

Soccer and Twitter: virtual brand community engagement practices

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify how consumer engagement practices shape the dynamics of a soccer club virtual brand community.

Design/methodology/approach – A netnographic approach was employed. Using a Python script, more than 7,000 tweets about São Paulo FC soccer club on Twitter were collected and analyzed using the Virtual Brand Community Engagement Practices typology.

Findings – The dynamics of engagement relies on two types of practices: those that comprise the actions of tweeting, retweeting, replying to, mentioning and liking messages from and about the São Paulo FC soccer club profile and those derived from the proposition of Hollebeek *et al.* (2017). Given the dynamics of Twitter, some practices have performed differently than the original proposal, resulting in a slight adaptation of the framework.

Research limitations/implications – Given the length and the netnographic nature of this study, its findings should be considered exploratory. Future studies can build upon the ideas presented here by researching different contexts and focal objects of engagement.

Practical implications – This paper provides the refinement of social media strategies and content development to make them more efficient and to establish a relevant communication channel with audiences. This knowledge can contribute to a better understanding of goals and metrics.

Originality/value – This paper is based on the behavioral nature of engagement in virtual brand communities, which is an increasing topic of interest. To date, few studies have examined online engagement using a practice approach specifically in the sports marketing context.

Keywords Engagement practices, Virtual brand community, Twitter, Sports marketing, Soccer, Netnography

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Soccer is one of the most popular sports and the leading sector in the sports industry, with global market revenue of nearly \$102bn in 2017, including revenues from ticket sales, media rights and sponsorships (Nielsen, 2017). As consumers, sports fans participate in this industry through the consumption of products, attendance at live events, or viewing matches on TV and online streaming. Furthermore, they track sports via social media by following the profiles of athletes and interacting with them by commenting about a topic, mentioning the sponsor or club profile, replying comments and sharing the news.



In this sense, brands can increase their engagement with fans in numerous ways, and the establishment of virtual brand communities, such as Facebook pages and forums, have been one of the key choices of managers (Abeza *et al.*, 2019; Mazodier *et al.*, 2018; Yousaf *et al.*, 2018). Given its strategic importance as a competitive advantage builder (Carlson *et al.*, 2018; Brodie *et al.*, 2011), consumer engagement (CE) has been a central topic of investigations suggested by the MSI (2018).

In the domain of sports marketing, researchers have been investigating the engagement process by exploring its cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects (Brodie *et al.*, 2011), like the research proposed by Alonso-dos-Santos *et al.* (2018), who investigated the relationship of sponsors with CE within virtual brand communities. Another example is the study by Vale and Fernandes (2018), in which consumer motivations to engage with brands on Facebook are investigated.

As shown by Gong (2018) and Hollebeek *et al.* (2017), despite the growing interest in this topic and the seminal work of Schau *et al.* (2009), research about the dynamics of the engagement practices within virtual brand communities in the CE domain of study is limited to date. As a result, there is an opportunity to research the engagement phenomenon using a behavioral approach in order to respond directly to the call from Hollebeek and Macky (2019), Liu *et al.* (2018), Hollebeek *et al.* (2017), Ratten (2016) and Parganas *et al.* (2015) for studies considering particular contexts, brands and industries.

Aiming to contribute to the debate, this paper asks the following research question:

RQ1. How do CE practices shape the dynamics of a soccer club virtual brand community (VBC)?

To answer the question, this research builds upon data from Twitter and is mainly supported by the Virtual Brand Community Engagement Practices (VBCEP) typology proposed by Hollebeek *et al.* (2017) as well as content categories grid adapted from Parganas *et al.* (2015). The methodological approach is based on netnography, which is well-suited to this study because it is a flexible and unobtrusive method adapted to the purpose of studying the dynamics of online communities (Kozinets, 2015).

Understanding CE within a soccer club VBC from a behavioral perspective is relevant for theoretical and managerial reasons. First, by assuming the São Paulo FC Twitter profile as a research context, this knowledge may help researchers exploring the articulation between the behavioral dimension of engagement (Brodie *et al.*, 2011, 2013) and practice theory (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2006; Ortner, 1984) within non-communitarian forms of consumer sociality (Kozinets, 2013, 2015; Smith *et al.*, 2014) and its outcomes. Second, this knowledge can also help managers of soccer clubs to develop social media marketing strategies that stimulate a greater level of interaction (e.g. by producing relevant content, promoting events and broadcasting news) and brand engagement.

This study is structured as follows. First, a literature review addresses the virtual brand communities and sports marketing relationship; this is followed by an explanation of the conceptual foundations of the CE practices in virtual brand communities. The next section presents the methodological steps. In the fourth section, an analysis of findings and a discussion are presented. In the final section, considerations, implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

2. Literature review

2.1 Virtual brand communities and sports marketing

Social networks on the internet are viable through digital platforms known as social media (Jain *et al.*, 2018; Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014). Companies, such as sports clubs, can promote products and services through word-of-mouth, by which consumers transmit informal opinions, criticisms and suggestions about them (Lima *et al.*, 2019; Kozinets *et al.*, 2010).

As argued by Perren and Kozinets (2018), those digital platforms have been changing the process of socializing, communicating and deciding on offers based on established bonds among peers. Within those communities, it is possible to connect and interact with other consumers, constituting what Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) called "brand community (BC)": a non-physical, specialized community based on strong social ties between the members and the brand.

To date, several studies have addressed the foundations of a brand community from different perspectives (e.g. Essamri *et al.*, 2019; Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2015). Regardless of the approach or context, it is possible to observe that members of those social collectives adhere to the three main markers of a BC (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001): the consciousness of kind; shared ritual and a sense of moral responsibility.

The interplay between those three key markers in a VBC (Brodie *et al.*, 2011) is sustained in part by practices of content creation and consumption. As highlighted by Lima *et al.* (2019), the process of sharing brand-related content and consumption experiences contribute to the community's cultural capital as well as of the brand's (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). One of the primary aspects of that dynamics relates to the type of content that is created and shared through the social network, which could have diversified drivers for members engagement (e.g. information, entertainment, personal identity, brand love and so forth) (Vale and Fernandes, 2018).

In this scenario, sports clubs have been taking advantage of social media and the possibility of creating and stimulating VBCs to increase their engagement with fans (Mazodier *et al.*, 2018). Parganas *et al.*'s (2015) work on sports brand management through Twitter, for instance, identified several brand attributes linked to share content emerging during a football season that could be used to generate and maintain CE.

Agreeing with Parganas *et al.* (2017, 2015), the identification and understanding about different types of brand-related content and their outcomes are fundamental to a better comprehension of a VBC's dynamics. In this sense, the maintenance of a given shared culture is somehow related to the set of engagement practices from both brands and their community members.

2.2 Consumer engagement practices in virtual brand communities

As noted by Hollebeek *et al.* (2017), CE could be defined as a way to promote value-laden consumer/firm interactions and relationships. Although interest in this phenomenon has been presented in the Marketing Science Institute – MSI agenda (MSI, 2018) and has been growing, there is a lack of an integrative construct related to it. Seminal studies as well contemporary ones are essential for gaining a better understanding of the phenomenon, even though they use the terms "consumer" and "customer engagement" without clear differentiation between them, as follows:

- (1) Actor engagement (Brodie *et al.*, 2019): "Engagement occurs among different types of *versatile actors*, not just customers, and consumers. Actors can be defined as humans or collections of humans, such as organizations, who are involved in the logic of human exchange systems – including economy and society – and who are typically categorized according to their discrete roles and functions";
- (2) CE in virtual brand communities (Brodie *et al.*, 2013): "Specific interactive experiences between consumers, the brand, and other community members";
- (3) Customer brand engagement (Hollebeek, 2011): "The client's level of motivation with the brand, being context dependent with regard to cognitive, emotional and behavioral impairment during interactions with the brand";

- (4) Customer engagement behavior (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010): “Behavioral manifestation of a customer, going beyond the buying process and resulting in word-of-mouth, recommendations, help to other customers, blog posts and reviews”; and
- (5) CE (Vivek, 2009): “The intensity of participation and connection of an individual with the offers of an organization and its activities initiated by the clients or even organization.”

Despite the plurality of concepts, it can be said that engagement with a focal object is mostly related to brands and their products and services (e.g. Prentice and Loureiro, 2018), their communication efforts (e.g. Mishra, 2019), and their VBC (e.g. Weijo *et al.*, 2019). Hence, following Brodie *et al.* (2013), the phenomenon can be discussed by a cognitive (i.e. to learn), emotional (i.e. to love), and behavioral (i.e. to interact) approach, having both processes and sub-processes.

The view of engagement as a behavioral manifestation, which is the perspective assumed here, was recently explored by Hollebeek *et al.* (2017) based on practice theory (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2006; Ortner, 1984). Extending the proposal of Schau *et al.* (2009), Hollebeek *et al.* (2017) conceived a typology of VBCEP, comprising eight different types of practices (e.g. greeting – welcoming new members to the community and ranking – when members invest in their social role and status) that contribute to and maintain the community’s identity and strengthen its members’ shared consciousness (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001). Essentially, VBCEPs denote the repeated and routinized behaviors that allow shared meanings among members of a given community, providing consumer-related opportunities or co-creating value with/for other members (Islam *et al.*, 2017; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2017).

The practices are organized in a set of sub-processes (e.g. procedural – reflecting the new member initiation phase; social (altruistic) – relating to social interactions as a full member; achievement based – displaying the community-, member- or brand-related achievements) that can be related to a specific role in the creation of social dynamics. Hence, observing the sub-processes’ flow and relationship, one can understand the engagement process in a VBC by applying a behavioral approach (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2017). Table I summarizes the typology.

This behavioral view is aligned with one of the main aspects of the relationship between sports clubs and their public, which is the level of engagement grounded in the practices of buying tickets, attending games at stadiums, and commenting on social media posts (Florea *et al.*, 2018). Hence, due to the popularity of social media and its relevance to marketing and branding efforts (Jin *et al.*, 2019), investing in driving that type of engagement via branded content could maintain and nurture a two-way communication with fans (Abeza *et al.*, 2019), improve data collection (Moussa, 2019), attract sponsorship (Hazari, 2018) and increase brand awareness (Aichner, 2019).

VBCEP process	VBCEP type	Description
Procedural VBCEP sub-process	Greeting	Welcoming new members
	Regulating	Providing rules and guidelines
Social (altruistic) VBCEP SUB-process	Assisting	Helping other community members
	Appreciating	Display of thankfulness and gratitude to the members
Achievement-based VBCEP sub-process	Empathizing	Showing support or understanding for other community members’ feelings
	Mingling	Specific online or offline interactions
	Celebrating	Noting and commemorating milestones
	Ranking	Members’ investments in the development of their status

Table I.
Virtual brand community engagement practices (VBCEP) typology

Source: Hollebeek *et al.* (2017)

3. Methods

The aim of this research is to identify how CE practices shape the dynamics of a soccer club VBC. To do so, this research is based on a mixed-methods approach, which has the netnography (Kozinets, 2015) as the main one. This social method considers interactions between users as a cultural phenomenon, which presents itself as an appropriate choice for exploring important dimensions of online behavior (Belk *et al.*, 2013).

3.1 Research context

The Twitter profile of São Paulo FC (i.e. @SaoPauloFC) has been selected because it is a significant player in South American and global soccer, with over 16m fans in Brazil. The club has gathered impressive global and regional titles over its history, and it is one of the top Latin American sports clubs on social media, with approximately 5m followers on Twitter (Socialbakers, 2018), which has more than 29m users in Brazil (Statista, 2018).

Even though the microblogging platform can be seen as a non-communitarian form of consumer sociality (Kozinets, 2013, 2015; Smith *et al.*, 2014), the collective of São Paulo FC profile and the users who interact with it can be considered a VBC. It comprises what Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) proposed: a non-physical, specialized community based on strong social ties between the members and the brand.

3.2 Data collection

The first netnography step was the joining process of the first author by following the São Paulo FC Twitter profile and familiarization with its dynamics. There was no formal structured script for initial observation, which followed user interactions within the community from May 23, 2016 to May 27, 2017. During this ongoing stage, several reflective field notes were made aiming to identify social dynamics and support initial coding.

In order to keep the amount of data limited to a manageable level (Kozinets, 2002), data were retrieved using a Python script considering the following twofold approach: 3,205 tweets from the São Paulo FC profile were collected; more than 4,511 tweets about the club made by Twitter users were considered. Each tweet included ID, date, time, message, the number of retweets and likes. In this sense, although it was possible to collect more entries, those collected tweets were already significant for the purpose of this research since they were: relevant; active; interactive; substantial; heterogeneous; and data-rich (Kozinets, 2002).

3.3 Data analysis

Data were manually analyzed using content analysis procedure (Bardin, 2007). For both data sets, each author individually performed: pre-analysis – read all tweets line-by-line to gain initial understanding about the nature of the data; codification – considered themes as registration unit; and categorization – grouped data by semantic criteria.

Specifically, for the first data set, which is composed of 3,205 tweets from the São Paulo FC profile, all tweets were analyzed in order to gain a better understanding of the type of branded content and consequent interactions. Then, they were organized into a category grid based on Parganas *et al.* (2015). For the second data set, from the approximately 4,511 tweets, 1,000 tweets were considered since data reached saturation, which means that no significant new insights were emerging from it (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Aiming to assure trustworthiness of this qualitative research, several discussion rounds were performed (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). Reflections on data promoted thoughts and ideas about the social phenomenon and were compiled in a Google Docs document, which was followed by the process of triangulation for comparing classified data, identification of patterns, and coherence with the category criteria (Belk *et al.*, 2013).

The different backgrounds and levels of involvement with soccer (i.e. São Paulo FC fan, enthusiast, indifferent) of all authors played a major role in the introspection process (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993). It is worth mentioning that all steps and activities were based on local regulations from the Brazilian Association of Research Companies (ABEP, 2018).

4. Findings

4.1 *The first type of soccer club VBCEP on Twitter: retweets and likes from users*

From the first data set, one can observe the action of retweet and liking the tweets from São Paulo FC, which are the usual ways of interacting, expressing approval, starting conversations, showing authority, and spreading information on the social media (Smith *et al.*, 2019). These behavioral reactions only occur after a tweet about a topic has been made, which reinforces the importance of observing what kind of branded content generates more engagement (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). Table II summarizes findings from the first data set into a branded content category grid adapted from Parganas *et al.* (2015) and reactions from users.

During the period of analysis, São Paulo FC participated in the Brazilian League, the Libertadores da América Cup and the Brazilian Cup, which were all covered by the club's profile with "Match Highlights", totaling 1,221 tweets and generating more than 400,000 interactions. This category represented almost two times more tweets than the second one ("Team News", with 666 tweets). The "Match Highlights" were tweeted twice a week, and the average of tweets decreased from 21 to 13 on the days when there were no highlights.

Considering "Dialogue", the club's responses to individuals were concentrated on three dates, all of which were before largely attended matches. "Product Attribute" categories constituted 59 percent of the total tweets, generating an average of 395 user interactions. This high result was obtained because tweets about players' hiring news provoked a strong reaction from the users. Moreover, the 38 goals scored during this period resulted in an average of 1,320 interactions. Match Highlights, Sponsor messages, Youth Academy and Dialogue resulted in fewer interactions than the total average of 355 retweets or likes. On the other hand, tweets about past idols, club news, stadium, history, fans and tickets overcame the average, as they were more visible on the VBC.

Given the deeply engaging nature of sports, it is plausible to assume that the playful activity of interacting with social media content could become something more serious and charged with instrumental, emotional, material, and temporal costs (de Almeida *et al.*, 2018). At this point, it is possible to observe the possibility of brands stimulating different levels of engagement and outcomes by promoting different types of content within the network. Hence, for instance, having Match Highlights tweets occurring almost in real time and its number of interactions, the importance of Twitter for the São Paulo FC marketing communication strategy as a relationship-building platform could be considered as a relevant choice.

4.2 *The second type of soccer club VBCEP on Twitter: mentioning and replying*

Based on findings from the second data set, the first VBCEP is the greeting, which welcomes new members to the community. Since Twitter has an asynchronous nature, one can join and be present without being noticed by other members (Buechel and Berger, 2018). The only messages that contained a welcoming phrase were related to hired professionals, such as a new coach or player. The following tweets, from August 2, 2016, serve as examples:

@user0: "With great inspiration, I will do my best on Thursday for @SaoPauloFC!"

@user1 replying to @user0 and @SaoPauloFC: "Great to see you are trying to speak Portuguese."

As a second practice, regulating, former members of the community share information about rules, norms and guidelines with new members. Since it is unusual to know whether a new member joined the community by following the club's Twitter profile, it is uncommon to find

Dimension	Brand attribute (category)	Criteria	Tweets	Retweets (RT)	Likes	Total of interactions	Avg. RTs	Avg. Likes	Avg. interactions
Product	Match highlights	Live updates during the match	1,221	159,421	257,973	417,394	130.6	211.3	341.8
	Team News	Regarding the current squad, training sessions, coaching staff	666	87,099	240,537	327,636	130.8	361.2	491.9
	Youth Academy	About the structure, athletes, and competitions of the club's young categories' squads	526	28,513	97,983	126,496	54.2	186.3	240.5
Non-product	Dialogue	Responses from the club's official Twitter profile to fans	236	1,186	3,091	4,277	5.0	13.1	18.1
	Tickets	About match tickets	148	15,794	43,813	59,607	106.7	296.0	402.8
	Sponsor	Sponsors, promotions, and advertisings	115	7,391	26,112	33,503	64.3	227.1	291.3
	Club News	Regarding the social activities of the club in the community	96	17,391	35,707	53,098	181.2	371.9	553.1
	Fans	Focused on the supporters' behavior, their importance to the club, and membership programs	72	7,919	24,152	32,071	110.0	335.4	445.4
Total	History	Past records of matches and competitions, historic facts and dates, the club's colors, mascot, symbols	62	8,325	20,092	28,417	134.3	324.1	458.3
	Idol	Important players, coaches, or executives	49	15,483	33,038	48,521	316.0	674.2	990.2
	Stadium	About the arena; events in the stadium	14	2,052	5,276	7,328	146.6	376.9	523.4
			3,205	350,574	787,774	1,138,348	109.4	245.8	335.2

Source: Adapted from Parganas *et al.* (2015)

Table II.
Summary of branded content categories and interactions

someone trying to moderate interactions. Although the act of trolling (i.e. insulting) is a common online behavior (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017), moderation efforts were not identified.

Regarding the third practice, members of the community assist each other in several situations. In the São Paulo FC Twitter VBC, when this practice occurs, it is mainly related to match tickets, as seen in one interaction on November 11, 2016, when a user reported an issue during the buying process and was helped by members. The following tweets serve as an example of the assisting practice:

@user4: "Is anyone buying tickets for the next week match of @SaoPauloFC? I'm having trouble with it. FU@&!"

@user5 replying to @user4: "Happening the same here. I'm gonna try to do it at the store. You should do the same. The website is down."

In addition to the behavioral focus of the VBCEP, this process also highlights cognitive and emotional CE (Brodie *et al.*, 2013), given the nature of the interactions. At this point, it is possible to relate these practices to the sense of moral duty shared between members of a BC (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001).

The fourth VBCEP relates to the appreciating action, through which members express gratitude and thankfulness toward other members. The communication of the sense of gratefulness for belonging to the community is perceived in tweets like the following:

@user8: "Twitter is a good platform because you can write anything about @SaoPauloFC that you want to share with your friends, right? ☺."

One of the aspects of the VBCEP is associated with the process of empathizing, which reflects the emotional bond with or support for other community members even when the theme of the discussion is not brand-related. In the São Paulo FC VBC, it is possible to illustrate that fifth practice by observing the tweet of an interview with a well-known player who was leaving the club after several surgeries. The next few tweets from July 16, 2016 show the empathizing practice:

@user11 replying to @SaoPauloFC: "Farewell, master @player!"

@user12 replying to @SaoPauloFC: "I had the same issue with my knee [...] thanks for everything, @player!"

The sixth VBCEP relates to social interactions online or offline with the members of the community and is called mingling. This kind of practice can be seen in tweets that invite fans to meet before a match to organize choreographies, arrange songs, and distribute flags. The following tweets before a match, which occurred in June 26, 2016, illustrate the practice:

@user15: "Bus to Campinas; Match: @SaoPauloFC X Ponte Preta; Date: Sunday, July 03, 4PM; Leaving time: 12PM; Ticket: R\$ 50,00; Contact: 3333-3333."

@user16 replying to @user15: "Can I go with you even if I don't belong to the official fan club?"

Collectively, assisting, appreciating, empathizing and mingling comprise the second set of sub-process. At this point, participants are operating as full members of the community and promoting the value of the soccer club at the same time to their peers.

As this VBC is related to sports, it is natural that celebrating, the seventh VBCEP, emerges as the most prevalent one. As proposed by McAlexander *et al.* (2002), this practice refers to the commemoration of achievements, such as the one identified in the São Paulo FC VBC on Twitter (e.g. cheering because of a winning). To illustrate, during a match on May 27, 2017, some users tweeted:

@user17: "GOOOOALLL!!! That is what I'm talking about @SaoPauloFC! You SUCK, @competitor!!!"

@user18 replying to user 17 and @SaoPauloFC: "Did you see that?! The guy deserves the PUSKÁS prize!"

In the case of a sport VBC, it is worth mentioning that losing a match could start the opposite behavior of commemorating an achievement, which would lead to complaining and insulting practices. None of these behaviors are foreseen in the original VBCEP (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2017) typology. Since the practice of regulating is not usually seen on Twitter, one can observe several tweets with aggressive and negative messages sustaining a new type of VBCEP called complaining. The following examples illustrate complaining:

@user20 replying to @SaoPauloFC: "You piece of shi*!"

@user21 replying to @SaoPauloFC: "Diiiie motherfu****!!!"

@user22 replying to @player and @SaoPauloFC: "You don't deserve the money that you make [...] go fu** yourself and start playing like a decent human!"

Finally, the eighth VBCEP points to the practice of members investing in the development of their personal positioning or status to become influencers on the topic, which is called ranking. There are several users with a considerable number of followers, some of whom having the blue badge Twitter verified account, which is given only to authentic and well-known profiles. The following thread of tweets is from a famous person (585,000 followers) who organized a charity event:

@user20: "Thank you for following me and supporting this cause. Regards! @SaoPauloFC"

@user 21 replying to @user20: "Actually, we are the one who has to thank you. You are part of our history! Keep us updated!"

As suggested by Cotter (2018), a member wishing to become an influencer, or someone recognized as having exclusive information about a topic could start tweeting messages about, for instance, new players contract before TV shows and newspapers. To illustrate, the following tweet was retrieved from June 14, 2016, when a famous person (26,000 followers) tweeted:

@user22: "Today, the work has started early! I'm already at the @SaoPauloFC, and in just a few minutes will give you exclusive information!"

@user23 replying to @user22: "I hope you tell us more about the contract of @player [...] that would be good news."

Celebrating and ranking together comprise the third achievement-based VBCEP sub-process (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2017). Here, it is possible to observe members displaying their community-related (e.g. number of followers), brand-related (e.g. purchase of a new uniform), and general life achievements (e.g. have met a player), as well as celebrating these achievements with others.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical implications

This study extends existing theory on CE practices in VBC by adopting a behavioral perspective (e.g. Sheng, 2019; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2017; Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Schau *et al.*, 2009). The first theoretical contribution (MacInnis, 2011) is related to the VBCEP (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2017) typology and its application on a non-communitarian form of consumer sociality (Kozinets, 2013, 2015; Smith *et al.*, 2014), such as Twitter. Given the dynamics and functionalities of Twitter (Chen and Berger, 2016), the practice of greeting and regulating performed differently than originally proposed, with the last one excluded from the Hollebeek *et al.*'s (2017) proposal.

Moreover, since the research context was a soccer club on Twitter, the addition of a new practice called *Complaining*, when fans tweet negative messages about and to São Paulo FC, is suggested. Even though the framework needed to be slightly adapted in this research, one can observe how CE practices shape the dynamics of a VBC on Twitter by observing the ongoing process of interactions. Figure 1 depicts the updated flow chart.

As a second theoretical implication, it can be said that the Parganas *et al.* (2015) content grid could work as an adjunct framework for the analysis of soccer club VBCs since one can observe which type of content generates interactions. As highlighted by Mishra (2019), Thomas (2018), and Brodie *et al.* (2013), the CE process has behavioral antecedents and consequents depending on the type of content promoted by the brand on social media.

Finally, the third theoretical contribution relates to the integrated marketing communication (IMC) domain. As suggested by Finne and Grönroos (2017), given the growth of social media and consumer empowerment, it is mandatory new research efforts that account for a better understanding of consumers sense-making process (Mick and Buhl, 1992) and marketing communication efforts. In this case, the conjugation of both adapted VBCEP typology and the content category grid proposed in this research contribute to it. The adoption of an integrative inductive/deductive research approach could allow the comprehension of emerging categories, practices, and meanings from members experiences within the community that can be articulated with theories on CE, brand actions and consumption (Viswanathan *et al.*, 2018).

5.2 Managerial implications

This research offers insights into social media marketing efforts for building stronger brands and better connections with consumers, considering three levels of contribution, as follows: IMC strategy; social media strategy and digital marketing metrics.

First, nowadays, new media technologies and divided consumer attention have been promoting several challenges to marketing managers despite their company size or context, which can be seen in their social media strategies (Gómez *et al.*, 2019). In this complex scenario, the optimal integration of marketing communications become mandatory in order to affect consumers decision making process throughout their buying journey (Payne *et al.*, 2017). A manager who is interested in exploring campaigns across platforms could rely on the proposed VBCEP typology and content category grid to guide and observe the interplay between TV ads, product placement, hashtags on Twitter, and the outcomes of such omnichannel integration (Hilken *et al.*, 2018).

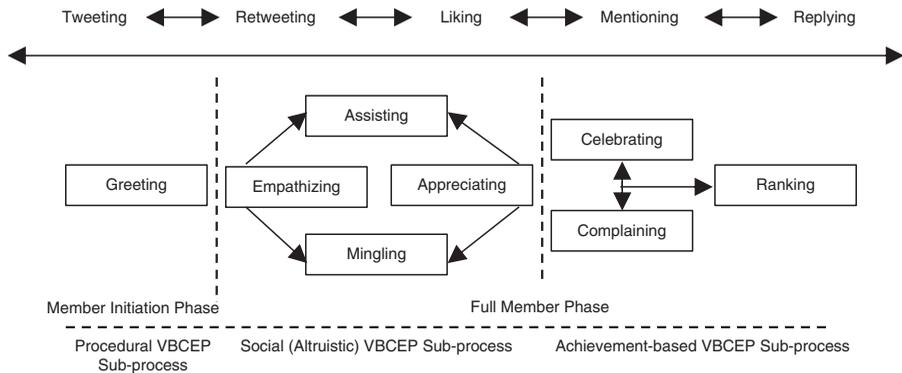


Figure 1.
Soccer Club VBCEP
dynamics on Twitter

Source: Elaborated by authors

As the second implication for marketers, given the growing interest in CE practices (MSI, 2018) and sports marketing (Hoskyn *et al.*, 2018), managers could use this study to refine their social media strategies in order to have their content more spreadable and likeable. Furthermore, the use of the adapted VBCEP typology and content category grid as proposed in this research can help managers to stimulate the co-creation of meaning for brands on Twitter, since the VBCEP (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2017) typology originally comes from members interaction and their consumption experiences.

Finally, the VBCEP flow chart proposed here could help professionals to guide their goals and metrics selection per media channel. By observing the content promoted and the dynamics of the resulting interactions, they can understand which type of content generates quantitatively and qualitatively more engagement. Also, given the plurality of brand touchpoints in the consumer journey (Farah *et al.*, 2019), it is fundamental to have additional criteria for comparing results across several types of media so that better key performance indicators – KPI could be defined (Keegan and Rowley, 2017).

5.3 Limitations and opportunities

Like all research, this qualitative and exploratory study has limitations that deserve attention. First, the research context is limited to Twitter and the São Paulo FC soccer club. Despite the size and relevance of Twitter, it is not the same social media platform as the one observed in the original VBCEP proposal (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2017), which required proper adaptation. For the selected soccer club, one can argue that different teams possibly generate different types of interactions, which may lead to an opportunity to research distinct contexts, such as brands, sports and social media platforms.

With respect to the methodological approach, both netnography (Kozinets, 2015) and content analysis (Bardin, 2007) have their limitations. Rather than focusing on statistical generalizability, this research is focused on whether the findings and insights from the study could be meaningfully transported to other contexts (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). Therefore, future research could be longer and adopt a quantitative approach, such as one related to the domain of Big Data (e.g. Alaei *et al.*, 2019) and social media analytics (e.g. Pai and Alathur, 2018) to identify key factors that influence engagement practices to validate the current exploratory findings and to be as generalizable as possible.

Finally, as shown by Hollebeek *et al.* (2017), the theoretical perspective that framed this investigation has limitations as well. First, the VBCEP typology only considers the consumers' online engagement practices without accounting for the influence of the offline aspects of engagement. Thereby, new investigations could consider the relationship between online and offline engagement practices in addition to the verification of the member phase status and nature of practices.

Also, given the collective aspect of sports marketing (e.g. teams, fans, associations), it would be interesting to observe future researches exploring the engagement phenomenon framed by the emerging Actor Engagement (Brodie *et al.*, 2019) proposal, which involves multiple actor interactions in broader networks, within the sports marketing domain.

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