Assessing the role of stakeholder relationships in the promotion of a major event on social media

Colin Cork[1] (corresponding author)
Western Michigan University, 1903 W. Michigan Ave, Kalamazoo, MI, 49008
Email: colin.cork@wmich.edu

Terry Eddy[2]
Department of Kinesiology, University of Windsor
Email: tweddy@windsor.ca

Katie Lebel[3]
University of Guelph
Email: klebel@uoguelph.ca

Lamar Reams[4]
Ohio University
Email: lreams@ohio.edu

Abstract

In 2016, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) hosted an event for the first time at Madison Square Garden in New York City. The McGregor-Alveraz fight card held three championship fights which was another first in the UFC. During the weeks before the fight, the UFC relied heavily on league and fighters to engage with fans through social media to promote the event. Therefore, this study employed a relationship marketing framework to examine consumer engagement on social media. The research focused on UFC 205, one of the most high-profile Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) events in history. After examining the Twitter activity surrounding UFC 205, it was found that both groups focus primarily on disseminating content that highlights group experience and information sharing. However, promotional content was retweeted most frequently by followers. The UFC is considered a leader in social media marketing among professional sport leagues, so the study holds important implications for sport marketers across numerous industry sectors

Keywords: Social Media, Brand Ambassadors, Marketing, Event Promotion, eWOM

1. Study Purpose

Professional sport has relied on key stakeholder's (e.g. league and athlete) social media accounts to market and promote events. The effectiveness of these marketing efforts relies heavily on the development and maintenance of relationships between stakeholder and fan. Paek, Morse, Hutchinson, and Lim (2021) suggested that a strong relationship was directly linked to intentions such as media engagement and attendance. Additionally, these positive relationships may be partially attributed to the influence athletes wield through social media, thereby contributing to higher levels of engagement. In a recent study, the authors found that fan online engagement with a professional tennis tournament was largely attributed to content produced by athletes (Chmait et al., 2020). From a league perspective, the literature similarly shows that league social media activity was crucial in fan online engagement (Trivedi, Soni, & Kishore, 2020). In both studies, the authors attributed these findings to relationships developed between stakeholder and fan.

These findings support the use of a relationship marketing framework to investigating league and athlete social media activity when promoting a major event (Abeza et al., 2020). However, even though the literature highlights the importance of leveraging stakeholder's social media activity to increase fan engagement (Eddy et al., 2021), there is a dearth of literature that explores the differences in the type and effectiveness of promotional content posted by these stakeholders for an event. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the effect of social media marketing strategies on consumer engagement through the application of a relationship-marketing framework. Specifically, the study explored the social media activities of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) and its key brand ambassadors (e.g., athletes) efforts to promote the event. This research provides industry

professionals with data that illustrates strategies for building relationships on social media and highlights the effectiveness of those strategies with respect to generating electronic word-of-mouth in the promotion of events.

2. Background

On November 12, 2016 at Madison Square Garden in New York City, the Ultimate Fighting Championship hosted UFC 205 (*Alvarez vs. McGregor*) – a card that featured three championship fights and a total of eight current or former league champions. The event was particularly poignant given the New York State's historically stalwart opposition of the sport. In September 2016, New York's athletic commission was the last state to legalize MMA, creating tremendous buzz among fans (Connolly, 2016). Tickets reportedly sold out in seconds, and the event broke UFC records for attendance, gate revenue, commercial pay-per-view (PPV), preliminary show ratings, and merchandise sales (Martin, 2016b).

Over the past decade, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) has grown from a league considered too violent for television and banned by state athletic commissions (Miller, 2009), to the world's leading professional mixed martial arts (MMA) league with a valuation of $4 billion in 2016 (Isidore, 2016). PPV buys are the most significant determinant of this estimation, as they serve as a direct indicator of demand (Reams & Eddy, 2017) and are a primary revenue stream for the league (Tainsky, Salaga, & Santos, 2012). Given the nature of individual sports, much of the interest in PPV events can be attributed to the marketing strategies of the league's star athletes (Martin, 2016a).

The social media marketing efforts of UFC president Dana White, as well as the @UFC league account, have also been instrumental to the league's success. White is considered a social media trailblazer who attributes a high level of league/athlete success to the effective use of Twitter (Schrager, 2012). White has more Twitter followers than any other North American league commissioner (almost 5 million) and believes so strongly in social media that he spearheaded an incentive program that rewards athletes for Twitter fan engagement, increasing followers, and creativity (Hui, 2012). This program is in stark contrast to many professional sport leagues, which have traditionally preferred to curtail athletes' usage of social media (Schrager, 2012).

Given the overall interest in UFC 205 and the UFC's stance on encouraging Twitter usage among its athletes, this event provided a unique context for studying marketing strategies on social media. The maturation of social media as a marketing tool has spurred both practitioners and researchers to re-examine traditional theoretical viewpoints from more contemporary angles (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Reid, 2013). For more complete reviews of the social media in sport literature, readers are directed to Abeza, O'Reilly, Seguin, and Nzindukiyimana (2015) and Filo, Lock, and Karg (2015).

Relationship marketing stands as an example of a longstanding theory that has the potential to be re-imagined in social media contexts. Relationship marketing has been characterized by its ability to create ongoing, sustainable relationships with consumers (Grönroos, 2004). In today's digitally focused climate, the classification of relationships has broadened significantly (Williams & Chinn, 2010). This shift is particularly noticeable in sport, where a consumer's perspective might be shaped by their interactions with leagues, teams, owners, players, members of the media, or even peers – all in one quick scan of their social media newsfeeds (Abeza et al., 2013; Doyle, Su, & Kunkle, 2022).

One particularly important marketing outcome associated with social media is the ability to generate electronic word of mouth (eWOM). eWOM has been defined as a statement from a consumer about a product disseminated through an online medium (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). eWOM has been estimated to generate over three billion daily brand impressions across social media (Berger, 2014), and is considered a unique phenomenon for enhancing social media marketing strategies (Chu & Kim, 2011). Engaging in eWOM implies that a consumer is satisfied with the brand/content (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009), and recipients often consider messages received via eWOM more trustworthy than other marketing messages (Hung & Li, 2007). Although several metrics for measuring eWOM exist, retweets are a popular variable for capturing social media engagement (Achen, Lebel, & Clavio, 2017).

Given this scenario, the goal of this research is to better understand how key stakeholders in the UFC are shaping the relationships being built between the league, athletes, and consumers. To guide the study, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: Which relationship marketing strategies are used most frequently by internal stakeholders of the UFC on Twitter?

RQ2: Which relationship marketing strategies are more frequently retweeted than others?

RQ3: Are there differences in retweets between the athletes and league across the relationship marketing strategies?

3. Methodology

A deductive content analysis was employed to dissect the relationship marketing strategies of key UFC stakeholders on Twitter: the official UFC league account (@UFC), league president Dana White (@danawhite), and the accounts of all 26 UFC athletes on the UFC 205 fight card (readers are directed to the UFC website for a full list of competitors). All tweets emanating from the 28 accounts were collected over a 49-day period from Sept. 28th, 2016 to Nov. 15th, 2016. The fight card was announced on Sept. 28th, the event was on Nov. 12th, and three days were added to capture post-event content.

DiscoverText, a web-scraping analytics services, was used to collect all tweets. A total of 5,246 tweets were collected: 3,539 tweets from the 26 athlete accounts, and 1,707 tweets from the league accounts. Since the focus of the study was on a specific event, two coders cleaned the data so that only tweets that referenced UFC 205 were retained for analysis. The criteria for retaining a tweet included the appearance of a relevant hashtag (i.e. #UFC205, #UFCNYC), an athlete discussing their opponent, or a reference to the event's date/time/venue. In addition, the data were limited to tweets posted in English. A total of 1,575 tweets were ultimately retained for analysis. Liz Carmouche had the fewest number of tweets among the athletes (4), while Tyrone Woodley had the most (182). Across the full sample, the mean number of retweets was 319.43, with a standard deviation of 1,542.62 (Minimum = 0, Maximum = 30,969). Additional frequency information can be found below in Table 2.

The second stage of the method involved the application of a constant-comparative open coding method, in which data were catalogued into usage categories modified from prior relationship marketing research in sport (Hambrick & Kang, 2015). Two independent coders coded 20% of the tweets to establish intercoder reliability (Cohen's Kappa = 0.81) and revised the category definitions until complete agreement was reached. Four usage categories were applied to code the data: information sharing (IS), group experience (GE), community, and promotional. The definitions for each category can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. *Category definitions*

Category	Operational definition	Common examples
Community	Tweet shows interactions within internal UFC stakeholders (i.e. athletes, their coaches, @UFC)	- Pictures that show a group of athletes together (i.e. training, or after a match) - Two athletes directly chatting with each other (i.e. offering congratulations, trash talking)
Group Experience (GE)	Tweet shows interactions between internal and external stakeholders (i.e. fans, family, celebrities, media members)	- An athlete acknowledging a tweet from a fan (i.e. by retweeting or responding) - An athlete talking to a reporter - Mention of an event where fans could meet athletes
Information Sharing (IS)	Tweets that share background information about athletes, links to interviews, etc., and are non-interactional in nature	- Updates about a fight or the weigh ins - Behind-the-scenes photos of athletes in their daily lives
Promotional	Tweets that were direct attempts to initiate a consumption behavior for the UFC 205 event	- Links to purchase merchandise for the event - Schedule updates directing fans to watch on pay-per-view - Instructions or links for purchasing tickets to the event

4. Results

Frequencies for each category were examined to address RQ1 (see Table 2). Overall, GE and IS were the two most popular categories among the athletes. It should be noted that 49.1% of the tweets coded as GE came from three athletes: Michael Johnson (96; 65.3% of his total), Tyrone Woodley (78; 42.9% of his total), and Katlyn Chookagian (56; 60.2% of her total). Though GE was still popular for other athletes, IS was the most common usage category for the majority of the other accounts. GE and IS were the two most popular categories for Dana White and @UFC as well though, proportionally speaking, they were much less active with GE. Further, the league was much more active with promotional tweets compared to the athletes.

Table 2. *Category frequencies by user type*

	Community	Group Experience	Information sharing	Promotional	Total
Athletes	133	468	443	68	1112
League	25	137	221	80	463
Dana White	*2*	*5*	*18*	*15*	*40*
UFC	*23*	*132*	*203*	*65*	*423*
Total	158	605	664	148	1575

To address RQ2 and RQ3, analyses were performed to determine if retweets differed between the usage categories. Since retweets are count data and were positively skewed, multi-level negative binomial regression was employed. The independent variables were the usage categories. A nominal control variable for each of the 28 accounts (nested within user status as an athlete or league account) was included to control for confounding factors, such as popularity and number of followers.

The overall model was significant ($p < .001$). GE was retweeted the least among the categories and became the comparison case (see Table 3). On average, promotional tweets were retweeted 22.866 times more often than GE tweets, community tweets were retweeted 3.865 times more often than GE, and IS tweets were retweeted 2.976 times more often than GE. In terms of interaction effects, only GE was retweeted significantly more often from the league accounts than the athlete accounts, which was influenced by the scarcity of GE tweets from the league accounts.

Table 3. *Negative Binomial Regression Model Results*

IV	β	IRR	Std. Err. (IRR)	Sig.
Intercept	3.043	20.96	5.351	<.001
Group experience	-	-	-	-
Community	1.352	3.865	.624	<.001
Information sharing	1.091	2.976	.319	<.001
Promotional	3.130	22.866	4.767	<.001
UserType	3.431	30.919	28.289	<.001
Group exp*League		3.43	.914	.005

Note: N = 1575. Retweets was the dependent variable. The user control variable was not entered into the model for effects, so coefficients and IRR are unavailable.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that UFC stakeholders are primarily posting Twitter content that can be described as group experience (GE) and information sharing (IS), in much higher proportions than found in past research (Hambrick & Kang, 2015). This could be due, in part, to the fact that UFC receives less mass media coverage than other professional sport leagues. Promotional tweets, on the other hand, appeared least often among the four categories. Hambrick and Kang (2015) observed that 21% of Pinterest pins from the four major professional sports leagues in the United States contained promotional content. The findings here were somewhat similar from the league accounts (@UFC and Dana White), but the volume of promotional content from the athletes was much lower. Although the UFC's league-wide sponsorship deal with Reebok restricts athletes' from posting sponsor material in the week leading up to an event (Brennan, 2016), it was still surprising that more promotional content did not appear earlier in the time period. This could suggest that the UFC may be moving beyond using promotional content on social media.

However, promotional content was found to be the most effective category for generating eWOM (retweets). This was somewhat surprising, as past research has indicated that social media users have found overt advertising messages intrusive to their experience (Lee, Kim, & Ham, 2016). However, much of the promotional content in this study did not exemplify overt advertising. For example, the design of the fight poster, one of the UFC's primary promotional tools (Reams & Eddy, 2017), is generally not designed to look like a 'hard sell' to buy tickets or PPV. As mentioned previously, there is an implied level of trust and satisfaction with the content when a user retweets a message. Thus, followers may not perceive the poster as an intrusive selling message. In either case, other leagues and organizations could benefit from employing image-based content for promotional purposes that disguises the objective of the message.

It should be noted that timing of the tweets is likely having some impact on the results. In particular, the eWOM generated by promotional tweets was likely driven by proximity to the event – 55 of the 148 tweets coded as promotion appeared the day before and the day of the event, most of which came from the @UFC account. Similarly, the 24-hour period surrounding the event saw 30 community tweets (no other single day had more than 10). Followers were likely swept up by anticipation or were engaging in second screen viewing during the event by, for example, retweeting content indicating their favorite athlete's fight was starting soon. Thus, if promotional tweets are well timed and used sparingly, they still appear to be impactful for generating eWOM.

Looking at the league's overall activity, @UFC and @danawhite combined for only 104 (22.5%) of the UFC 205-related tweets over the 31 days from the fight card announcement to the Monday before the event. This was in contrast to the more evenly dispersed activity from the athletes. This was likely caused by their next fight being the athletes' primary focus, whereas Dana White and @UFC were tweeting about other events (particularly UFC 204, 206, and 207). Past research has found UFC fans to be more attached to individual athletes than the league itself (Reams, Eddy, & Cork, 2015), so it could also be that the league is actively relying on the athletes to generate early interest in events. This is logical, but also does not provide the league as much control over how the athletes are using the event as a platform to promote their own brands. For example, many of the lesser known/followed athletes were leveraging UFC 205-related content (i.e. #UFC205) to draw attention to content that has more benefit to them personally than the UFC brand (i.e. sponsor mentions, vlogs, videos, interviews). As such, the league could be missing out on opportunities to leverage the overall brand to draw in casual fans.

For example, there was a clear opportunity for the league to be more active in moving engagement offline by adopting some of the GE strategies employed by the fighters (i.e. watch parties). Thus, it appears the league did not take full advantage of the opportunity to push out content over a more sustained period.

It is worth reminding readers that eWOM is only one of many marketing objectives that can be sought through social media. Much of the content coded as GE was directly conversational and did not appear to provide much incentive for people outside the conversation to engage, but that does not mean that this type of communication is not worthwhile. Dialogue is critical to maintaining relationships through social media (Abeza et al., 2013) so Q&A's with athletes, for example, offer high levels of engagement and interaction that likely has a substantial impact on fans' connections with athletes, despite not being effective for generating eWOM. That said, the diffusion of messages via eWOM on social media allows organizations access to markets that may not be actively seeking information about them, which can be an important element for brand building. Thus, generating eWOM is important for all organizations, but especially those that exist outside the mainstream (like the UFC) or suffer from low brand awareness/equity.

6. Future Research

In the future, research should explore if there is a difference in generated eWOM when these findings are applied across different social media platforms and/or types of content (Eddy et al., 2021). For example, previous research has found that engagement differs based on the type of media included in a post (Cork & Eddy, 2017) - with the rise of more visual/video-intensive platforms like TikTok and Snapchat, there is an opportunity to extend the research on social media relationship marketing that has typically been based on content that is primarily text- and/or picture-based. Another area for future exploration is the effect an athlete's level of stardom or influence has on fan engagement and subsequent eWOM metrics. Chmiat et al. (2020) noted that athlete stardom directly contributed to general fan engagement (e.g. mentions of the event) but did not directly report any findings related to promotional content produced by athletes.

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