Original Article

Research on the off-season social media performance of Polish football teams playing in the Ekstraklasa League

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Abstract:

Social media, as an element of marketing communication, influence different aspects of sport clubs' marketing strategies including the ways of their offers presentation in the internet. That tendency can be observed regardless a season in their calendars. Analyses of the specialistic literature reveal that authors generally have concentrated on the results of communication performed in social media, while constant attention should be put on observation of trends and performance of clubs in that area.

The paper presents results of the research conducted by the authors concerning social media performance (on Facebook mainly) of Polish football clubs, that play in the Ekstraklasa (the highest league in Polish football), during the off-season. The research were conducted in January 2020, what enabled verification of the main hypothesis that assumed that during the off-season periods, the football clubs did not reduce intensiveness of their communication realised via social media with different groups of their stakeholders. In the paper some statistic tools were used to analyse basic variabilities describing marketing efforts of the clubs. To indicate relations between different factors, that were analyzed in the study, the Spearman's correlation coefficients were calculated to collate level of attendance with performance and reactions of the clubs in social media.

The results of the research and statistical analyses allow for comparisons between performances of the clubs' marketing departments and also, for indication of performances continuity with no relation to results and emotions, that are usually associated with matches. The results indicate that the clubs communicate with their stakeholders regardless the moment in their tournament calendars. They create and maintain loyal brand communities, that may be described as local but also supralocal ones. Marketing efforts of the clubs depend on their sizes, budgets and traditions. Conducted analyses of performance of Polish football teams playing in the Ekstraklasa League revealed that Facebook, as a mean of marketing communication, is perceived quite similarly by different clubs. During the off-seasons the posts have mainly considered trainings, preparation camps, information about tickets and other current affairs. All the analysed activities were usually performed parallelly on the researched sites. In that context, the scores and other sport achievements, seem to be not as important as emotional relationship with stakeholders, their affiliation with clubs and with the football as a sport discipline.

Key Words: sport clubs, Facebook, communication activity, Spearman correlation.

Introduction

The topic of social media usage as a tool to communicate is quite regularly discussed in the marketing literature because each entity is influenced by different tendencies, including economic and social ones, so, it must react the way that enables reaching its goals. Moreover, by implementation of its strategy, it also tries to outrival its competitors. In consequence, to be successful, many changes within its marketing should be introduced, and most of them are related to social media performance.

Currently, social media has become an indispensable communication tool for people. This situation has brought some changes in communication and socialization tools. Social media studies in young people are important, especially in terms of understanding communicative gaps between generations (Gonener, 2020).

The challenges that modern marketing has to face may be described synthetically basing on the MEDIUM concept, which can be defined as a set of features that should characterize modern marketing communication. Although the method was introduced by Ernst&Young in 2001 it is still applicable and valid (Chmielarz, 2001). According to the MEDIUM concept modern marketing is:

- Mass.
- Economical,
- Direct,
- Interactive,
- Ultrafast,
- Measurable.

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The MEDIUM set of features relates to changes within area of marketing communication. They result from: the Internet growing popularity, related technologies and social relations. All these factors have fostered creation of new tools and forms of marketing communication (Baruk, Hys and Dzidowski, 2013).

Companies have to figure out a way of finding, attracting and keeping customers of their respective products and services by promising them that what they are buying will satisfy and meet their needs and wants. With many competing brands and substitute products available, the competitive advantage is an ideal situation but less likely to happen. Therefore, the company that offers the best to the customers will have a bigger market share (Pour, 2019).

In the face of today's rapidly changing environment, with the advent of a technology revolution and associated trends such as social media, customers' needs and demands (and even decision making processes) are changing (Mekkonen, 2019).

It may also be stated, that as marketing efforts previously used to be aimed at wide groups of addressees who were reached at the same time using a massive type of communication, nowadays, marketing is used more extensively. Massive marketing strategies have become expanded or even transformed into direct marketing communication, but not in the scope of reaching clients and omitting intermediaries. In that context, the direct marketing is interpreted as a direct contact with precisely defined and targeted group of customers and it is introduced to make quick communication possible and maintain direct, long-lasting relationships. The contact is usually direct, one-to-one, without any intermediaries in the process, and it is supported by detailed sets of data. It enables adjustment of marketing communication and preparation of adequate offers adjusted to expectations of narrowly and precisely defined market segments and even individual clients (Armstrong and Kotler, 2016).

Technological progress, especially in the areas of data processing, data mining, data bases and the Internet, has changed direct marketing significantly. Postal types of advertisement, catalogues, sales calls are not used so intensively in direct marketing anymore. Internet tools of different type have become much more popular. Although the types of postal ads, catalogues and sales calls are still used, their usage in marketing strategies is not so significant any more. The situation is a direct consequence of iniquitousness of computers and the Internet; In consequence, the changes that have taken place, also influenced interpersonal communication processes. Technological changes that caused transformation of the Internet marketing were called by Ph.Kotler the new wave technologies. They enable communication and interactions between individuals and groups. This way the new wave technologies provide individuals with opportunities to express themselves freely and openly, and to cooperate with others. In consequence, the new era – the era of participation and co-creation started (Kotler et al., 2010). At that stage of markets development, customers do not only consume ideas, news and entertainment, but first of all, they co-create them. This way consumers have become prosumers and their status in marketing strategies change significantly.

The internet marketing, also described as the e-marketing, can be defined as a form of the direct marketing. The internet marketing includes all forms of marketing efforts that are implemented on-line. They include performance on the Internet, the internet thinking, and taking advantage of internet characteristic and potential. When traditional marketing and its internet version are compared, it may be observed that the overall goals, rules and function of marketing performance have not changed, but nowadays the Internet may be indicated as a crucial element when they are planned and introduced (Rosa et al., 2016).

The Internet is a mean of ubiquitous communication. From that perspective, many of its features may be indicated that make it attractive and useful for marketing communication. Media are presumed to be impartial reporters of news and information. However, studies illustrated that the sentiment expressed in media coverage about a brand can be measured and diffused beyond the publications' initial reach via social media (Perotti and Tuten, 2019)

Social media presence is one of the activities that are related to the concept of the internet marketing. Social media can be defined as different applications, internet platforms and media, that are aimed at making interactions, cooperation and exchange of information between users possible and easier (Kim&Ko, 2012). They use technological and ideological basis of the Web 2.0 concept for effective performance. The Web 2.0 concept indicated the ways to design and prepare internet solutions that make it possible to connect as many cooperating users of various devices and operational systems, as possible, basing on open, light technologies that enable revealing the collective intelligence and benefiting from it. Publication of information generally just starts the process of communication. The information may be adopted, adjusted and spread in different directions by different participants of the process, who become receivers first, and then the senders of the messages. Social media are aimed at dialogue, discussion and polemics. They enable very precise targeting and conduction of promotion campaigns basing on information that are detailly profiled. They may be used to animate brand communities members by taking advantage of the their peers trust. They also foster a systematic development of the word-of-mouth marketing efforts performed by clients from the customer databases (Shih, 2012).

Centralizing the media promotion campaign on television does not mean ignoring the importance of other channels; the current society tends towards maximum technology. Once aware of the consumer's need to receive rapid information, sports clubs and sports organizations must create sites to meet these needs. Moreover, today there is the possibility to create personal pages on different social platforms whose efficiency should not be disregarded: Facebook, Twitter, etc. (Luminita and Ștefănică, 2017).

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Example of social media include social networking like Facebook, and Twitter also sites, photo and video sharing sites like YouTube and many others (Malkogeorgos et al., 2013).

There are several types of websites that can be indicated as the ones that follow the Web 2.0 trend. Among them, the following may be defined as the most popular ones:

- Social networks, which can be described as a tangible reflection of different social relations on the Internet. Social networks are created to enable communication between various users. Facebook may be indicated as the most popular social network at the moment.
- Blogs are the websites that present personality or opinions of their authors. They may cover very different topics and represent very different forms.
- Social media; the Internet is no longer only a channel of communication, but it has also become a mean to communicate. Wherefore, different forms of on-line grassroot initiatives may be observed, such as: civil journalism, social catalogues. Users, not the editorial boards, rate attractiveness of contents (www.wykop.pl, for example).
- Social sharing which enables co-sharing of different types of the content and issuing recommendations (YouTube for example).
- Social knowledge bases, in which the owner of the content may not be indicated.
- Virtual realities in the form of applications that can be run in a browser, or can be installed in the computer. They replicate the real world or virtual fantasy words (TheSimsOnline.com or WorldofWarcraft.com).
- Content aggregation and syndication include different tools enabling tracing and sharing of contents due to increasing amount of data accessible on-line (Kaznowski, 2008).

The wide range of tools and forms accessible within the so-called modern marketing make entrepreneurs analyse options that will be the most effective in businesses they run. Social media heavily changed the way we get informed and shape our opinions. Users' polarization seems to dominate news consumption on Facebook. Through a massive analysis on 920 news outlets and 376 million users, we explore the anatomy of news consumption on Facebook on a global scale(Bessi et al., 2017).

Football (soccer), an extremely popular sport, has become a social phenomenon across all social classes and countries as a socio- cultural product strongly manufactured by the media. Football has a leading and dominant role in a large part of the leisure and entertainment industry, above any other sport (Fazenda and Carvalho, 2018). In the specific case of team sports, the majority of reported studies have been in soccer too (Clemente et al, 2015).

The discussion in this paper is aimed at analysing effectiveness of the part of the overall internet marketing strategies of the football clubs that are represented in the Polish Ekstraklasa league. The analyse was conducted basing on their presence on Facebook. The study in the presented form is expedient, due to the growing importance of direct and informal forms of communication between sport clubs and their stakeholders. The necessity to limit the range of the research to fan pages of the Polish football clubs is derived from prior analyses that revealed that communication in their other channels, social media for example, is either too narrow and limited (blogs, YouTube channels), or too intensive (Twitter), or sometimes too informal and impossible to be investigated by any type of research (social databases for example). That characteristics enable any type of marketing effectiveness analyses. Similar research, concerning social media usage in sport, were conducted in the past (Płonka, 2018), but they did not cover any specific period of time, as in case of the study, which situates analysed activities in the certain period of time – in the off-season.

Materials and methods

Hitherto, discussions that may be found in the literature have mainly considered different types of performance on social media, major themes of communication and results of marketing efforts for sport. Thereby, effectiveness of communication tools to reach stakeholders was analysed and reasons of their implementation was discussed. The works, that were cited above, were mainly orientated on the aspect of social media management in sport clubs, teams and other equities that are related to sport. (Gilliani et al., 2017; Filo et al., 2015; Farrelly et al., 2014). While social network knowledge is general and extensive, few studies have delved into the core knowledge of individual social networks, especially Facebook, which is a social network with over 1.7 billion users worldwide ((Dwivedi et al., 2018).

In the paper, the method of observation was used to analyse marketing performance on social media, on Facebook to be more precise. All the football clubs that are represented in Polish Ekstraklasa were researched. Facebook, as a mean to communicate with fans, was chosen because of its mass popularity among present and prospect fans. Facebook is generally aimed at: costs cutting, direct contacts with the stakeholders, ability to use more informal, personal ways to reach groups of addresses, and easier interactions with people who are interested in contents. In contrast to other social media channels, Facebook helps to find a balance between official and unofficial contents. It is reckon as very effective when speed of information transfer is considered. Moreover, it gathers quite stable groups of users. Communication noise, that interferes the process of communication, and relates to amounts of received information, has less disruptive in its case.

Facebook has already been tested for likes and reactions and concerned content engineering (Lee, 2018), in sport too (Fernandes and Vale, 2016). After indicating and discussing some main characteristics of Facebook, it should be analysed what are the opportunities that it provides sport clubs with, and to what extend the advantage can be taken from its main attributes. Another factor, that was also considered during designing the process of research, was a specific time when research were conducted (January 2020), and verification of the hypothesis considering intensiveness of football clubs performance in media without results of matches as its main component. The hypothesis assumes that, in the period of the off-season, football clubs do not change intensiveness of their performance in social media. During the research process, the method of observation was used. It included registration of any single post/status that was published by any of the 16 clubs from Polish Ekstraklasa league on their official Facebook pages. Additionally, the amount of followers were also registered, number of reactions and comments, as well as the topics of published posts. The data was gathered between 1 and 31 January 2020. Then, it was analysed using quantitative and qualitative methods. In case of quantitative analysis, the Spearman's rang correlation coefficient was used (Cavallo, 2020). The method is a nonparametric measure to assess statistical dependence between the ranking of two variables, the median of reactions and average attendance level during matches (Hong Wang, 2016). The qualitative analysis enabled analysis of main topics of the posts and reactions of the target groups after their publication on Facebook. The research problems are a continuation of the theses developed in previous articles by the authors concerning the communication of clubs with their environment (Kowalski, 2016).

Results

As mentioned, the research were conducted in the group of 16 Polish football clubs that play in the Ekstraklasa league in Poland. The results revealed some interesting facts about the clubs' performance in social media - on Facebook. The Table 1 includes the results of research and it includes several information that were a base for further analysis; the results presented in the table were gathered through the observation.

Table 1. Facebook performance of Polish football teams playing in the Ekstraklasa league (January 2020)

A club	Posts	Median of reactions	Median of comments	Maximal number of reactions	Minimal number of reactions	Maximal number of comments	Attendance during the autumn season 2019
Legia Warszawa	139	382	12	3600	87	330	20 513
Cracovia Kraków	135	209	3	3300	13	883	8 456
Pogoń Szczecin	206	237,5	5	2300	19	701	3 812
Śląsk Wrocław	115	284	10	1600	39	151	14 795
Lech Poznań	71	366	27	11000	33	588	17 983
Piast Gliwice	140	106,5	2,5	802	4	65	4 654
Lechia Gdańsk	126	255	9	1600	26	204	11 564
Wisła Płock	137	81	2	971	24	123	5 377
Jagiellonia Białystok	262	86	5	2200	8	155	10 944
KGHM Zagłębie Lubin	138	52	2	848	8	175	3 907
Raków Częstochowa	130	139,5	4,5	711	18	136	3 036
Górnik Zabrze	131	157	11	1200	14	179	15 376
Arka Gdynia	227	85	2	1200	11	60	8 619
Korona Kielce	150	44	1	2100	6	116	5 463
Wisła Kraków	118	408	13,5	2200	23	97	16 016
ŁKS Łódź	183	277	5	1700	104	170	5271

When the data presented in the Table 1 is analysed, it may be observed, that all the teams were very active on Facebook in the analysed period of time. The number of posted contents was quite diversified – from 71 posts by Lech Poznan, up to 262 published by Jagiellonia Białystok. It should be added that many clubs were very active during exhibition games they participated in. Thereat, the posts usually considered comments on current situation, what makes the overall results of the research and their analysis imprecise. Nevertheless, much more important in case of the study, was to investigate effectiveness of the posts. They were analysed basing on number of reactions (likes, emoticons, comments). Because the distribution revealed large variability, expressed by the coefficient of variation (25% in case of Pogonia Szczecin up to 120% for Legia Warszawa), measures of locations (a median and a quartile deviation) were chosen to conduct the statistical analysis. After data proceeding, the highest levels of reaction were revealed in case of Wisła Kraków, Legia Warszawa and Lech Poznań (408, 382, 366 reactions), and the lowest in case of Korona Kielce and KGHM Zagłębie Lubin (44 and

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52 reactions). When the amount of comments was analysed, the highest level of median was identified in case of Lech Poznan (27 comments), and the lowest in case of Korona Kielce (1 comment). At the same time, the maximal level of reactions was observed on the fan page of Lech Poznan and minimal (4) on Piast Gliwice's. The most intensive discussion was evoked by the information about one of the Cracovia Kraków player's birthday, but in case of every club the posts, that were not commented at all, can be found. The medians of the reactions were presented on the Figure 1.

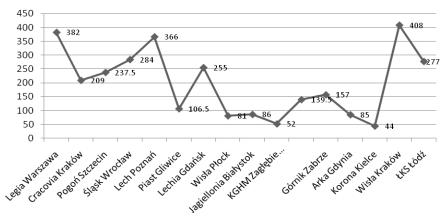
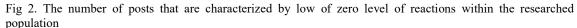
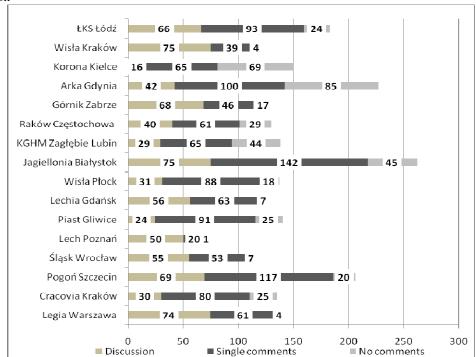


Fig. 1. The medians of relations distribution in case of the Polish Ekstraklasa football clubs.

As the result of the qualitative analyses, the assumption that clubs' posts on Facebook were mostly informative can be made. At the same time, when the level of capitalization of social media potential is analysed, the actions undertaken by the clubs in the researched area, should be qualified as inefficient. When the median of reactions and average attendance during the matches, that were played in autumn season, are analysed, it may be observed that averagely 1 to 6% of Facebook users reacts on posts published by the clubs. Also, the significant number of posts is left without any comments (Fig.2).





The results presented in Fig. 2 indicate, that many posts that were published in January 2020 were commented quite rarely (up to 10 comments), or were left without any comments. Consequently, they may be indicated as ineffectual. From that perspective, many ineffective, in marketing context, posts may be found in communication of: Korona Kielce (134 out of 150 posts), Arka Gdynia (185/227), KGHM Zagłebie Lubin

(109/138), Cracovia (105/135), Raków Częstochowa (90/130), Wisła Płock (106/137), Pogoń Szczecin (137/206) and Jagiellonia Białystok (187/262). Wisła Cracow has fans that may be indicated as the ones with the highest level of involvement in discussions about the club (43 of 118 the posts did not motivate fans to leave any comments).

Data presented in the Table 1 was a base for further structural analysis that enabled indication of relations between activeness of fans performed in social media and attendance during matches. Assuming, that Facebook is a place where fans of football clubs gather, the higher level of fans responsiveness to posts published by the club they support is, the higher attendance level during matches should also be observed. The relationship between the two variables was calculated using the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient.

	Table 2. Input data to	calculate the Spear	man's rank correlation	coefficient.
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Clubs	Attendance rank X1	Reaction rank Y1	Posts rank Y2	X1-Y1	X1-Y2	$(X1-Y1)^2$	(X1-Y2) ²
Legia Warszawa	1	2	10	-1	-9	1	81
Cracovia Kraków	9	8	5	1	4	1	16
Pogoń Szczecin	15	7	14	8	1	64	1
Śląsk Wrocław	5	4	2	1	3	1	9
Lech Poznań	2	3	1	-1	1	1	1
Piast Gliwice	13	11	11	2	2	4	4
Lechia Gdańsk	6	6	4	0	2	0	4
Wisła Płock	11	14	9	-3	2	9	4
Jagiellonia Białystok	7	12	16	-5	-9	25	81
KGHM Zagłębie Lubin	14	15	8	-1	6	1	36
Raków Częstochowa	16	10	6	6	10	36	100
Górnik Zabrze	4	9	7	-5	-3	25	9
Arka Gdynia	8	13	15	-5	-7	25	49
Korona Kielce	10	16	12	-6	-2	36	4
Wisła Kraków	3	1	3	2	0	4	0
ŁKS Łódź	12	5	13	7	-1	49	1
sum	X	х	X	X	X	282	400

Input data was defined to calculate the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. Using the following formula (1) the coefficients was calculated:

$$Rs = 1 - \frac{6\sum_{i=1}^{n} (Yi - Xi)^{2}}{n(n^{2} - 1)}$$
 (1)

Between the attendance and Facebook performance (estimated basing on a number of posts on the fanpage):

$$Rs1 = 1 - \frac{6 * 282}{16(16^2 - 1)} = 1 - 0.41 = 0.59$$

Between the attendance and involvement (estimated basing on the level of funs' responsiveness to posts published by the clubs):

$$Rs2 = 1 - \frac{6*400}{16(16^2 - 1)} = 1 - 0.59 = 0.41$$

The results of calculation indicate, that performance of the clubs on Facebook translates into attendandce during matches. The value of the correlation coefficient in this case is quite high (0,59). It can be assumed, that Facebook and the club's fanpages are the places where fans search for information about their clubs. When the fans involvement is discussed, the value of the coefficient is lower, but also positive. The fans who react may be described as the supporting groups. They may be characterised as highly interested in medial performance of the clubs, as well as in all other, related activities performed by the club and its fans.

Discussion

Analysing marketing performance of Polish football clubs that play in the Ekstraklasa league, they can be described as highly conventional, and their usage in the clubs' promotion is rather typical. Qualitative analysis of the posts published on Facebook allow to formulate the conclusion, that all the clubs use very similar strategies. In January 2020, in the period of the off-season, the contents published on Facebook were related to trainings, preparatory camps, informing about tickets and other current affairs. The timetable of publishing certain contents were notably similar. That observation may be the reason behind the low level of interaction with the followers. The ways of posts publishing and their topics were usual and ordinary. Fan pages are designed typically, according to marketing in social media principles. The fact, that fans are not eager to discuss posts indicate the high level of passivity among fans and emotionless attitude towards communication with the clubs. That situation is probably the result of messages that are overloaded with contents (text and pictures). Fans, who receive that type of information tend to react, but do not want to go into any more intensive relationship, and they are not willing to peruse the content carefully.

Furthermore, the research also enabled observation what are the ways in which the football clubs marketing departments use their Facebook fan pages. Generally, Facebook is treated only as a mean to pass current information (scores, for example). As a result, followers become disappointed and not involved. Nevertheless, if a Facebook fan page plays a significant role in the process of relationship with fans creation, and ultimately, when it creates a synergic effect with other social media pages (Instagram, Twitter, YouTube), the attendance during matches should also increase. Thus, the results of the study and the calculated coefficients indicate, that the relations between the variables are quite low. In that scope, the necessity to conduct analyses how addresses of communication react, what are the topics of the messages and numbers of comments, should be underlined. Lech Poznań and Wisła Kraków examples prove that it is possible to receive strong reactions from fans even with quite little effort. On the other hand, many clubs choose to publish posts frequently, even at the expense of low levels of reaction and involvement (Arka Gdynia, Jagiellonia Białystok).

The most important aspect of the research is the assumption, that Polish football clubs that represent the highest level of professionalization, use benchmarking in their Facebook performance strategies, acting noticeably similar. That tendency negatively affects active identification and involvement of the clubs' fans. For that reason the tool cannot be defined as unambiguously effective.

Conclusions

Internet marketing performed in social media by football clubs should base on instant interactions with fans. It should not be used only as a way to send information, but also as a tool to build brand communities of fans, who are strongly involved in relation with the club and attend matches it plays. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube, are the tools that are used by the clubs the most frequently. Unfortunately, marketing departments of the football clubs seem not to understand expectations of nowadays fans, who require not only information, but also some entertainment. In that context, it is quite surprising that the clubs do not use a potential of the viral marketing, what was very clearly shown in the study. Instead, they use forms that are unattractive for nowadays users (photos, low quality films, series of posts concerning the same topic, large size posts). This way the potential of social media is not used effectively and the marketing departments seem to target only the most loyal fans.

At the same time, it should be indicated, that the Facebook fan pages are designed professionally, promotional series of short films presented to fans are interesting, and relations to other social media channels are built quite well.

The studies, as the one presented in this paper, should make the clubs revise their presence in social media, and in consequence, make it more adjusted to expectations of not only the current fans, but also, and probably first of all, of the prosper ones.

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