of the visualisation). The other nodes represent clusters of discussion among social media users, the most significant of which are shown on the right of our visualisations.

Results/findings and discussion

The most immediate observation to make is that the volume of conversations instigated by EPL tweets. Furthermore, the subsequent number of conversations prompted by original tweets was also significant. The network was of a broadcast form, where messages were created by a central hub but then shared by disconnected users.

We interpreted the disconnectedness of EPL users as meaning that, once the league tweets, clustering occurs with subsequent discussions taking place between fans of teams that play in it. Brand engagement and social media conversation in these terms would seem to be driven in combination the likes of Manchester United, Arsenal, Liverpool and so forth, that form part of a brand constellation, which the EPL is part of.

Further scrutiny of the visualisation revealed more detail about the nature of peoples' brand conversations. The users who are influential in the visualisations have a higher betweenness centrality score within the network. Betweenness centrality measures the number of times a node will lie on the shortest path to other nodes. It shows accounts that influence the flow around a system because they act as bridges within the network.

Conclusion, contribution, implication

We conclude that when brands talk people listen (that is, read). However, in the case of the EPL people then wander off to continue the conversation amongst themselves about the brands – sometimes a lot, sometimes not very much. As the EPL demonstrates, whilst a brand might instigate a conversation, after the initial post it can lose control over subsequent discussions and even see other, more influential, entities driving what is said.

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