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## Effective Promotions through Social Media: A Case of Major League Baseball Teams

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### Abstract

This study examined if the impacts of Facebook promotions on fan engagement were moderated by team performance in the Major League Baseball. Two teams showing the opposite results in the 2015 seasons were selected. Likes, Shares, and Comments were measured as indicators of fan engagement. All posts were categorised in the five promotion types. A two-way MANOVA was carried out to see if there were any differences in Facebook Likes, Shares, and Comments for differing promotion types and team performance. The results revealed that there were statistically significant interaction effects between promotion types and team performance on Likes and Shares. For player/personnel promotion and team information, the numbers of Likes and Shares were significantly higher than the other promotion types for both teams. For Likes and Shares by the two significant promotion types, Royals had significantly higher mean scores than did Phillies.

*Keywords: fan engagement, promotion types, social media, Facebook, Major League Baseball*

### 1. Introduction

Traditional marketing and communication methods have been navigated toward methods using social media in the sport industry (Rothschild, 2011). The social networking sites not only act as interactive platforms but also allow the public to share, create, discuss, and revise content (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Professional sports teams

have popularly utilised social media as a medium of retaining fan relationships and attracting new fans through friending people with same interests (Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012). Major League Baseball (MLB) teams are not exceptional. All MLB teams have managed not only their official websites but also various social media to promote merchandises or ticket sales and announce event schedules such as fan festivals, spring trainings, charity events, and

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the like. In addition, the teams provide information about their coaches, players, and teams and share interesting photos and video clips about games using social media. Among various social media platform, this study investigated the Facebook pages of the Major League Baseball teams to further explore whether there were any significant differences in levels of fan engagements for different combinations of types of promotion postings and success of teams.

#### ***Fan Engagement and Importance of Content***

Many sport organisations run own Facebook pages with desires to establish and maintain relationships with their customers. For the businesses to be successful in relationship marketing, high quality contents need to be guaranteed (Rishika, Kumar, Janakiraman, & Bezawada, 2013). In regard to benefits of high quality content, it can attract more customers and motivate the customers to engage and interact (Heinonen, 2011; Lipsman, Mud, Rich, & Bruich, 2012; Woodcock, Broomfield, Downer, & Starkey, 2011). As social interaction is a key function of social media, a certain level engagement between fans and organisations is expected from using social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Active engagement from the customers has positive impacts on the organisations in terms of improvement in visibility, brand image, and establishment of the organisations' reach (e.g., Goh, Heng, & Lin, 2013; Peters, Chen, Kaplan, Ognibeni, & Pauwels, 2013).

Recently various actions of promotion campaigns using Facebook have been conducted by

professional sport teams. For effective Facebook promotions, fan engagement through two-way communication could be an important objective for every team (Schultz & Peltier, 2013; Speyer, 2011). Fan engagement can be defined as pro-social behaviour of the fans (de Ruyter & Wetzels, 2000), and this behaviour significantly contributes to a sport team, team management, and fans in nontransactional exchanges (Dholakia, Blazevic, Wiertz, & Algesheimer, 2009). Facebook enables users to interact with particular posts with a single click such as Likes, Comments and Shares (Olczak & Sobczyk, 2013). A user' click on Likes towards a post enables massive users to see the post, creating a high marketing value. Besides, if a user clicks on Shares for a post, the post appears on the user's profile (Timeline) and also reaches to a larger number of users. In addition, Facebook users are able to share their opinions about a post using the Comments function (Olczak & Sobczyk, 2013). Accordingly, when evaluating whether high or low engagement is achieved towards a specific post, the three interaction types of Likes, Shares, and Comments are popularly utilised (e.g., Bonsón & Ratkai, 2013; Evans, 2010; Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, & Pihlstrom, 2012).

#### ***Promotional Posts on Facebook***

In building effective social media environment which is suited to engage fans, two conditions are required: effective promotion through relevant and high quality content and inducement of comments (Smith, 2013). According to Smith (2013), more attractive and customised

posts should be uploaded frequently to get more attentions from the users. These interests are converted into Likes, Shares, or Comments to the posts on Facebook. Empirical evidence showed that Facebook posts introducing new products or services information, current issues, and brand success positively affected the number of Likes (Malhotra, Malhotra, & See, 2013). In the same vein, interesting stories of behind-the-scenes including photos and video clips with athletes or teams could get more attention from fans (Achen, 2015). Mangold and Faulds (2009) highlights that the exclusivity of contents and purpose of posts matters in building the environment for fan engagement as fans perceive themselves to be unique to teams. Briefly, engaging contents could result in maintenance of interaction with fans in a positive way particularly when they are entertained by the posts.

In the professional sport contexts, there have been several studies investigating the effectiveness of promotions using of Facebook. Achen (2015, 2016) utilised the five promotional types for posts (i.e., external commerce, fan interactivity, organisational promotion, player/personnel promotion, and team information), which were originally developed by Clavio and Metz (2014). Using this coding scheme, numbers of Likes, Comments, and Shares from 5,786 posts was collected from Facebook pages of 28 NBA teams (Clavio & Metz, 2014). Achen (2015) analysed Likes, Comments, and Shares of promotions posted by NBA teams on Facebook and revealed player/personnel promotion received the most number of Likes and Comments while fan interactivity obtained most Shares. Grönroos

(2004) emphasised the importance of two-way communications between teams and fans and highlighted that such fans exclusive contents of results or game recaps and behind-the-scenes had positive impacts on fan engagement. In addition, Thompson, Martin, Gee, and Eagleman (2014) found that the contents of behind-the-scenes were more supported by the customers. Moreover, the numbers of likes for player/personnel promotion and team information were positively associated with winning percentage. Malhotra et al. (2013) addressed that it was essential for organisations to examine what motivates consumers to engage and how to convert them into supporters for the organisations. Malhotra et al. (2013) noted several ways which organisations are able to encourage their customers to like the postings on their Facebook pages. As one of the ways, they suggested that posts of brand success induce more active customer engagement, higher number of Likes (Malhotra et al., 2013). In the same vein, from the research investigating whether success of NBA teams affect the level of fan engagement on posts on Facebook pages, Achen (2015) found that a higher number of Likes was gained when the teams with high winning percentage posted contents about their game recaps or results. According to Achen (2015), this is because the fans are in favour of success of their teams. The presence of interaction between promotions and team success imply that the way fans are engaged with a team's promotional campaigns may depend on the team success.

In summary, using the coding scheme

(Achen, 2015, 2016; Clavio & Metz, 2014), the present study was designed to test two hypotheses established on the basis of the aforementioned literature. First, the researchers attempted to see if, regardless of team performance, player/personnel promotion and team information received higher numbers of Likes, Comments, and Shares from the posts on MLB Facebook pages. Second, it was tested whether the numbers of Likes, Comments, and Shares on player/personnel promotion and team information posted by Royals (successful team) were higher than the numbers of Likes, Comments, and Shares on player/personnel section and team information posted by Phillies (unsuccessful team).

## II. Method

### *Content Analysis*

Two MLB teams which showed the opposite results in the 2015 season were selected. While Royals won the World Series, Phillies resulted in the lowest winning rate (38.9%) in the 2015 season (Major League Baseball, 2015). Using a content analysis, data were collected from a total of 1,166 promotional posts on the official Facebook pages of Royals (579 posts) and Phillies (587 posts) between 1st January 2015 and 31st December, 2015.

### *Fan engagement.*

The individual numbers of Likes, Shares, and Comments received as indicators of fan engagement were recorded from the 1,166 posts on

two teams' official Facebook pages (579 posts for Royals and 587 posts for Phillies). The Facebook pages of Royals and Phillies were followed by 1.15 million and 1.69 million fans, respectively. The total number of followers of 30 MLB official Facebook pages was 53.6 million, and its average follower number per team was 1.79 million in the 2015 season.

### *Promotion type.*

For the post categorisations, Clavio and Metz's (2014) coding scheme was employed. The scheme includes external commerce, fan interactivity, organisational promotion, player/personnel promotion, and team information (Achen, 2015, 2016; Clavio & Metz, 2014). According to Achen (2015, 2016), all posts related to team' sponsors or business partners were classified as external commerce. Fan interactivity referred to posts to arouse fans to engage or interact (e.g., special events, giveaways, polls, survey), and organisational promotion included posts about organisation-related promotional campaigns such as venues, merchandise, concessions, security, or parking (Achen, 2015). Various promotional posts about player, personnel, or their behind-the-scenes information were labelled as player/personnel promotion, and lastly transfers and injury of players, schedules, game recaps, or results are coded as team information (Achen, 2015).

### *Data Analysis*

A two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was carried out for data analysis. Wilks' Lambda was employed for testing stat-

istical significance of the multivariate null hypothesis. After the null hypothesis was rejected, univariate ANOVA tests were performed for testing whether the dependent variables of Likes, Shares, and Comments had statistically significant differences. Finally Tukey HSD was employed for multiple comparisons for any significant dependent variables.

### III. Results

The mean and standard deviation values for three dependent variables of Likes, Shares, and Comments with regard to promotion types, team performance, and the interaction of promotions types and team performance are presented in Table 1. For hypothesis testing, the multivariate significance tests was conducted to determine if there were statistically significant differences

among the groups of interest on a linear combination of the numbers of Likes, Comments, and Shares. For promotion types, the multivariate null hypothesis of equality of the means over the five promotion types for three dependent variables was rejected at the .05 significance level, Wilk's  $L = .93$ ,  $F(12, 3053.49) = 7.56$ ,  $p < .001$ . For team performance, the multivariate null hypothesis of equality of the means over the top- and bottom- ranked teams for all variables was rejected at the .05 level, Wilk's  $L = .98$ ,  $F(3, 1154) = 6.87$ ,  $p < .001$ . For promotion types by team performance, the multivariate null hypothesis was also rejected at the .05 level, Wilk's  $L = .97$ ,  $F(12, 3053.49) = 2.68$ ,  $p = .001$ . Given the significance of the overall tests, follow-up univariate main effects were examined on promotion, team performance, and their interaction individually.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Promotion Type, Team Performance, and Promotion Type by Team Performance on Likes, Shares and Comments

|                                    |   | Likes             | Shares            | Comments        |
|------------------------------------|---|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Promotion type                     | External commerce (n = 80)                  | 1633.15 (1179.90) | 233.50 (369.32)   | 46.46 (67.92)   |
|                                    | Fan interactivity (n = 177)                 | 2944.99 (743.08)  | 414.13 (232.59)   | 104.71 (42.78)  |
|                                    | Organisational promotion (n = 249)          | 4533.35 (626.53)  | 545.56 (196.11)   | 159.97 (36.07)  |
|                                    | Player/personnel promotion (n = 332)        | 9271.86 (543.19)  | 1306.26 (170.02)  | 207.91 (31.27)  |
|                                    | Team information (n = 328)                  | 5484.69 (548.47)  | 1243.188 (171.68) | 146.171 (31.57) |
| Team performance                   | Royals (n = 579)                            | 6300.92 (521.31)  | 1080.31 (163.18)  | 152.81 (30.01)  |
|                                    | Phillies (n = 587)                          | 3246.29 (444.38)  | 416.75 (139.10)   | 113.27 (25.58)  |
| Promotion type by team performance | External commerce (n = 26)                  | 1601.46 (1938.77) | 274.81 (606.86)   | 47.39 (111.60)  |
|                                    | Fan interactivity (n = 89)                  | 3469.51 (1047.89) | 495.83 (328.01)   | 104.75 (60.32)  |
|                                    | Royals Organisational promotion (n = 126)   | 5288.30 (880.70)  | 635.46 (275.67)   | 231.27 (50.70)  |
|                                    | Player/personnel promotion (n = 158)        | 12418.74 (786.47) | 1888.38 (246.18)  | 209.73 (45.27)  |
|                                    | Team information (n = 180)                  | 8726.60 (736.85)  | 2107.04 (230.65)  | 170.92 (42.42)  |
|                                    | External commerce (n = 54)                  | 1664.83 (1345.29) | 192.19 (421.09)   | 45.54 (77.44)   |
|                                    | Fan interactivity (n = 88)                  | 2420.48 (1053.83) | 332.43 (329.86)   | 104.66 (60.67)  |
|                                    | Phillies Organisational promotion (n = 123) | 3778.40 (891.37)  | 455.67 (279.01)   | 88.68 (51.31)   |
|                                    | Player/personnel promotion (n = 174)        | 6124.98 (749.44)  | 724.14 (234.59)   | 206.08 (43.14)  |
|                                    | Team information (n = 148)                  | 2242.77 (812.61)  | 379.33 (254.36)   | 121.42 (46.78)  |

Note: Table includes means and (in parentheses) standard deviations.

A series of univariate ANOVA tests (see Table 2 for more details) revealed that Likes and Shares showed statistical differences for promotion types ( $F = 18.12$ ,  $p < .001$  for Likes and  $F = 5.13$ ,  $p < .001$  for Shares), team performance ( $F = 19.89$ ,  $p < .001$  for Likes and  $F = 9.58$ ,  $p = .002$  for Shares), and promotion\*team performance ( $F = 5.10$ ,  $p < .001$  for Likes and  $F = 3.38$ ,  $p = .009$  for Shares). However, Comments was not significant for all three cases, promotion types ( $F = 1.72$ ,  $p = .14$ ), team performance ( $F = 1.01$ ,  $p = .32$ ), and promotion\*team performance ( $F = 0.66$ ,  $p = .62$ ).

player/personal promotion and  $p = .034$  for team information), fan interactivity ( $p = .023$  for player/personal promotion and  $p = .014$  for team information), and organisational promotion ( $p = .039$  for player/personal promotion and  $p = .023$  for team information). However, there were no significant differences between team information and player/personnel promotion and among external commerce, fan interactivity, and organisational promotion. With regard to team performance, the post hoc test was not required as there were two groups only in the independent variable. The previous ANOVA test suggested

Table 2. Univariate ANOVA Tests for Promotional Type, Team Performance, and Promotion Type by Team Performance

|          | Promotion type |          | Team performance |          | Promotion type by team performance |          |
|----------|----------------|----------|------------------|----------|------------------------------------|----------|
|          | <i>F</i>       | $\eta^2$ | <i>F</i>         | $\eta^2$ | <i>F</i>                           | $\eta^2$ |
| Likes    | 18.12**        | .06      | 19.89**          | .02      | 5.10**                             | .02      |
| Shares   | 5.13**         | .02      | 9.58*            | .01      | 3.38*                              | .01      |
| Comments | 1.72           | .01      | 1.01             | .001     | .66                                | .002     |

\* $p < .01$

\*\* $p < .001$

The nature of pairwise differences was further explored using the post hoc tests. For Likes, player and personnel promotion had a significantly higher mean score than other four promotion types ( $ps < .001$ ). Team information had a significantly higher mean score than external commerce ( $p = .007$ ) and fan interactivity ( $p = .017$ ). But there were no significant differences between team information and organisational promotion and among external commercial, fan interactivity, and organisational promotion. For Shares, team information and player/personnel promotion had both significantly higher mean scores than external commerce ( $p = .048$  for

that the numbers of Likes ( $p < .001$ ) and Share ( $p = .002$ ) were significantly higher for better performance team (Royals). Lastly, there was a statistically significant interaction effect, indicating that the effects of the different promotional posts on Likes and Shares were not the same for Royals (top-ranked team) and Phillies (bottom-ranked team). The numbers of Likes and Shares were statistically higher among Fan in Royals for both team information and player/personnel. However, there were no significant differences in the other three promotion types between fans in Royals and Phillies.

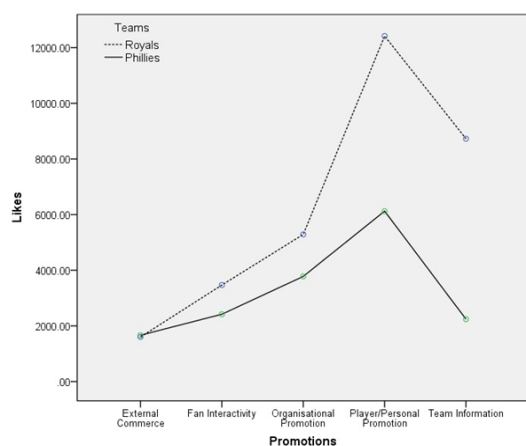


Figure 1. Interaction between team performance and promotions on Likes

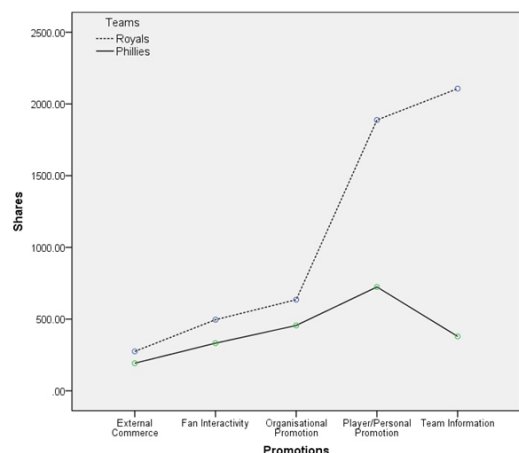


Figure 2. Interaction between team performance and promotions on Shares

#### IV. Discussion & Conclusion

Professional sport teams utilise various social media as platform for establishment and maintenance of fandom. A better understanding of their consumers’ needs and behaviours help team marketers cope with feasible challenges (Pronschinske et al., 2012). This study extended

the previous research by applying the coding scheme (Achen, 2015, 2016; Clavio & Metz, 2014) into the context of MLB. The posts on Facebook were categorised into the five promotion types to examine if there were any differences in fan engagement among the promotion types under the assumption that fans’ engagements with promotional posts through Facebooks would be different (Pronschinske et al., 2012). In addition, under the belief of a positive association between active fan engagement and brand success (Malhotra et al., 2013), the study tested if team success had positive impacts on fan engagement (number of Likes, Comments and Shares) with various promotion posts. The main findings were (a) generally fans preferred player/personal promotion and team information, (b) fan engagements were more active for the high-performance team, and (c) fan engagement behaviours varied with different promotion types and team performance. Interestingly, unlike the previous finding (Achen, 2015), there was no significant multi-variable main effect for Comment. The function of Comment was not supported as indicator of fan engagement derived from a post as commenting on posts is not always determined by the post itself but often is for the purpose of communicating with other users.

First, the study found that player/personnel promotion and team information elicited higher number of Likes and Shares than other promotion types. This finding supports the previous finding that active customer engagement can be derived by provision of brand-related information (e.g., Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013)

which can be converted into player and team information in the current context. Malhotra et al. (2013) addressed that posts related to new product information were likely to receive a higher number of Like. Consistent with this finding (Malhotra et al., 2013), Fan would expect to see player/personnel and team related information such as transfer and injury of players, game schedule, and results of game recaps. Social media enable organisations to understand their customers' preferences and needs (Askool & Nakata, 2011). In addition, Wysocki (2012) claimed that fans' active engagement is expected when underpinning values related to their needs were provided from promotion contents, or the information delivered by the teams is what the fans cannot obtain elsewhere. MLB team marketers who seek to achieve more active fan engagement on their social networking sites should understand their fans' expectations and needs first and reduce the gap between their expectations and perceptions by providing more contents on their player and team/game information.

Another noticeable finding from the study indicated that team performance affected the level of fan engagement in player/personnel promotion and team information. Royals (higher winning percentage team) received significantly higher numbers of Likes and Shares than did Phillies (the lowest winning percentage team) for these two promotions types. Achen (2015) explained that higher level of fan engagement can be aroused by success of NBA teams as fans tend to be interested in the success of the teams which they have been supporting. For

MLB team marketers having a successful season, it could be a good opportunity to maximise the marketing effects by designing posts of contests or promotions related to athletes and teams on their Facebook pages. In addition, successful teams which advance in the postseasons are able to utilise the additional games (up to 19 games including the World Series) for their marketing endeavours. It should be highlighted that the number of Facebook followers did not have significant impacts in this case. Royals with 1.15 million Facebook followers received the higher number of Likes and Shares in player/personnel promotion and team information though Phillies had 1.69 million followers. An initial belief was that the market size of a team is proportionate to the number of fans following social networking sites of the team which eventually influence such paralinguistic digital affordances (Pronschinske et al., 2012). However, the present study found that higher number of fans of Phillies did not lead to a higher level of fan engagement. Fan engagement is rather caused by team performance, not by the number of followers. Consequently, it indicates a team with relatively a small number of Facebook followers still has sufficient potentials to create a higher marketing effect.

In conclusion, it would be essential to develop social media marketing strategies which reflect characteristics of their fans and objectives of the teams. The findings can help professional sport teams design more effective social media strategies to promote better communications with their fans. Relationship marketing is an attractive promotion tool for success of sport



teams as contemporary sport fans are more willing to interact with the teams through social networking sites (e.g., Benigni, Porter, & Wood, 2009; Groza, Cobbs, & Schaefer, 2012).

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