A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF FANS' TWEETS: THE CASE OF FOREIGN CRICKETERS IN PAKISTAN SUPER LEAGUE

UN ANÁLISIS DE CONTENIDO DE LOS TWEETS DE LOS FANÁTICOS: EL CASO DE LOS JUGADORES DE CRÍQUET EXTRANJEROS EN PSL

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Abstract: Researchers have agreed upon the importance of social media in regard to establishing athlete brands. In this sense, Twitter is a very important example of social media which represents fans' perspectives about their favorite (or least favorite) athletes and provides solid fan feedback, which can be helpful in the context of image branding for an athlete. The current study has employed a qualitative content analysis of Twitter users during Pakistan Super League (PSL). The tweets were collected during the 2017 edition of PSL. Data containing #HBLPSL and #PSL was collected and tweets with names of foreign athletes were selected from more than 38,000 tweets. Findings from this study suggested that fans' tweets about athletes could be separated into two major categories: 1) fan related motives and 2) athlete' related motives. Fan related motives included sharing: information, visuals, predictions and feedback regarding certain athletes. Athlete' related motives included: athlete performance, style of celebration and athlete comments. Results of the current study have highlighted the motives that persuaded fans to tweet about a certain athlete during the PSL.

Key Words: Twitter; athlete brand; cricket; social media; sport marketing

Resumen: Los investigadores han estado de acuerdo en la importancia de las redes sociales en la búsqueda de establecer marcas de atletas. En este sentido, Twitter es un tipo muy importante de medios de comunicación social que representa las perspectivas de los aficionados sobre sus atletas favoritos (o no) y proporciona información sólida de los aficionados, que puede ser útil en el contexto de la imagen de marca para un atleta. El presente estudio utiliza un análisis cualitativo del contenido de los usuarios de Twitter durante el PSL. Las colecciones de tweets comenzaron el primer día del PSL 2017 (9 de febrero de 2017) y concluyeron el último día del estudio (5 de marzo de 2017). Se recopilaron datos que contenían #HBLPSL y #PSL y se seleccionaron tweets con nombres de atletas extranjeros de entre más de 38. 000 tweets. Los resultados de este estudio sugirieron que los tweets de los aficionados sobre los atletas, podrían separarse en dos categorías principales: 1) motivos relacionados con los aficionados, y 2) motivos relacionados con los atletas. Los motivos relacionados con los aficionados eran compartir información, imágenes, predicciones y comentarios sobre ciertos atletas. Los motivos relacionados con los atletas fueron el rendimiento de los atletas, el estilo de celebración de los atletas y los comentarios de los atletas. Los resultados del estudio actual han resaltado los motivos que persuadieron a los aficionados a utilizer twittear sobre un determinado atleta durante la PSL.

Palabras clave: Twitter; marca de atleta; cricket; medios sociales; marketing deportivo

Introduction

Cricket has changed since the introduction of the 20-over format (T20) (Cannonier, Panda, & Sarangi, 2015). The dull, long matches have been converted into short, fast and colourful entertainment. Both the audience and the players have enjoyed this change, as the prospect of cricket leagues has emerged. Cricket has traditionally only been played between countries, (Malcolm, 2001), which meant that cricketers would only represent their respective countries, which greatly reduced their chances at global stardom, considering that fans of rival countries would automatically dislike them.(Gupta, 2005).

However, the league format provides cricketers a much greater opportunity to establish themselves as global brands, as the national pride factor shrinks.

Cricket leagues established a new era in various countries, as foreigner cricketers were invited to represent local teams. This was the first-time cricket fans could understand and experience the outlook of football fans, with examples like Englishman Kevin Paterson playing for local Pakistani team Quetta in PSL or West Indian Chris Gayle representing Australian Melbourne in Big Bash League. This development has provided so many possibilities that some cricketers have taken early retirements from international cricket and dedicated themselves entirely to league cricket in various countries.

Although league cricket is a new concept in this sport, many cricketers have already established a positive image in the new countries where they play. Darren Bravo in India, and Darren Sammy in Pakistan, are the most prominent examples of this trend (Radley, 2017). Both of them have become popular –on and off the field— and have used their celebrity status to endorse brands in countries where they were dismissed as foreign players only a few years back. However, now they are top athlete brands in these countries.

Athlete branding is not a very old topic in academia. However, recent studies have focused on the importance and process of athlete branding and have found various important factors that play a significant role in the creation of branded athletes (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2013; Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014; Hasaan, Kerem, Biscaia, & Agyemang, 2016). Social media is one of these factors.

Researchers have agreed upon the importance of social media in regard to establishing athlete brands. Among various social media types, Twitter has been recognised, by marketing and advertising managers, as a means to reach the consumer in a "live" environment (Parganas, Anagnostopoulos, & Chadwick, 2015). Thus, Twitter is an essential medium that represents fans' thinking about their favorite and least favorite athletes and provides solid feedback which can help in build an athlete's image (i.e., athlete brand).

Despite the importance of social media in the creation of an athlete brand, no study is yet available (to the best of the author's knowledge) which analyses Twitter in the context of athlete branding in cricket. In addition, there is an overall dearth of studies that address athlete branding in cricket (for both local and foreign cricketers), PSL from the prospect of fan's social media participation and athlete branding among Pakistani fans. Therefore, this study tries to examine tweets about foreign athletes during PSL. Also this study is unique in its context, as it discusses foreign athlete branding. In doing so, this paper analyses Pakistani fans' tweets regarding foreign cricketers to understand the concept of foreign athlete branding. Also, the current study aims to provide a better understanding of the motives that persuade fans to tweet about their favorite athletes.

Literature review

Social media and Twitter

Social media provides a live experience for fans to discuss sports among themselves (Harrington, Highfield, & Bruns, 2013). The number of social media users is predicted to grow to 2.5 billion by 2018 (Parganas et al., 2015). The proliferation of social media has significantly affected the way people communicate, share information and make decisions (Qualman, 2009). The online interactive environment (having a conversation on Facebook, making a statement on Twitter, or watching a video on YouTube) has become the most prominent place for consumers (i.e., fans) (Keller, 2009; Parganas et al., 2015). In this vein, studies have found that Twitter has positive effects on brands when it is used to promote and advertise (Erdogmus & Çiçek, 2012; Henderson & Bowley, 2010; Relling, Schnittka, Sattler, & Johnen, 2016).

Twitter and sport

Twitter is considered an extension of traditional sports broadcasting and communication (Watanabe, Yan, & Soebbing, 2015). And, therefore, Cunningham and Bright (2012) declare that the procedure to influence fans is also applicable to social media. Pegoraro and Jinnah (2012) noted that the rise of social media over the past few years has provided sponsors and endorsers with a new way of engaging fans. Gibbs, O'Reilly, and Brunette (2014) mentioned that professional sports teams can use Twitter to increase their fan engagement. As social media (i.e., Twitter) provides a direct communication link to consumers, sports teams and athletes use it to enhance marketing and customer service activities (Smith and Sanderson 2015). Also, because Twitter improves visibility, it is therefore important to study it in the context of athlete branding (Green, 2016). Hasaan et al. (2016) mentioned that social media helps generate interest and deepens fan knowledge about athletes. In this context, we can summarize that

Twitter can play an integral role in athlete brand creation.

Athlete branding, cricket and social media

Arai et al. (2013) mentioned that every professional athlete is a brand and has a unique image. In this context, various models have been proposed that attempt to summarise the process of athlete branding. Furthermore, past studies have identified various off-field and on-field attributes that help with branding athletes (Arai et al., 2013, 2014; Constantinescu, 2016; Cortsen, 2013; Hasaan et al., 2016). However, it is not always the case. For instance, Cricket is played between countries which are very different from football or basketball playing countries, where clubs compete against each other. With cricket, one has to support ones country's team/athletes almost automatically (Hasaan & Kerem, 2017). It is rare to see a cricketer who is both a celebrity in his home country as well as internationally (Hasaan, 2016). Fans are motivated to follow their favorite athletes on social media in order to gather information, learn about their personality and to simply be entertained. (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012). Twitter and other social media outlets are considered essential for spreading positive awareness about athletes through word-of-mouth (Erdogmus & Çiçek, 2012; Hasaan et al., 2016). Also, positive word-of-mouth from social media is positively linked to brand equity (Abdullah & Siraj, 2016) which is why it is important to understand the motivations of tweeting fans. However, no study to date has examined the factors which motivate fans to tweet about their favourite athletes. To fill this gap in the literature, the following research question was formed for the current study:

RQ1: What factors motivate fans to tweet about foreign athletes during PSL?

Methodology

Sample and procedure

The current study examined tweets (and subsequent retweets and mentions) which were collected via Twitter Archiver. Tweet collection began on the first day of the 2017 PSL (February 9, 2017), and concluded on the final day of the competition (March 5, 2017). Data containing the #HBLPSL and #PSL hashtags was detected. Since Urdu is the most widely spoken language in Pakistan, we considered both English and Urdu tweets. Upon the conclusion of the tournament, more than 38,000 tweets were generated. Instead of merging the retweeted messages we analyzed each tweet separately as this technique is more useful in examining the buzz generated via social networking sites (Delia & Armstrong, 2015).

The collected tweets were analyzed in two phases. Phase one consisted of filtering the tweets using an athlete's name and handle. In the second phase, the athletes were sorted into 'foreign' and 'local' categories. Although the study's focus was on foreign athletes, local athletes were also considered to show the difference between the two. (See Table 1 for further details). It has been confirmed that only tweets from fans were examined (i.e., excluding tweets from media outlets).

Once the foreign athlete database had been created, a content analysis of the tweets was carried out for categorization and analysis. Content analysis is commonly used to analyze various types of communications (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This technique is used on qualitative data to identify meanings (Patton, 2002). Researchers have used this technique extensively in sports to study a variety of sports-related contexts, including celebrity athletes (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010); so, this type of technique is very popular when examining sports issues. Two level coding was then adopted to categorize the Tweets. The first review generated the initial themes of the results. Once the initial themes had emerged, all tweets were revisited to make sure that the data of the study justified the allocated tweets before establishing final themes.

Table 1. Ten most discussed athletes on Twitter

o.	Foreign Athlete		Local Athlete	
	Athlete Name	No. of Tweets	Athletes name	No. of tweet
1	Darren Sammy	1043	Shahid Afridi	6562
2	Brendon McCullum	875	Ahmed Shehzad	3444
3	Dawid Malan	753	Shoaib Malik	2961
4	Grant Elliott	741	Mohammad Hafeez	1192
5	Chris Gayle	630	Hasan Ali	884
6	Sam Billings	555	Babar Azam	826
7	Eoin Morgan	470	Mohammad Nawaz	721
8	Shane Watson	421	Wahab Riaz	703
9	Kumar Sangakkara	411	Kamran Akmal	597
10	Kevin Pietersen	398	Umar Akmal	502

Results

The comparison of tweets for the local and the foreign athletes paints an interesting picture. Only one Pakistani athlete, Shahid Afridi, was tweeted about more than the top-ten foreign athletes combined (6562 vs 6297). On the other hand, the most tweeted foreign athlete, Darren Sammy, was at 1043. Overall, there was only one foreign athlete who crossed the 1000-tweet limit as compared to four Pakistani cricketers who did.

Table 2. Description of the top ten discussed foreign athletes

o.	Athlete's Name	Country Represent	PSL team	Mostly discussed for
1	Darren Sammy	West Indies	Peshawar Zalmi	Performance
2	Brendon McCullum	New Zealand	Lahore Qalandars	Comments
3	Dawid Malan	England	Peshawar Zalmi	Performance
4	Grant Elliott	New Zealand	Lahore Qalandars	Celebration
5	Chris Gayle	West Indies	Karachi Kings	Predictions
6	Sam Billings	England	Islamabad United	Performance
7	Eoin Morgan	England	Peshawar Zalmi	Comments
8	Shane Watson	Australia	Quetta Gladiators	Performance
9	Kumar Sangakkara	Sri Lanka	Karachi Kings	Performance
10	Kevin Pietersen	England	Quetta Gladiators	Predictions

The result of the current study can separate the motives into two major categories: 1) fan-related motives and 2) athlete-related motives. The fan-related motives include: information; visual; prediction and fan comments while athlete-related motives include: performance, celebration and athlete comments.

#Information

Twitter analysis revealed that fans tend to share information regarding athletes. For instance, users tweet about PSL team changes (i.e., cricketer in/out), broken records by by cricketers and facts and figures of cricketers. For example,

- *Both teams have 1 change Amir Yamin in for Jason Roy Ben Ducket in for Sam Billings #LQvIU #HBLPSL*
- *HBL PSL Most Fifties - 4 Umar Akmal 3 A Shahzad 3 T Iqbal 3 Ravi Bopara 2 L Wright 2 Sarfaraz 2 Sharjeel #PSL2017 #HBLPSL @iamAhmadshahzad*
- *Malan will play again for @PeshawarZalmi #HBLPSL https://t.co/pjI5F0d8cn*
    - *#Visual*
    - Most of the tweets/retweets were in visual format (i.e., photographs, videos and memes). For instance,
- *8.3 SIX! Yasir Shah to Shane Watson watch https://t.co/7VLpZp1jmg #LQvIU #HBLPSL*
    - *#Prediction*
    - Predicting match results and performance expectations was another popular theme of the tweets.
- *@thePSLt20 McCullum will blast Islamabad today. #HBLPSL*
- *Luke Ronchi will score another 50 for sure #PSL #ISBvs LHR*
    - *#Fans' Comment*
    - Fans often use social media to make comments; PSL fans did the same. They used Twitter to express their emotions through these comments. For example,
- *That was rude. Very very rude Mr. Umpire @thePSLt20 Don't do that with the champs @IsbUnited. Smith's wicket was unjust. #HBLPSL2017 #HBLPSL*
- *One thing is clear... Chris Gayle & Mickey Arthur are both overpaid, overrated & pretty much over. #hblpsl #AbKhelJamayGa*
- *Disappointing that foreign players wont play in the #HBLPSL final in Lahore however their safety is most important & PCB can't take the risk*
    - *#Performance*
    - An athlete's performance is an important aspect of fan 'entertainment. As in real life, the quality of an athlete's performance is a major topic to discuss. Also, performance is an important factor in PSL follower's tweets. Good performances were appreciated while bad performances were criticized.
- *What a superman catch by Sangakara ☺ #KKvsLQ @thePSLt20 #HBLPSL #PSL2017*
- *What a brilliant knock SHADAB KHAN ❤❤ good to see that a young lad took his team out of danger #LQvIU #HBLPSL*
- *RT @Ponty100mph: 2nd disappointing #hblpsl for KP in a row. Let's hope he can find more than a single 50. Surely Luke Wright must play soon*
    - *#Celebration*
    - Fans not only focused on athlete performance but also considered other attributes, such as athlete style of celebration. For instance, New Zealand's Grant Elliet's Obama-like bat drop was a very popular topic on Twitter.
- *The bat drop of #Elliot after winning six..This is real #Savage... ☺ #BeLoudBeProud #lahoreqalandars #LQvIU #HBLPSL*
- *Celebrations this PSL: 1- Elliot 2- Usama Mir 3- Rumaan Raees #HBLPSL*
    - *#Athletes' comments*
    - PSL followers also discussed athlete's off-field actions (i.e., interviews, remarks, and comments) on Twitter. Positive remarks/comments were appreciated, while negative ones received disapproval.
- *RT "I will go Lahore At any rate, if Lahore qualify for final" Brendon McCullum ❤ #HBLPSL*
- *Kumar Sangakkara "The young kid Usama Mir was outstanding. He put his hand up and said I will bowl the last over" #HBLPSL #KKvPZ*

Discussion

The current study focused on examining PSL tweets through a content analysis. The aim of the study was to understand fans' motives for tweeting about foreign cricketers. The main goal was to understand these motives and to help a foreign athletes in the quest of establishing their brands internationally. This study was one of the first attempts to examine twitter content related to PSL, foreign athletes, and fans' motivations to tweet. Findings from this study suggest that fans tweet about their favorite athletes when they want to share information, visuals, predictions and comments. The findings from this study, as summarized in Figure 1, allows for a better understanding of the factors that motivate fans to tweet about foreign athletes.
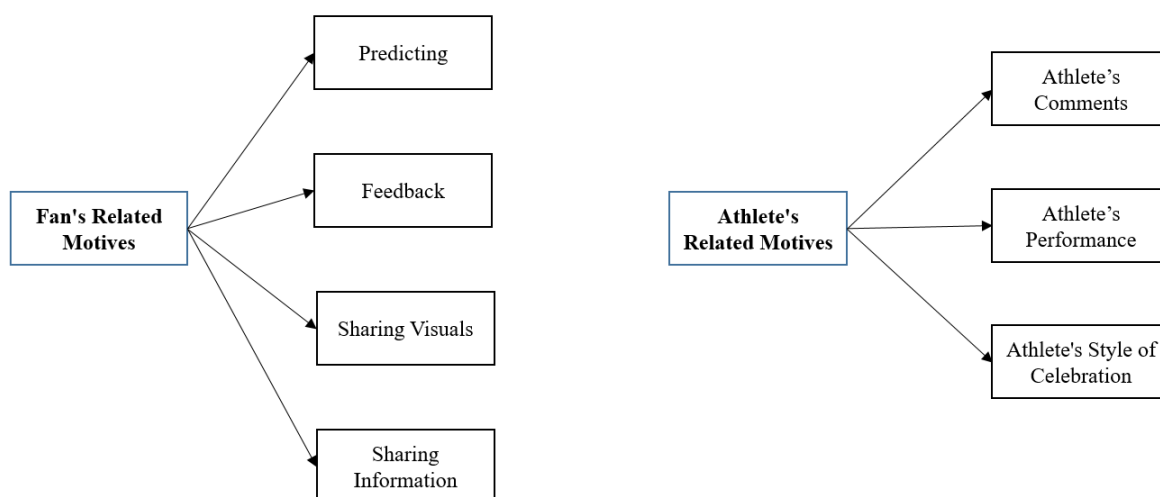

Figure 1: Presentation of fans' responces

In the context of fans' motives, past studies have identified various reasons for fans' involvement in Twitter and other social media. Hambrick et al. (2010) called this phenomenon 'information sharing', which consists of sharing unique sport and team-related content. In this vein, Kassing and Sanderson (2010) mentioned that fans search for content which provides them with opportunities to share information.

The second reason, of sharing visuals, is in line with past studies. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) mentioned that sharing videos and pictures is a very popular activity among social media users. In the context of sport, Thompson, Martin, Gee and Geurin (2016) noted that short video-interviews with key athletes add value to fans, as they like to share such content on social media.

The third reason for tweets was prediction. Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) labeled this type of message as 'the analyst'. Although their study was based on athletes' use of twitter, it is also applicable to our study, as social media treats all users the same (Gilbert & Karahalios, 2009). In this sense, either the athlete or the fan can both tweet and retweet an analyst message. Lastly, giving comments is very common on social media, which was confirmed by this study as well. Khan (2017) also mentioned that one of the norms of social media is user comments (Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian 2012).

Athlete-related motives include athlete performance, celebration and comments. Firstly, an athlete's performance (i.e., on-field activities) is considered a key attribute for establishing his/her brand name (Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al., 2016; Yu, 2005). It also a major factor for fans to follow an athlete (Frederick et al., 2012). That is why this study is in line with past studies which claimed that an athlete's performance is a strong factor in attracting fans to tweet about that athlete. Secondly, the fans' tweets indicated that an athlete's unique style of celebration generates discussion on twitter. In this vein, Hasaan et al. (2016) mentioned that Cristiano Ronaldo's trademark celebration scream 'Si!' provides good stories and discussion for the media and the fans. Also, Smith, Smith and Sanderson (2012) found that celebration sharing is one of the common factors among social media sports fans (Park & Dittmore, 2014). Lastly, the analysis identified that athletes' comments (either negative or positive) are popular among fans as they retweet, share or comment on them. This result is in line with past studies as Boehmer and Tandoc (2015) noted that fans retweet informative and original comments from their

favorite athletes.

Conclusion

It is clear now that athlete branding in not solely based on on-field performance, but it also impacted by off-field and marketing activities (i.e., media visibility) (Arai et al. 2014; Hasaan et al. 2016). While Twitter engagement enhances the visibility of an athlete (Thompson et al. 2016). That is why the current study highlighted the motives behind fans' tweets during the PSL. Analysis of tweets suggested that fans' motives can be divided into two categories: fan-related motives (sharing information, visuals, predictions and feedback) and athlete-related motives (athlete performance, style of celebration and athlete comments). Past studies have positively identified Twitter's role in spreading information and positive images of athletes through electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) (Jin & Phua, 2014). Also, Seng and Keat (2014) noted that eWoM is likely to be perceived as reliable; therefore, this study provided a useful insight into the thinking of twitter users.. Results of the current study can help foreign athletes and their managers establish their brand names in Pakistan by enhancing their Twitter presence to reach more fans (or potential fans). The results of the current study suggested that an athlete's most precious asset in foreign leagues is their consistent performance. Apart from performance, athletes' good will gestures to local community are key to becoming popular in an alien country. The current study highlighted the reasons that motivate fans to tweet about foreign athletes and in following this lead, athletes could become the talk of Twitter, and gain awareness among potential fans. Furthermore, this study contributes to the international-fan literature as very little work is available in this field. This study provides perspectives of international fans to academics and practitioners. Thus, the current study might be useful in gaining the loyalty of international fans.

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