

For the 'like' of the game: Assessing the role of social media engagement in football consumer outcomes

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Abstract

The rise of social media use has altered the marketing context globally. In this regard, sport consumerism in particular has been influenced by the need of fans to communicate in real time and through remote means accessed digitally. However, limited research exists insofar frequency of social media use influences specific consumer outcomes. In this study, an investigation was undertaken to evaluate how regular social media use associates with positive consumer outcomes. These outcomes were performance tolerance of fans, stadium match attendance and consumer expenditure. Drawing from relationship marketing – and market segmentation theories, the postulated paths were scrutinised. 2465 adult fans of a predominant South African professional football club participated in the study. Of this sample, 67.75% indicated that they visit the social media platforms of the club under investigation on a daily basis. A cross-sectional design was implemented, with structural equation modelling as analysis used to explore postulated regression paths. Positive predictive relationships between frequent social media use and all consumer outcomes were established. Results are discussed and recommendations are made for future research.

Keywords: Social media, sport consumerism, football, structural equation modelling, football

Introduction

The rise of social media in the professional sports marketing domain can be described as revolutionary (Larkin, Fink, & Trail, 2015; Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly, 2014; Underwood, 2015). Witkemper, Hoon Lim, and Waldburger (2012) observe that social media has essentially altered the manner with which professional sport clubs engage and communicate with fans. It has enhanced the capability of these clubs to converse with a wider audience by digitally accessing new markets in remote areas (Shank & Lyberger, 2014). Stavros et al. (2014: 455) argue that social media platforms offer a “valuable forum for sport organizations to better understand fan motivations and strengthen fan relationships”. Parganas, Anagnostopoulos, and Chadwick (2015: 551) comment: “The emergence of social media has had a profound impact on the way companies (such as sport clubs) communicate and connect with their customers”. Through social media platforms, the reach of a sport club is significantly strengthened as it enables immediate information access and real-time communication channelled through a consumer device closely held by the sports fan (Jeff, Jennifer, Catherine & Elke, 2014; Thompson, Martin, Gee, & Eagleman, 2014).

Business organisations from all over the world have had no choice but to be responsive to the significant impact social media has had on the way customers perceive their brand. Ashley and Tuten (2015) state that this impact has necessitated the development of

formalised social media strategies on the part of businesses who wish to engage effectively with consumers in a contemporary manner. By and large, businesses are forced to formally position their marketing departments to traverse through the added complexity brought about the surge that social media platforms enjoys in the marketing domain (Hudson, Roth, Madden, & Hudson, 2015; Scott, 2015). This has been particularly relevant in the case of professional sport clubs, where social media has infiltrated all aspects of marketing and communications management, through sheer power of numbers and volume traffic (Brown & Billings, 2013; Delia & Armstrong, 2015; Jeff et al., 2014); as illustrated for example by the more than 68 million people that follow (“like”) Manchester United Football Club on the platform *Facebook*, or the Cricket South Africa official *Facebook* page locally which has more than 3.5 million followers (Stander & De Beer, 2016).

Despite the clear influence of social media on the altered way professional sport clubs converse with fans and despite the recognition of importance of formalised social media strategies, the impact of social media engagement in consumer actions has not been robustly evaluated from a scientific perspective (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). Moreover, the effect of social media engagement in the subjective perceptions and experiences of sport fans remain largely unexplored (Brown, Willis, & Havard, 2015; Hudson et al., 2015; Pronschinske & Groza, 2012). This represents a research gap as knowledge about the effect of social media engagement on the part of sport fans will inform the development of targeted and meaningful social media strategies by professional clubs. This study will assess the effect that regular social media engagement has on sport consumer buying actions and perceptions.

Theoretical disposition of social media use in sport fan communities

Hollensen (2015) has attempted to describe the rise of social media in the communication efforts of major organisations as a clear example of relationship marketing. The author argues that the properties of social media, which entails accessing a customer directly, in real time and through a conversational platform, cultivates the relationship the business seeks to establish with that individual as it makes the sharing of information easier. This view is shared by De Vries, Gensler and Leeflang (2012); who have articulated that social media platforms, when managed efficiently, promotes brand equity by creating a sense of “closeness” to the business on the part of the client. This is described by Williams and Chinn (2010: 422) in the realm of defining social media in the context of relationship marketing: “Social media can be defined as the tools, platforms, and applications that enable consumers to connect, communicate, and collaborate with others.

Social media are distinguished from other forms of communication because they support user participation on a massive, collective scale; the contributions are also distributed among the participants to view, share, and improve”. It is this collaborative and engaging nature of social media that speaks volumes to the nature of sport fans and consumers.

Shani (1997: 9) has stated that sport fans usually have “a desire for long term association with a sport team”. Harris and Ogbona (2009) argue that fans form a deeply affinitive and significant emotional connection to the team they support which directly informs the level of their consumption in the commercial properties of the club brand. It is this emotional connection which, according to Hudson et al. (2015), motivates the fan to make a greater investment of both time and money to support the brand’s progress. Through social media, the sport fan feels that he/ she has a voice in the decision making of his/ her favourite sport club, that his/ her opinion is valued and that the communication process is reciprocal (Harris & Ogbona, 2009; Parganas, Anagnostopoulos, & Chadwick, 2015; Stavros, Pope, & Winzar, 2008). This enhances the quality of the relationship a sport team develops with its fans.

A second theoretical perspective for the effectiveness and rise of social media in the sport consumer domain is offered by market segmentation theory; which holds the view that a consumer group of any particular brand, product or service can be differentiated based on certain attributes, cultural, demographical or social characteristics (Bouzdine-Chameeva, Ferrand, Valette-Florence, & Chanavat, 2015; Fillis & Mackay, 2014; Hunt & Arnett, 2004). These differentiable characteristics influence fundamentally the manner with which a consumer interacts and engages with a brand, with homogenous consumer groups likely to share similarity in the manner with regards to such aspects as regularity, frequency and loyalty of their consumer actions (Bouzdine-Chameeva et al., 2015; Wedel & Kamakura, 2012; Venter, Wright, & Dibb, 2015). As far as social media engagement in sport consumerism is concerned, Shank and Lyberger (2014) argue that loyal and ardent fans of a particular team will seek as much interaction and engagement with their team's digital platforms as possible and that engaging, well-designed social media sites will attract large numbers of fans.

According to Lim, Hwang, Kim, and Biocca (2015:158), the following pertains: "A notable phenomenon is the convergence of spectatorship and virtual interactions that occurs when passive behaviour, television viewing, meets an active engaging behaviour, the use of social networking sites". In other words, and in line with market segmentation theory, social media platforms offer the constituency of loyal sport fans so much more than traditional sport marketing platforms, with consistent access to information, a forum to converse directly with their favourite team and other fans and an enjoyable and interactive way to enhance their knowledge of their club (Brown, Willis, & Havard, 2015; Clavio & Frederick, 2014; Hudson et al., 2015; Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015). The business of sport, which has directly been fuelled by high levels of consumer expenditure due to the passion and emotive connection to team of fans, has thus been offered a valuable strategic asset in the form of social media; to enhance and affirm this loyalty on the part of fans (Shank & Lyberger, 2014). From this perspective social media has become a key market segmentation tool.

Despite the theoretical delineation of social media in the context of relationship marketing and market segmentation theory, much work is needed in understanding how social media use by sport fans could practically translate into favourable consumer actions. Moreover, information is required on how regular social media use on the part of fans can be favourable to the strategic goals and growth of a professional sport club. This information will be valuable in understanding how social media platforms can be used to enhance the relationship clubs develop with their fans and can be utilised to segment sport consumer groups as a means to focus marketing on loyal sport fans.

The current study

In the current study, an empirical evaluation was undertaken to gauge how regularity of social media engagement could potentially influence measurable and scientific consumer actions and outcomes by comparing clusters of fans on the basis of relationship marketing and segmentation theory. Three empirical consumer outcomes were evaluated, namely the performance tolerance of fans, stadium match attendance and fan consumer expenditure

Performance tolerance of fans

The first consumer outcome under investigation in this study is performance tolerance. Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa, and Biscaia (2014) define performance tolerance as the level of engagement fans seek with their favourite sport club, during both successful and challenging times (i.e. regardless of whether the team does well on the field or not). These authors argue that fans who have high levels of performance tolerance will display positive consumer behaviours regardless of whether the team wins or loses against its opposition. These fans have a deeply rooted allegiance to the club and feel it their duty to support their

team (Yoshida et al., 2014). Kanosue, Kogiso, Oshimi, and Harada (2015) argue that performance tolerance of fans is a direct reflection of loyalty and as such a critical brand success indicator for a sport club. When fans have high levels of performance tolerance, they will display positive behaviours such as wearing club official clothing and attending special club events regardless of whether the team performs well or not (Doyle, Filo, McDonald, & Funk, 2013; Yoshida et al., 2014; Yoshida & Heere, 2015). Performance tolerance is an important metric for professional sport clubs as it is closely associated with brand following and as a result a significant influencer of sponsors' decision to invest in a club (Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, Ross, & Maroco, 2013). It is also the so called "die-hard" attitude of performance tolerant fans that ensures the brand sustainability of a club has a long term future (Smart, Chen, & Henderson, 2015).

Based on relationship marketing, this paper argues that fans that frequently interact with the social media platforms of a club will experience higher levels of performance tolerance; as their emotive connection to the club will be substantial and their level of brand engagement will be regular. They are thus likely to, based on the closely formed relationship that is possible through social media digital platforms, experience greater team loyalty which should translate into performance tolerance.

Stadium match attendance

A second consumer outcome explored in this study is stadium match attendance. Love, Kavazis, Morse, and Mayer (2013) observe that attendance of sport events at the stadium is in decline globally, with increased entertainment options and variety playing a major role in people's decision to not physically attend a match. Hall (2009) argues that this has put pressure on what was originally a healthy revenue stream to professional sport teams. Stadium match attendance however remains an important commercial activity, directly; as it generates revenue through gate sales, but also indirectly; as it visually illustrates a sport team's support and in many ways reflects the social currency the team enjoys in society (Mullin & Hardy, 2014; Ross, 2006; Samra & Wos, 2014). It is this social currency that gives effect to a club's ability to attract key external stakeholders, such as sponsors and commercial partners; who are interested in brand recognition when they make a decision to get involved with the business activities of the sport club (Baker, McDonald, & Funk, 2016; Samra & Wos, 2014). Based on the premise of market segmentation theory, this paper argues that frequent social media users will be more inclined to frequently attend matches at the stadium. This is because social media use reflects a fan's interest in the club's developments (Shank & Lyberger, 2014). A fan that has great interest in the club and its activities is also likely to more regularly attend matches at the stadium as this is the location where the brand of one's favourite sports team can be most directly observed (Kunkel, Doyle, & Funk, 2014).

Fan consumer expenditure

The final consumer outcome under investigation in this study is that of sport fan expenditure. According to Stander, De Beer, and Stander (2016), fan consumer expenditure describes the monetary investment of fans in all products, services and commercial properties related to a sport club. This may include clothing, memorabilia, novelty items or special services outside of matches; offered by a club. In modern sport consumerism, merchandise and related products have developed into a substantial part of the commercial offerings of major sport clubs from around the world (Ahn, Suh, Lee, & Pedersen, 2012; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2014). Lee, Trail, Lee, and Schoenstedt (2013:40) offer this perspective: "Sales of athletic team merchandise have become a lucrative and synergistic business for sport franchises". PricewaterhouseCoopers (2015) estimated that annual and international revenue generated for sport team merchandise was more than 20 billion US\$ in 2015, with

optimistic growth forecasts set for the future. A professional club that seeks to maintain and increase its market position has no choice but to continually improve its merchandising – and retail offerings (Ahn et al., 2012; Biscaia et al., 2014; Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015). This paper postulates that high social media engagement on the part of sport fans will enhance their intention to purchase merchandise – and special products/ services of their favourite club. This is defended on the basis of relationship marketing; which argues that a consumer with a strong emotional affinity to a particular brand/ service offering will repeatedly seek purchase of that item (Hollensen, 2015; Hudson et al., 2015). It is also proposed in line with market segmentation theory; which states that loyal and ardent consumer segments will be homogenous in the manner with which they seek repeated and sustained buying of the product/ service to which they experience a deep sense of loyalty (Bouzdine-Chameeva et al., 2015; Brown, Willis, & Havard, 2015; Clavio & Frederick, 2014).

Research preamble and hypothesis

Regardless of the rise of social media use and commonality in the domain of sport fan consumerism and – marketing; empirical work is needed regarding specific consumer outcomes that can be attained through frequent engagement of social media platforms by fans.

This study attempts to address that research gap by evaluating whether regularity of social media use will influence the consumer outcomes of performance tolerance, stadium match attendance and total consumer expenditure of sport fans. Based on relationship marketing and market segmentation theory, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: Frequent social media use has a positive predictive relationship to performance loyalty amongst sport fans.

H2: Frequent social media has a positive predictive relationship to stadium match attendance amongst sport fans.

H3: Frequent social media use has a positive predictive relationship to consumer expenditure amongst sport fans.

Methodology

Study sample

This study was conducted as part of a bigger sport consumer research project, conducted in partnership with a major South African professional football club which has been in operation for more than four decades and is widely considered one of the African continent's best supported sport teams. Football also offered a useful context for the study, as it represents the most popular sport from a consumer (fan) perspective, both locally in South Africa and globally (Department of Sport and Recreation, 2014; Giulianotti, 2012; Saayman & Rossouw, 2008). In the project outlined above, 2465 fans participated and gave feedback to the researchers.

A demographic overview of the participating sample is provided in Table 1. Information on the sample gender, race and level of education is included. Several of the participants were also part of the participating club's organised supporters' branch structures, which illustrates that an engaged and active group of sport consumers formed part of the study.

Table 1: Demographics of the study participants (N = 2465)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Valid Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	1965	80.3
	Female	483	19.7
Race	Asian	37	1.5
	African	2347	95.3
	Coloured	55	2.2
	White	21	0.9
	Other	3	0.1
Level of Education	Grade 11 and below	353	14.3
	Grade 12	1061	43.1
	Diploma	556	22.6
	Degree	318	12.9
	Post graduate degree	176	7.1

Note: Where totals do not add up it is due to missing values

Research approach and procedure

A quantitative research design was utilised based on market segmentation; by differentiating the specific consumer outcomes and associating this with the frequency of these clusters' social media engagement. Through a specially designed digital landing platform fans could access the research survey directly by means of a hyperlink directing the participant to the instrument. This hyperlink was made available on the *Facebook* (social media platform) page of the participating club. This ensured that the researchers engaged with a captive research audience. Before fans could respond to the uploaded survey, they were requested to read through and complete a terms and conditions section. This section shared information on the voluntary and confidential nature of the research. Permission to conduct the research was secured, directly from the marketing executive team of the participating football club.

Research instruments

Social media engagement: Frequency of social media engagement was gauged by means of a categorical scale measuring the regularity with which fans make use of the official social media platforms of the professional football team participating in the study. Fans were asked how frequently they visit the social media platforms (*Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram*) of the football club. Possible responses included *never, less than once a week, once or twice a week, between three and six times a week and every day.*

Performance tolerance: Performance tolerance was assessed with the *Fan Engagement Scale* (FES; Yoshida et al., 2014). Three items is used to evaluate the dimension. An example item is "I display the logo of my football team on my clothing even if they do not perform well". Responses are recorded on seven-point Likert type scales ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. In terms of reliability, Yoshida et al. (2014) found internal consistency of 0.86 through Cronbach alpha values. In a local study, Stander and De Beer (2016) established internal reliability of 0.90, also by means of Alpha Cronbach values.

Stadium match attendance: A single categorically ordered item used to assess the extent with which participating fans attend the football club under investigation's matches at the stadium. Six possible categories were provided through a category scale asking how many matches a fan attends per annum, with possible responses including *never, about once a year, about two per year, about three per year, about four per year and five or more per year.*

Fan consumer expenditure: A single categorically ordered item was also used to ascertain the level of fan consumer expenditure amongst the participants in the sample. It was asked of the participating fans to indicate their level of expenditure in all products/ services related to the football club in the study on a five-point category scale, with possible responses varying between *less than R500 per year*, *between R501 and R1000 per year*, *between R1001 and R1999 per year* and *R2000 or more per year*.

Statistical analysis

Mplus 7.4 was used to specify a structural equation model (Muthén & Muthén, 2015). Specifically, Mplus enabled the researchers to create latent variables from the categorically ordered data, i.e. frequency of social media use, the items for performance tolerance, stadium match attendance and fan consumer expenditure. This is an important statistical consideration, as the “distance” between the scale options cannot truly be considered equal as is the supposition with maximum likelihood estimation (Newsom, 2012). Thus, the weighted least squared (mean and variance adjusted) estimation method was applied in order to generate the model – abbreviated WLSMV (Muthén, Du Toit, & Spisic, 1997). WLSMV is also robust against non-normality of data, i.e. potential skewed distributions. The WLSMV estimation method also provides the well-known model fit statistics that are available in maximum likelihood estimation and these were considered for the current study: Comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). For the CFI and TLI values of 0.90 are acceptable, but values of 0.95 and above are considered as superior fit. For the RMSEA values of below 0.08 are considered acceptable (Van de Schoot, Lugtig, & Hox, 2012). To support or reject the hypotheses, a correlation matrix will be investigated to provide preliminary support to the hypotheses. Effect sizes for correlations will be considered medium at 0.30-0.49 and large from 0.50 and above (Cohen, 1988). However, the result of the regression paths will be used to fully support or reject the hypotheses, i.e. the size, direction and significance of the beta coefficients for the research model. Statistical significance is set at the 95% level, i.e. $p < 0.05$.

Results

Descriptive statistics of the observed variables

Table 2 provides an overview of the observable levels of the variables under investigation.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for the variables under investigation

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Social media usage (frequency)	Never	65	2.64
	Less than once a week	112	4.54
	Once or twice per week	325	13.18
	Between three and six times per week	292	11.85
	Everyday	1670	67.75
Stadium match attendance	Never	264	10.71
	One per annum	287	11.64
	Two per annum	275	11.16
	Three per annum	398	16.15
	Four per annum	403	16.35
	Five or more per annum	836	33.91
Fan expenditure categories	R500 or less per annum	697	28.30
	Between R501 and R1000 per annum	936	38.00
	Between R1001 and R1999 per annum	540	21.90
	R2000 or more per annum	291	11.80

Note: Where totals do not add up it is due to missing values

Table 2 indicates that the majority of participants to the study were frequent social media users (67.75% used social media on a daily basis). From the perspective of stadium match attendance, the largest percentage of fans attended five or more matches per annum (33.91%). The expenditure cluster was observed mostly at the cluster between R501 and R1000 per annum (38%).

Correlations between the latent variables

Table 3. Reliabilities and correlation matrix for the latent variables of fan engagement

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Social media use	n/a			
2. Performance tolerance	0.45*	(0.90)		
3. Stadium attendance	0.73**	0.37*	n/a	
4. Fan expenditure	0.82**	0.32*	0.61**	n/a

Notes: All correlations statistically significant $p < 0.001$; * = medium effect; ** = large practical effect

As can be seen from Table 3, only one study variable had items in order to calculate reliability, i.e. performance tolerance. The Cronbach's alpha value for performance tolerance was acceptable and above the cut-off of 0.70. As for the correlations, all values were statistically significant and all variables were positively related with each other with at least medium effect size, given preliminary support to all of the hypotheses. Specifically, frequent social media use was positively correlated with performance tolerance ($r = 0.45$; medium effect), stadium attendance ($r = 0.73$; large effect), and fan expenditure ($r = 0.82$; large effect).

Model fit and regression results

Results of the WLSMV estimation showed that the model was a superior fit to the data (CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.06). Interpretation of the regression results therefore continued.

Table 4 and Figure 1 presents the results of the structural equation modelling.

Table 4. Regression paths of the structural model

Regression relationships	Standardised Estimate	Standard Error	p	R^2
Social media use → Performance tolerance	0.45	0.03	0.001	20%
Social media use → Stadium attendance	0.73	0.03	0.001	53%
Social media use → Fan expenditure	0.84	0.02	0.001	70%

Notes: All p 's < 0.001 ; R^2 = explained variance in outcome by model predictors

As can be seen from Table 4 all of the regressions were significant and positive. Specifically, the relationship from social media use to performance tolerance was supported (H1; $\beta = 0.45$), to stadium attendance (H2; $\beta = 0.73$), and to fan expenditure (H3; $\beta = 0.84$). Furthermore, the model explained a significant amount of variance in all of the outcome variables: performance tolerance (20%; medium effect), stadium attendance (53%; large effect) and fan expenditure (70%; large effect).

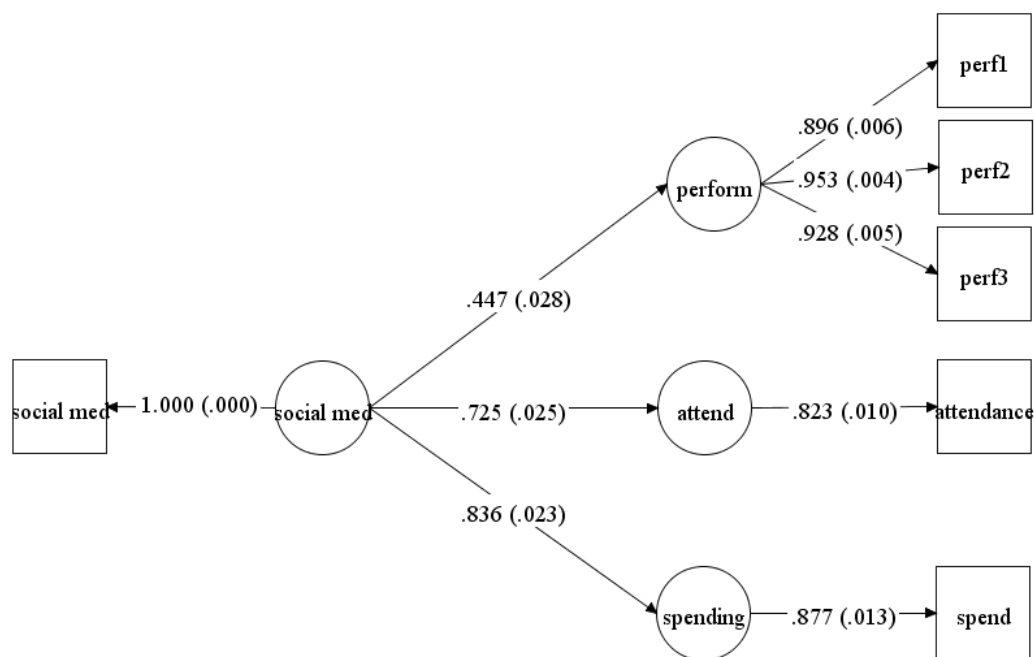


Figure 1. The full structural equation model with standardised estimates

Discussion

The objective of this study was to evaluate whether regularity of social media usage could influence particular consumer outcomes within the domain of sport consumerism; and more specifically in the realm of a sample of South African football supporters. This was approached from the perspective of relationship marketing, which has been prevalent in the rise of social media use in sports marketing (Hollensen, 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010). It was also postulated in relation to market segmentation theory; which holds that consumers who share preferences in their product/ service engagement experiences will have the same characteristics insofar their absorption with a brand is concerned (Bouzdine-Chameeva et al., 2015; Shank & Lyberger, 2014; Wedel & Kamakura, 2012). The research was done in response to the gap insofar clear consumer outcomes associated with social media use applies. Despite the surging rise of social media use in marketing (and specifically in sports marketing) little empirical work has explored social media dynamics as it predicts consumer patterns (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

Results were explored based on three consumer outcomes. Firstly, performance tolerance of fans as it is predicted by social media use was evaluated, with a positive regression path being revealed and medium variance in this relationship declared. This suggests that frequent social media use can be leveraged by the marketing teams of professional sport clubs to enhance loyalty of fans, as performance tolerance is a direct component of brand equity (Kanosue et al., 2015). Thus, by ensuring that social media platforms are engaging and attractive to fans (as to direct traffic and enhance regularity of use), clubs can inspire sustainability of loyalty and foster long term relationships with fans. A second consumer outcome that was revealed as positively related to frequent social media use was stadium match attendance. With numbers of physical match attendance in decline globally, authors are in pursuit of solutions that could enhance the number of sport fans attending matches at the team's home venue (Hall, 2009; Love et al., 2013). Results revealed a positive predictive relationship of large effect, indicating that social media provides a useful consumer platform to enhance the willingness of fans to invest the time and effort required to attend a match at

the stadium. Thirdly, results suggested that frequent social media use is associated with fan expenditure; which is indicative of a direct commercial investment into the properties of a football club. With a positive practical relationship of large effect, results revealed that social media could potentially be a useful asset to drive larger revenues collected and bolster the commercial properties of the club. This is consistent with the notion of Witkemper et al. (2012), who argue that social media is not only a contemporary societal exchange tool but a powerful marketing asset.

The research provides empirical evidence that regular social media use could directly influence consumer behaviours, purchasing intentions and buying actions. It puts forward an important consideration, namely for a review of sophisticated marketing approaches that can enhance the consumer engagement experience. This should translate into positive actions that can strengthen the brand of a sport team and expand its revenue. This, when done sustainably, could also create wider economic opportunities through different sectors of the sport industry.

Recommendations, limitations, contribution and conclusion

Recommendations for future research and limitations

Future research should be directed at evaluating not only frequency of social media engagement but also manner and method of such engagement. It is important to scrutinize which properties of social media and digital platforms fans find most engaging, as to target those properties and provide for a more enduring fan experience. Also, at a business policy level, insight into nuances of fan social media engagement can inform more directed business marketing strategies, providing for a greater return on investment. It is also important to evaluate more broadly the consumer outcomes of frequent social media use. In this study, performance tolerance, stadium match attendance and merchandise expenditure were evaluated. However, there is also other indicators of revenue growth that can be explored in an effort to amplify the reach of frequent social media use of fans. This includes but is not limited to management cooperation, prosocial behavior and positive fan ambassador actions of fans. Subsequent research should explore these outcomes. Finally, future research should also be conducted in consumer domains wider than only the sport industry. Social media is relevant to any product/ service that relies on relationship marketing and marketing segmentation, and future research in other domains will benefit the literature insofar this important contemporary trend in client conversation is concerned.

The biggest limitation of the research is its cross-sectional nature; which does put forward the risk of common method bias. A longitudinal design, evaluating changes in social media engagement over time, will greatly benefit the literature. It will also shed more light on the social media engagement behaviors of fans over time as a means of providing intelligence on strategic areas clubs can focus on to stimulate consumer buying actions. The study was also conducted in a very contextually specific domain, namely South African professional football, in a particular sector, sport, which in itself is limiting. Further research should be broader as to validate the findings of this study. Finally, the three social media platforms probed in this study were *Facebook*, *Instagram* and *Twitter*. With the rapid advancement of technology, future studies should also evaluate other digital conversation platforms.

Conclusion

The study made an important contribution to the literature through empirical assessment of social media use frequency as it relates to consumer outcomes. It elaborates on early suggestions that social media marketing is particularly relevant in the sports industry, where conversation on a professional team is rapid and in real time (Stavros et al., 2014;

Underwood, 2015). Drawing from the relationship marketing – and market segmentation theories, the study provides a useful platform for future research in this evolving and expanding contemporary marketing direction.

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