Assessment of the Uses of Social Media by Select Groups During The 2018 Fifa World Cup Competition in Russia

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to find out how FIFA, football teams, and fans clubs all used social media in the coverage of Russia 2018 World cup. Anchored in the Uses and Gratifications and Technological Determinism theories, the study took a quantitative approach primarily with some qualitative back up for in-depth analysis. Content analysis was adopted to analyse tweets of the aforementioned parties, while a code sheet was developed by adapting Hambrick, Simmons, Green and Greenwell classifications. The study revealed that FIFA used social media mainly for promotional purposes, while football teams used same primarily for interacting with their fans. Football fans used social media primarily for interacting with other fans. Facebook was the most used social media platform ahead of Twitter and Instagram. It was recommended that the social media platforms introduce more languages to deepen their penetration.

***Keywords**: Social media, Traditional media, World Cup, Football, Russia 2018*

Introduction

Publicity is the lifeblood of any sporting tournament, championship or event; hence, the traditional media (TV, radio, newspapers, magazines) are always given primal considerations in the planning and execution of such events by the event organisers (Nicholson, Kerr,& Sherwood, 2015).Sports generally has been popular with human kind and, as a result, the traditional media have played critical roles in propagating it to its teeming audience over the years.The press (newspapers mainly) was the first medium to publish stories about sporting events to their audience. They published upcoming events and results of past events (Beck & Bosshart, 2003).According to Beck and Bosshart (2003, p.3) “sports

refer to a playful self development, self actualisation, and competitive use of physical and mental skills".

The advent of radio supplanted the newspaper as the principal means of covering sporting events. Radio had the advantage of live reporting which the newspaper lacked. Radio held sway in sports reportage because of its inherent characteristics of immediacy, ease of use, reach, diffusion rate and breaking of illiteracy barrier. The radio itself was soon overtaken with the invention of television and its obvious advantages over radio. The combination of audio and video brought sporting events right to the living rooms of spectators in far-flung places all over the world. And in the words of Beck and Bosshart (2003, p.10) "television has clearly become the leading medium in the context of sports".

Technological advancement which gave birth to the Internet and its subsidiaries like social media has added another player to the sporting event coverage arena. Social media is "a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0, which allows the creation of user generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p.61).Even though social media has not supplanted television in sporting events coverage as yet, it brings different dimensions to the game (McDaniel & Sullivan, 1998).Verster (2010) opines that social media is fast becoming the default internet mode for communicating, collaborating and interacting. Several studies (Fuller & Atkin, 2017; Ugande & Kusugh, 2017; Akinlade, 2014) have established that social media has gained traction and is highly integrated into the society's fabric.At inception, professional journalists view social media as an experimental, social platform, but it metamorphosed into a bonafide source without which journalists cannot do their work effectively (Pexton, 2011). It is against this background of social media's importance that this study examined the uses of social media by different parties at the FIFA Russia 2018 world cup.

Statement of the Problem

The mass media have helped to publicise and hype sporting events, while also improving their ratings at the same time. The entrance and growing influence of social media has changed the game entirely. As the most popular social media platform, Facebook has over 2.41 billion monthly active users globally as at the second quarter of 2019. To put it in perspective, if Facebook were a country it would be the most populated ahead of China and India respectively. Another popular social media platform, Twitter, has about 330 million monthly active users as at the first quarter of 2019 (Statista.com).

Although there is a growing body of studies on the utilisation of social media by sporting event organisers, sport teams, sport journalists, advertisers/sponsors and sport fans, there is little done as yet on the FIFA Russia 2018 football world cup. As a result, this study explored the interrelationship between the Russia 2018 world cup coverage and the uses of social media. The study attempts to contribute to knowledge on the interrelationship between social media and sports coverage.

Aim and Objectives of the study

The primary aim of this research is to determine how social media was utilised by FIFA, football teams and fans during Russia 2018 football world cup. In addition, the research sought to determine the specific social media platforms adopted by the aforementioned parties, and how frequently they were used.

The objectives of the study were to determine:

1. What social media FIFA utilised in Russia 2018 World Cup
2. What social media platforms were used by football teams in Russia 2018World Cup.
3. Which social media platforms football fans used in Russia 2018World Cup.
4. How FIFA utilised social media in Russia 2018World Cup.

5. What football teams used social media during Russia 2018World Cup.
6. How football fans made use of social media during Russia 2018World Cup.

Consequently, the research questions raised from the objectives of the study are:

1. What social media did FIFA utilise during Russia 2018 World Cup?
2. What social media did football teams use during Russia 2018 World Cup?
3. Which social media platforms did football fans use during Russia 2018 World Cup?
4. How did FIFA use social media during Russia 2018 World Cup?
5. How did football teams use social media during Russia 2018World Cup?
6. In what ways did football fans use social media during the Russia 2018 World Cup?

Conceptual Review and Historical Background

Social media could be defined as "online communications that use special techniques that involve participation, conversation, sharing, collaboration, and linkage" (Dominick, 2011, p.25). The Associated Press (AP) stylebook (2013, p.253) defines social media as "online tools that people use to connect with one another including social networks." Thornley (2008, p.1) defines social media as "online communication in which individual shift fluidly and flexibly between the role of audience and author. To do this, they use special software that enables anyone without knowledge of coding to post comment, or share mash up content and to form communities around shared interests." Simply put, social media is an umbrella term used to describe the various types of internet based applications that lend themselves to content creation, sharing, exchange, collaboration and social networking within a website.

According to Dominick (2011), the origin of social media is traceable to the mid-1990s when creation of personal web pages gained traction. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) highlighted the various forms of social media as collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), blogs and micro blogs (e.g. Twitter), social networking sites (Facebook, MySpace), content communities (YouTube, Picasso), and virtual game worlds (world of war craft).The AP stylebook (2013) has a slightly different categorisation of social media as: blogs, micro blogging sites, social networking sites, wikis, content sharing sites, online forums, check-in services and all sorts of other sites.Irrespective of the categorisations, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Vine, YouTube, and WhatsApp have really become quite popular especially among the youth who utilise them to socialise, network, and for entertainment purpose, amongst other uses(Pew Internet & American life Project survey, 2013; Ezumah, 2013; Kwon, Daihwan, Geringer & Lim, 2013).The first major social media platform was MySpace created in 2003 and then followed by Facebook in 2004(Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Facebook has since overtaken MySpace and is indeed now the most popular social media platform in the world with about 2.41 billion monthly active users as at the second quarter of 2019 according to Statista.com.

Football (not to be confused with American football) is the most popular sport in the world (Alegi, Weil, Joy, Giulianotti, & Rollin, 2019). It has its origins in England and it is a multi-billion-dollar industry presently. The organisation that is in charge of running football globally is known as FIFA (Federation Internationale de Football Association) and it was established in 1904. Such is the popularity of the game that FIFA can boast of 211 nation members compared to the United Nations 193 nation members. FIFA is the organiser of the now iconic football world cup which takes place in different countries every four years. The first FIFA world cup was held in Uruguay in 1930 and was won by the host nation. The competition was hosted four years later by Italy which also won it, and the final was broadcast on radio for the first time ever (Fifa.com).

Although the FIFA world cup was broadcast on TV for the first time in Switzerland in 1954, it was the 1966 edition hosted by England that revolutionised football coverage on TV globally.

As Chisari (2006, p.48) noted:

> Live transmission in Europe and overseas, new technical devices such as the slow motion machine, huge economic and human investments, large audience figures globally, all these things are nowadays considered to be normal for a TV broadcast of a major football event, but emerged for the first time during the 1966 world cup in England. The TV broadcasting of this world cup can be considered to be the launch pad for the future development of the televised football as well as for the globalisation of soccer through television.

Today, FIFA world cup is the second most watched sporting event just behind the Olympics. Over a billion people tuned in from every country and territory to watch the 2010 and 2014 world cups in South Africa and Brazil respectively (Bada, 2018).

Review of Related Empirical Studies

Froget, Abbas and Yasha (2013) in their study outlined eight motives for which Facebook users utilise social media. They are: to meet people, entertainment, maintenance of relationship, sharing of media products, social events, products enquiry, discussion and information seeking. They found that entertainment and discussion purposes were the top two motives for Facebook users. Similarly, Gibbs, Reilly and Brunette (2014) categorised the gratification sought by Twitter sport fans into four: interaction, promotion, live update and news. Fuller and Atkin (2017) opined that information seeking and entertainment purposes were the two uses that users utilised smart phones apps for.

Pempek, Yermolayeva and Calvert (2009) concluded that the youth prefer new media like social networking sites to traditional mass media that does not allow any direct interaction with their peers.

Ugande and Kusugh (2017), Abubakar (2011), Damasus and Amodu (2014), and Ezumah (2013) all confirmed that Facebook is the most widely used social media platform. In their own investigation into how Twitter has changed the nature of sport media relations, Gibbs and Haynes (2013, p.1) averred that Twitter "has flattened the sport hierarchy". More significantly, Twitter has overturned sports journalists' monopoly of information gathering and dissemination thereby threatening the gate keeping function of the traditional mass media (Shultz & Sheffer, 2010). Pegoraro (2014, p.1) affirmed the conclusion reached by Gibbs and Haynes (2013) by positing that Twitter has "disrupted the linear framework of sports consumption offered by traditional media to a many-to-many possibilities of the internet". In other words, sport fans do not have to rely solely on the traditional journalists for information about their clubs, teams, players, etc. Thanks to Twitter they can reach out directly to the club/team/players and vice versa.

How sporting events organisers utilise Twitter was the focus of study of Hambrick (2012). It outlined how a sporting event organiser spread information on Twitter by adopting influential tweeters who used their large following to quickly diffuse the information. The study submitted that Twitter is a veritable tool that can be leveraged by organisers to promote their events/products. Ozsoy (2011) focused on how fans utilised Facebook to follow and support their favourite sports teams/players. He found that most of the fans were young males who followed the official Facebook page of their sport team to get information and update about the team. The focus of Yuan and Shuhua's (2015) study is how NBA clubs utilised Twitter to build relationship with their teeming fans. Clubs did this by regularly sharing information on players, games, events and also promoting clubs' products and merchandise. Hambrick, Simmon, Greenhalgh and Greenwell (2010) did a content analysis of an athlete's tweets which they categorised into six categories: information sharing, content, interactivity, diversion, promotional and fan ship. They found that most of the tweets fell under the diversionary category as they were not sport related. From the foregoing, there is a plethora of studies on social media usage by

sport fans, organisers, players, clubs but little or none has been undertaken for the Russia 2018 World cup. Hence, this paper explored the various ways that FIFA, football teams, and fans utilisedsocial media to do their jobs during the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

Theoretical Framework

This study is undergirded principally by the Uses and Gratifications theory and to a lesser extent the technological determinism theory. The uses and gratification theory was propounded by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) and its main thesis is that people seek and select the media and the content they consume based on their needs. It is an audience-centred theory that centres on what people do with media rather than what the media do to people. The theory debunks the assumption of the magic bullet theory that the audience is passive and is instinctively influenced by media messages. Rather it sees the people as active seekers of specific media content which they consume to gratify a need. This theory is applicable to this study because it showed how social media users utilise it to gratify different needs and purposes as regards coverage and participation in Russia 2018 world cup.

The Technological Determinism theory was coined by Thorstein Veblen and its main thesis is that technology is the major driver of culture and social structure. It states that technological inventions shape the socio-cultural milieu of society and they are the principal motor of social, cultural, political change. This theory is relevant to this study as we attempted to explore how the advent of social media has changed the way sport fans get information about their teams, and how it has changed the coverage of sport generally.

Method of study

The research method adopted for the study is content analysis. It was adopted as it is the most appropriate to examine the manifest content of social media accounts belonging to FIFA, football teams,

and football fans (Ohaja, 2003). In addition to the quantitative analysis, the social media contents were subjected to a qualitative analysis also to add depth and put the findings in proper perspective. The social media accounts were subjected to qualitative analysis in order to glean trends, patterns and scenarios that may not be captured in a quantitative analysis.

The Twitter accounts of FIFA, the 32 teams that qualified for Russia 2018, and football fan clubs form the universe of study. Utilising a combination of stratified random sampling and purposive sampling methods, official 'tweets' of FIFA, six football teams (one from each continent) and their corresponding fan clubs formed the units of analysis.

A code sheet was developed by adapting Hambrick, Simmons, Green and Greenwell (2010) classification of tweets into six categories:

1. Interactivity: This refers to conversations, responses, exchanges between an organisation, advertiser, fan, team and another party on football or non-football matters.
2. Fan ship: This refers to tweets/posts that express support for a particular team/player/manager. Tweets that get into arguments with rival fans will be included in this category even though they are interactive in nature.
3. Content: Tweets/posts that include links to pictures, videos, memes and other websites will be categorised under content.
4. Promotional: Refers to publicity regarding products, competition, matches, players, sponsorship deals, services carried out via tweets/Facebook posts.
5. Diversion: Information provided by players, organisers, advertisers, etc. that have nothing to do with sport will be categorised under diversion. They may be talk about family, weather, religion, etc. that creates a sort of diversion from the sport.
6. Information sharing: Sport related information shared by organisers, teams, players, journalists about things like

players' injury updates, training sessions schedules, press conferences, results of matches, venues of matches, etc. will be categorised under information sharing.

@FIFAworldcup

The official FIFA Twitter account for Russia 2018 World Cup had about 20,000 tweets as at the end of the competition on July 15th 2018. Utilising an online software (ExportTweet), 3200 tweets were downloaded out of which 60 tweets were randomly sampled.

Football teams

The official Twitter accounts of the Nigerian (@NGSupereagles), Croatian(@HNS_CFF), Australian (@Socceroos), Japanese (@jfa_en), Mexican (@miseleccionmx), and Argentine(@Argentina) teams had a combined total of 30,443 tweets. Using an online software, 50 tweets per country were randomly chosen to make a total of 300 tweets.

Football fans

The official Twitter football fans pages of the six aforementioned football teams were also selected. Fifty tweets per country were randomly selected for analysis, amounting to 300 tweets in total.

In effect, the total number of tweets selected as sample is 660 across board.

To ensure intercoder reliability, two independent coders were employed to code the tweets. Wimmer and Dominick (2011, p.171) define intercoder reliability as "the levels of agreement among independent coders who code the same contents using the same coding instruments".

Using Holsti's formula: $r: \frac{2M}{N1+N2}$

M: The number of coding decisions agreed on by both coders

N1: The number of coding decisions by the first coder

N2: The number of coding decisions by the second coder

Therefore, r: $\frac{2\ (598):\quad 1196:\ 0.90}{660\ +660:\quad 1320}$

The result of 0.90 is quite high enough and is therefore reliable.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data gathered were presented and analysed in numerals and simple percentages in accordance with the study's research questions.

Research Question 1: What social media did FIFA utilise during Russia 2018 World Cup?

The official organisers of the football world cup, FIFA, made their presence felt on the digital space by opening and running accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. FIFA adopted the same account name @Fifaworldcup across the three social media platforms. FIFA Facebook account had the largest followers of 44million, followed by Instagram's 14.5 million followers and then Twitter's 7.5million followers.

Unsurprisingly, Facebook was the most used social media by FIFA with over 200,000 posts during the World Cup. Surprisingly, even though FIFA's Instagram account (14.5million followers) had 7 million followers more than its Twitter's account (7.5million followers), Twitter was actually utilised more with over 20,000 tweets compared to Instagram's 7,653 posts.

The main finding here is that Facebook was the most used social media platform by FIFA during the Russia 2018 World Cup, followed by Twitter and Instagram respectively. This finding corroborates those of Ugande and Kusugh (2017), Abubakar (2011),

Ezumah (2013), and Damasus and Amodu (2014) who all found Facebook to be the most widely used social media platform.

Research Question 2: What social media did football teams use during Russia 2018 World Cup?

As if taking a cue from FIFA, all the six chosen teams created and ran social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram respectively. The combination of the sampled countries (i.e. Nigeria, Croatia, Australia, Japan, Mexico and Argentina) Facebook's posts amounted to 44,283 posts. Their total tweets on Twitter amounted to about 30,443 tweets, while their combined Instagram messages were about 18,049. The main finding here is that Facebook was the most used social media platform by football teams during Russia 2018 world cup, followed closely by Twitter and then Instagram.

Research Question 3: What social media did football fans use during Russia 2018 World Cup?

The fans of the six aforementioned countries on Facebook amounted to 16.7 million fans with a total of 15.1 million 'LIKEs'. Their numbers on Twitter was about 10.7 million with tweets running close to 15.2million. The fans numbers on Instagram dwindled on Instagram with a combined total of just over 8.07 million fans posting a total of 6.2 million messages.

The main finding here is that Twitter was the most active social media platform for football fans during Russia 2018 World Cup. It was closely followed by Facebook and then Instagram. This finding mirrors that of Hambrick (2012) which found that Twitter is a veritable social media platform that can be used to promote goods or services.

Research Question 4: How did FIFA use Social media during Russia 2018 World Cup?

The majority of FIFA's tweets, 27 (45%), were promotional in nature, while content sharing tweets 13 (21.6%) were the second

most used. About 20% (12) of FIFA's tweets fell under the information category, closely followed by 13.3% (8) of interactive tweets. FIFA did not engage in diversionary or fan ship tweets. This is understandable as the organising body is expected to maintain their neutrality.

A closer look at FIFA's tweets showed that prior to the June 14th 2018 World Cup commencement date, most of the tweets were mainly for publicity of the then impending world cup. FIFA tweeted about the dates and venues of matches, participating cities in Russia, and about the history and culture of the host country. During the competition proper, FIFA tailored its tweets/posts towards live updates of matches, results, background statistics, past records between rival teams, and publicising upcoming matches. The main finding for this research question is that social media is a veritable promotional tool. This is in tandem with Hambrick's (2012) finding which affirmed the importance of social media platforms for promotional purposes.

Research Question 5: How did football teams use social mediaduring Russia 2018 World Cup?

The football teams in Russia 2018 used social media mainly to interact with their fans/supporters (102 tweets representing 34%), share information about team, players, games (81 tweets, 27%), and also share contents like video highlights, pictures, 74tweets (24.8%) with fans. Only 20 tweets (6.7%) out of the 300 were used for promotion purposes, while 12(4.6%) and 11(3.6%) of the tweets fell into the diversion and fanship categories respectively.

A closer look at the teams' tweets showed that they generally used social media for the same purposes of engaging, interacting and sharing contents with their fans. They used the medium to appeal to fans to support the team during matches, answer some fans' questions bordering on the preparation of the team for upcoming matches, and share behind-the-scenes celebratory videos of players in the locker room after a victorious match.

The Nigerian team Twitter handle @NGSuperEagles for example tweeted about team news, training schedules, interviews with players and technical staff, player's injury updates, team selection list, etc. Star players are often selected to do video clips asking for fans support before upcoming games. Such videos are then uploaded on Facebook/Twitter where they typically get several thousands of 'Likes' or 'Retweets' depending on how popular the star player is. The main finding here is that teams use social media to engage and interact with their fans, which tallies with the findings of Yuan and Shuhua (2015) that NBA clubs used social media to build relationships with their fans.

Research Question 6: In what ways did football fans use social media during Russia 2018 world Cup?

There were about 138 tweets (46%) which fell under the interactivity category, while content sharing category came second with 84 tweets (28%). Fanship category had 48tweets (16%) while information sharing and promotion had 12 and 18 representing 6% and 4% respectively.The main finding here is that fans used social media primarily to interact with other fans, players, managers, journalists, pundits and even rival fans.A closer look at the tweets shows that fans actively participated in the FIFA world cup in Russia by rooting for their various national teams and engaging in sometimes fierce exchanges on debatable referee calls and team/players' performance.

Fans were also major content providers through the plethora of memes and videos they posted online. These memes were generally humorous in nature and were used to mock opposing team players, managers, referees, or sometimes even the event organisers---FIFA.Long before the world cup began, football fans all over the world were tweeting and posting messages on social media talking about the different teams and their chances of doing well in Russia 2018.In an online poll organised by Sky Sport, the Nigerian Super Eagles kit was voted as the best of the 32 participating teams by social media users globally.Fans also used social media to celebrate

important victories by tweeting congratulatory texts and making jubilant fans videos. The English fans were adjudged to have "won the social media world cup" when their fans flooded the social media in the aftermath of their team's victory over Sweden. Their hash tag #It'sComingHome (referring to the World cup) trended on Twitter for days!

On the flip side, disappointed fans also tend to use social media to attack their own players who they feel underperformed. For example, quite a number of Nigerian fans on Twitter berated their team's striker, Odion Ighalo for missing a couple of decent chances which later proved costly. Brazilian star striker, Neymar, was also a regular target of critics who made memes ridiculing his diving tactics.

Discussion

From the findings gleaned from analysing the social media contents of FIFA's, participating teams' and fans' accounts, it is obvious that social media is now an important part of football coverage even though the big screen is still the major source of broadcasting and watching the games. Social media proved to be an important tool for promotion of goods and services as exemplified by its usage by FIFA at Russia 2018 (about 45% of tweets were promotional).

FIFA recognising the fact that many of the youthful populace which make up their target audience are on social media took to same to propagate and promote the World cup to them effectively. This also explains the high level of video contents (21.6%) which FIFA uploaded to whet the appetite of their target audience. Social media also proved to be a reliable source of information as regards the schedule of the matches, venues, match results and the likes, which FIFA regularly posted online. The main change brought about by FIFA's adoption of social media is perhaps the window of interaction that the platform provides for FIFA to interact directly with some of their target audience. Hitherto, fans did not have any

realistic means of interacting with the football organising organisation.

FIFA and its sponsors' adoption of social media to market their products successfully confirms Vester's (2010) submission that social media is fast becoming the default internet mode of interacting and communication. It also tallies with the findings of Hambrick (2012) which averred that Twitter is a veritable tool that can be leveraged by organisers to promote their events/products. The various teams in Russia 2018 also used social media mainly not for promotional purposes like FIFA, but for interacting with their fans directly. This is also an important advantage which social media brings to the game. The teams did not have to rely on the traditional media to get out their messages to their fans anymore. This in effect breaks the traditional media monopoly of information dissemination. Thistallies with the finding of Pegoraro (2014, p.1) that social media has 'disrupted the linear framework of sport consumption to many-to-many possibilities of the internet'.

The media outlets adoption and utilisation of social media is an evidence of the popularity of social media among sport fans. Rather than see the social media as a rival the media practitioners have cop-opted it as a tool to ply their trade. Journalists used social media primarily to provide background information and behind the scenes information. Social media also afford the journalists themselves opportunity to field questions from fans reacting to their stories. This avenue to interact is brought about by the invention of social media, and therefore supports the thesis of the technological determinism theory that technology shapes the society.

The fans massive usage of social media supports the uses and gratifications theory that states that people adopt specific media to gratify their needs. Most of the fans used social media primarily to interact with other fans, upload and download contents, share and get information, and also to express their fan ship for their national teams.

Conclusion

The paper set out to evaluate the uses of social media in Russia 2018 world cup by the event organisers, participating teams, and football fans. By content analysing the social media accounts of the aforementioned parties, we were able to establish that social media played a prominent role in Russia 2018 world cup. The event organisers FIFA, used the social media mainly to publicise the event, the host cities, and the country where it was being held. During the competition proper, FIFA used social media to engage football fans by providing live updates of games and organising competitions where fans get to win prizes. The advertisers and sponsors in conjunction with FIFA also used social media to organise competitions for fans to predict outcome of matches. Fans were also encouraged to vote for "The man of the match" in every game played. The participating teams all used their social media to interact with their fans and ask for their support in all their matches. They use the same medium to keep their fans updated about team news. Such tweets are usually retweeted by thousands of fans who follow such teams' accounts. The fans were the main users of social media in Russia 2018 world cup. They tweeted and posted Facebook messages in support of their various teams, created humorous memes, argued over team/players performances and created numerous unofficial hash tags during and after games. Social media has democratised sport coverage and participation; fans are now literally part and parcel of sporting events. True to technological determinism theory's tenet, social media has revolutionised the sport media landscape.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

a. Facebook should add more languages to its platform to deepen its penetration especially in developing countries.

b. Sport organisations should increase their social media presence in order to reach their youthful target audience.

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