

The Experiences of Female Football Fans on Social Media

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Aim and Research Questions

The use of social media to interact with other fans represents a growing part of football fandom. Fans frequently discuss all aspects of their favourite sport, team and players through social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter as well as on official and unofficial online forums. However, both online and offline, female fans have their authenticity and loyalty as fans questioned (Crawford, 2004; Gosling, 2007), which may lead them to avoid or abandon participating in online discussions about their favourite teams. This study explores the experiences of female fans in their football-related use of social media, addressing the following research questions:

RQ1. How do female fans use football-related social media?

RQ2. What challenges do female football fans face on social media?

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Social media have transformed the way football fans can interact with one another. Online communities allow football fans to connect with fellow fans (Hedlund, 2014) to discuss, for example the players, managers, new signings, matches and off-field activities of their favourite club. In doing so, fans can forge supportive, reciprocal relationships within the online community, building social capital, defined here as “a relational individual or collective resource that is more or less intentionally built and created and is used to achieve defined goals” (Numerato & Baglioni, 2011, p. 595). However, social media can also become arenas for bullying, harassment and the sharing of offensive content or views (Cleland, 2014).

Football stadia are still seen as a male domain (Crawford, 2004) and social media fan communities are dominated by male fans. Despite growing numbers of female fans, they are often marginalised in fan communities and in academic research (Gosling, 2007), facing open abuse and hostility. Gaining entry into (online) fan communities can be difficult for females, who display differences (i.e. gender) from the community norm. Consequently, football-related social media become sites of social exclusion (Crawford, 2004). As such, the dark side of social capital, defined as “situations in which trust, social ties and shared beliefs and norms that may be beneficial to some persons are detrimental to other individuals, sport movements, or for society at large” (Numerato & Baglioni, 2011, p. 594), comes to the fore in understanding both the experiences of and challenges faced by female football fans on social media.

Research Design, Methodology and Data Analysis

This study employs a qualitative, interview-based methodology to explore the experiences of female football fans on social media. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with eleven female fans of professional football clubs predominantly based in the north west of England. Analysis of these preliminary interviews informed the development of a more extensive interview guide for in-depth interviews with a further fifteen female fans. Respondents were selected via convenience sampling, with recruitment taking place largely through social media. All interviewees were aged over eighteen and self-identified as a football fan. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and then analysed using an iterative form of thematic analysis, building, revising and adding to a template of themes as analysis proceeded (King, 2012).

Results/Findings and Discussion

Initial findings reveal that female fans reported being the target of confrontational and sexist comments on social media, including having their authenticity as 'real' football fans questioned (Crawford, 2004; Gosling, 2007). Here, the dark side of social capital is evident, with the shared norms of the (male-dominated) social media communities expressed through a mistrust of females as 'real' fans. Therefore, female fans have to work harder than their male counterparts to gain acceptance within football-related social media communities. However, we discovered that female fans often find like-minded (female) fans through social media, forming online communities that have, in some cases, extended into the physical realm through meet-ups at matches. Therefore, social media can form a valuable support function for female fans. Based on their experiences, the notion of safe spaces also emerged in the interviews, with fans expressing a desire for social media to become a safe space for all fans to interact together around their shared love of the sport or team, regardless of gender.

Conclusion, Contribution and Implication

Our study provides valuable insight into the lived experiences of female fans on social media – a topic largely ignored to date. Female fans represent a significant proportion of football clubs' fan bases and possess significant buying power. However, on social media they often face hostility and abuse. Nonetheless, our research also surfaces examples of females forging online relationships and building social capital within football-related social media communities. The ability to extend these instances more widely across football-related social media communities represents a significant challenge for football clubs, governing bodies and social media organisations, but one that we argue is imperative in order to ensure that all fans can enjoy the benefits of social media communities as part of their football fandom.

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