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ONLINE FOOTBALL FANDOM: AN ANALYSIS OF THE COMMUNITIES FORMED AROUND 12 BRAZILIAN TOP PROFESSIONAL CLUBS ON TWITTER

Ana Carolina Vimieiro
Queensland University of Technology

Renato Vimieiro
The University of Newcastle

Abstract

This paper analyses Twitter conversations about 12 of the most popular professional football clubs in Brazil. More precisely, we explore the dynamics of these conversations in a daily basis, highlighting variations found between match-days and other days. We apply a series of digital methods to investigate what football fans are doing on Twitter, what they are sharing, how they are talking to each other, and which devices they are using to post their messages. This study extends for three months, between September and November 2013, and includes around seven million tweets. This empirical analysis is used to reflect upon the implications of new media technologies to football fandom practices, an issue that has not been significantly explored in the previous literature.

Keywords

football; fandom; digital fandom; supporter; digital method

Introduction

Even though Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other spaces have been largely used for sport-related conversation and sport fan production, those practices have not received substantial attention from either social sciences or humanities scholars so far. Gibbons and Dixon (2010) are accurate in outlining this gap, but they do not go further in empirical and analytical terms. They also perceptively pointed out a series of historical and theoretical reasons sustaining it. For them, there are both an overvaluation of the 'authentic'/'traditional' supporter and a downgrade of other sport fans as inauthentic and only 'consumers' in most research about sport fandom. This distinction between authentic vs. inauthentic fans play out in the football scenario as a dispute between the notion of traditionality — which includes values related to the working class, masculinity,

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and local clubs — and one of “new fandom” — global clubs, family football, and consumption via media (Nash, 2000). Combined with a rigid separation between ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ worlds still in vogue in this area at the time of the publication of Gibbons and Dixon’s paper, online communities were receiving less attention than they deserved because they were regarded at some level as inauthentic (Gibbons & Dixon, 2010).

Since the publication of their work, the few studies in this area that use online content as source of analysis do not properly discuss the specificities of sport fandom practices in a changing media environment. This state of things opposes to a rather dissimilar situation in the pop culture fandom area. Recognising that fans have been historically early adopters and creative users of emerging media since long ago, researchers in this area have largely explored online fan communities and the implications of the web 2.0 to fandom practices (Baym, 2007; Booth, 2010; Jenkins, 2006; Pearson, 2010).

In Brazil, football fans have gathered online at least since early in the 2000’s to chat about their clubs, players’ performance and so on. The first significant communities were formed in Orkut, the most popular networking platform in Brazil at the time. The majority of them were created in 2004. However, they are now losing members while the number of followers and likes of the official accounts of the same clubs on Twitter and Facebook are increasing (Figure 1). For this study, Twitter was chosen as the data source because of its accessibility.

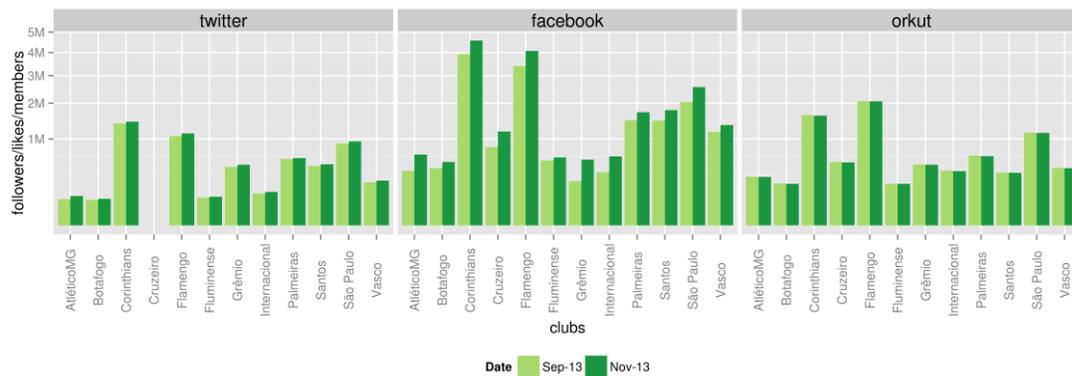


Figure 1: Evolution of Brazilian football clubs on Twitter, Facebook and Orkut from Sep to Nov 2013.

Methodology

We divided this study in five phases: planning, collection, pre-processing, processing, and visualisation/analysis. We used yourTwapperkeeper to collect the messages. However, before this phase, it was necessary to learn the keywords that football supporters use on Twitter to archive the conversations. Many challenges were found in this planning stage: some clubs in Brazil have names that are common nouns; their names and nicknames are words in other languages than Portuguese; and Twitter users in Brazil use much less hashtags than English-speaker users. To solve it, we used the name and one nickname for each club to collect the data, followed by a pre-

processing phase in which many non-related messages were filtered out of a total of 42 million tweets. This filtering process selected: a) only messages in Portuguese; and b) tweets that included one of the keywords of a list that we created with names of current players, the head coach and other staff of each club, plus usual terms related to football such as goal, championship, referee and so on. Everything that did not comply with those rules was excluded from our corpus. The final dataset has around 7 million tweets posted over 12 weeks in 2013, and the amount of messages by club matches the size of their respective fan bases.

In the processing phase, we used the Twitter metrics proposed by Bruns (2011), together with information collected from other sources to create a table. In this table, the Twitter metrics generated for each day were matched with the respective details about that day in the schedule of each club. For instance, we added information about the matches, the place where the club was playing (home/away or if it was a derby), and whether the game was being broadcast on free TV or only on pay TV. This information, together with the Twitter metrics, allowed us to create charts that summarise the data of all clubs (as in Figures 2a, 2b and 2c) or use specific clubs as examples (as in Figures 2d, 2e and 2f).

Results and brief analysis

Our results indicate that football fans talk in a more spontaneous way in match-days, sharing significantly less URLs than in days with no matches (Figure 2b). On the other hand, they tend to talk more to each other in days with no games, when more directed messages (genuine replies) were found (Figure 2a). The proportion of Instagram and Foursquare URLs is larger when the clubs are on the pitch (Figure 2f), when there is also an increase in the proportion of mobile applications being used by fans to connect to Twitter (Figure 2d). YouTube URLs are mostly shared in post match-days, which make sense, once fans are sharing the highlights and goals (Figure 2f).

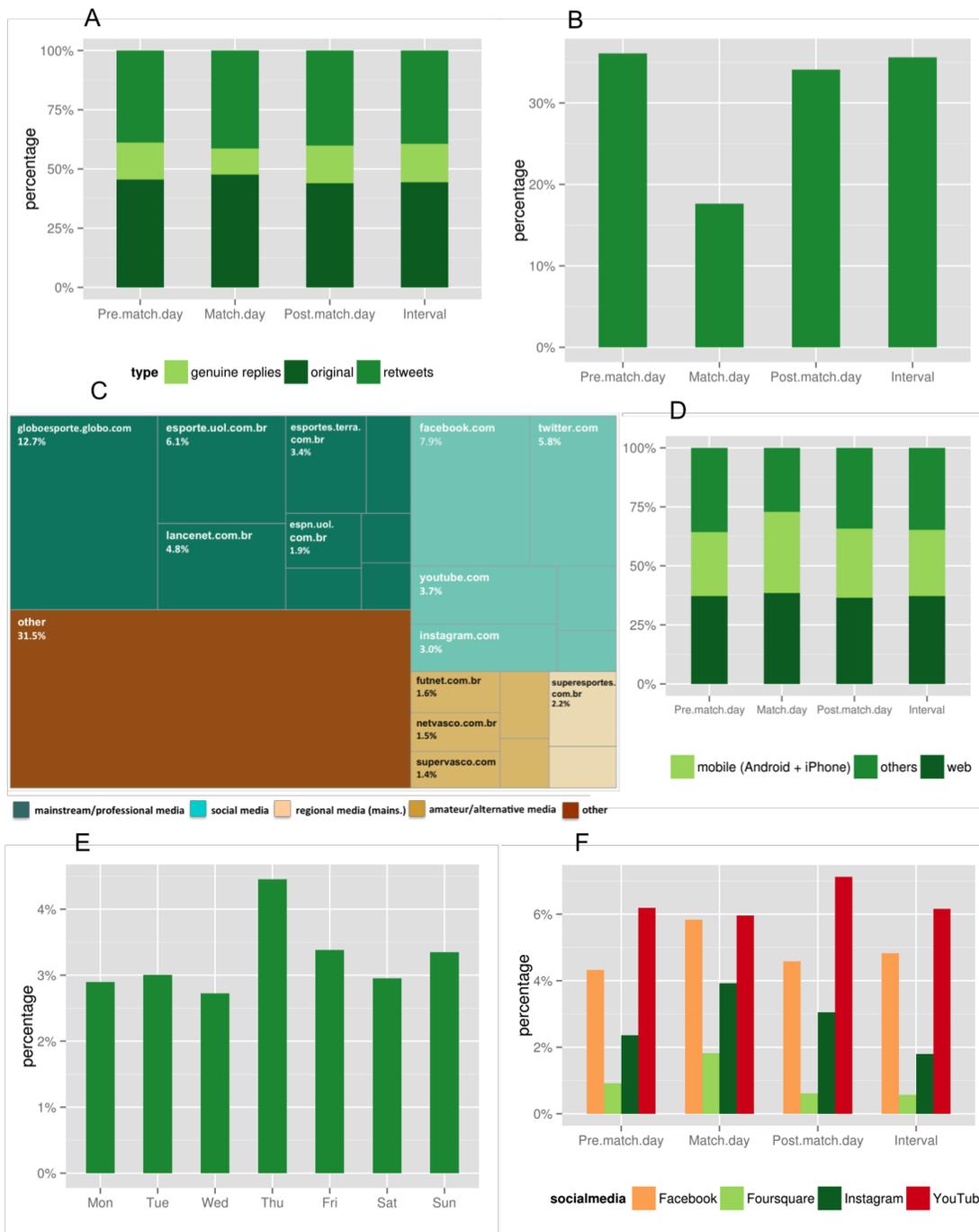


Figure 2: (a) Types of interaction by day type (all clubs); (b) Tweets with URLs by day type (all clubs); (c) Top domains (all clubs); (d) Applications used by day type (Atlético-MG); (e) Blog URLs by day of the week (Atlético-MG); (f) Social media URLs by day type (Atlético-MG).

The amount of URLs of blogs increases Thursdays, Fridays and Sundays (Figure 2e). This is also comprehensible since many fans and journalists that keep football-related blogs generally have a similar routine, posting analyses in the days following matches (which are held mostly Wednesday and Thursday evenings, and Sunday afternoons). Even though such communities are strongly influenced by the fans themselves (the top

50 most central users in each community include many supporters), mainstream media websites are still the dominant information sources (Figure 2c).

Conclusion

Our data drove us to disagree with some pre assumptions still strong in the football fandom area that those discussing football online are not the same fans that attend matches (one of the reasons that the former were regarded as “inauthentic”). Indeed, the data shows that fans adopting Twitter for football- related conversations use more mobile applications and share more Foursquare and Instagram URLs in match-days. The data also revealed that all 12 clubs have strong communities, with very active blogspheres and countless participatory initiatives which include YouTube channels with original production, radios, podcasts, wikis and so on. Yet, these communities have groups of central users: supporters that week in, week out are the most influential ones over the conversations going on within their communities. The significant point is that these fans are mostly not associated with the traditional organisations of football supporters, called in Brazil “torcidas organizadas”. In this sense, football fan bases seem to be gaining a distinct shape in the digital age: one more fragmented and decentralised. And the hierarchy follows the hierarchy of contemporary group formations: legitimacy and authority are less formally attributed, being rather constituted within networked interactions.

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