Hashtag activism by brand lovers: a netnographic study

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Abstract: Hashtag activism has been receiving a lot of attention from academics and the media due to its power as a symbol of protest and its ability to open debate on important social issues. Social network sites (SNS) stand out as online platforms where people spend time and communicate with each other and hashtags offer interesting features to leverage message reach. SNS users adopt hashtags to share their opinions and often to influence the decisions of others, such as peers, politicians, and brands. Despite the relevance and attention that hashtag activism has received from the media and public opinion, literature on this topic is still scarce, particularly in terms of its impact on brands and business strategies. This article aims to fill this gap by exploring hashtag activism conveyed by sport fans. A netnographic study was conducted regarding the hashtag #juninhonocorinthiansnao, directed at a Brazilian football club. The study demonstrates that brand lovers use hashtag activism to protect brand values and to fight against actions that are not coherent with the essence of the brand and its communication, transforming it into a tool for brand control.

Keywords: social network sites; SNS; social media marketing; brand control; netnography; sports marketing; football fans.

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1   Introduction

Hashtags are powerful communication tools that can increase the reach of a message. Social network sites (SNS) enable their users to categorise their posts with hashtags, which facilitates search, and the most popular hashtags on platforms such as Twitter are indicators of the topics that are trending the most. Hashtags are often used by social movements to foster debate and disseminate ideas and opinions, giving rise to what is called hashtag activism, a form of online activism. Activism is defined as the action of campaigning for a cause often coordinated by organisations, unions, political influencers or even everyday people, and can be implemented on the streets, in the media, and through social platforms (Van Haperen et al., 2018). Online activism refers to the many digital ways users challenge and impact individuals and organisations through acts of protest (Minocher, 2019). With hashtag activism, the message one intends to propagate is in the hashtag itself, by combining the '#' symbol with the keyword or idea to be conveyed. It often occurs spontaneously, depending only on the interaction and replication of other users to gain visibility. There are many recent cases of hashtag activism in different spheres such as social, feminist, and consumer issues (Clark, 2016; Duvall and Heckemeyer, 2018; Kim, 2017; Romani et al., 2015). Some prominent examples that stand out for their high levels of engagement are #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #ASLIceBucketChallenge, to name a few.

Online activism also involves consumers. Research has already shown that consumers can promote social change through their individual decisions (Papaoikonomou and Alarcón, 2017). Kozinets and Handelman (2004) define consumer activism as social movements mobilised to consumers' ideological interests. Through campaigns, boycotts, and mobilisations, activists seek to reduce the harmful effects that brands and companies may have on the community (Benmecheddal and Ozcaglar-Toulouse, 2015; Chen, 2020; Varman and Belk, 2009). Overall, the goal of consumer activism is to either damage or support an organisation through actions that intend to bring about change (Lightfoot, 2019). Activism on social media has gained more strength and greater public involvement in a number of online causes (Minocher, 2019). Several factors lead to the increase of message sharing (Kumar and Kaushik, 2018), namely negative feelings regarding brands' actions and strategic options. Still, love and identification are part of the set of feelings that influence relationships between consumers and brands, and consequently some hashtag activism.

Sports have also become a favourable setting for hashtag activism. Numerato (2018) states that outside of its entertainment value and social engagement, football fandom may also have a political side to it. Fan activists often take to SNS to spread messages of discontent and conduct campaigns, mobilisations, and boycotts, leading their teams to new purposes and directions. Numerato (2018) identifies two main dimensions of heterogeneity in fan activism: activism *in* football, which focuses on socio-cultural

characteristics and fandom; and activism *through* football, which addresses social, political, and non-football issues. Numerato and Giulianotti (2018) add that citizen and consumer identities are interrelated, and as a result, many of the fans' reflexive actions are triggered by social and ethical principles, including human rights.

Despite the relevance and attention that hashtag activism has received from media and public opinion, extant literature on this topic is still scarce, particularly its impact on brands and business strategies. This article aims to fill the gap on hashtag activism involving brands by exploring the case of sports fans.

This article includes a netnographic study of a hashtag that had great repercussion in Brazil in August 2018, #JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao [in English, this hashtag would read something like 'Juninho at Corinthians no']. The movement was created by fans of the Sport Clube Corinthians Paulista football team in response to the announcement that the team had signed a player who was accused of assaulting his ex-girlfriend. Our data is comprised of 773 randomly selected Twitter posts from 7 to 12 August 2018, under the hashtag #JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao.

The next section of this article analyses the major contributions of literature on hashtag activism and brand love. We then explain the method of empirical study and present the results from our analysis of extant literature and a sentiment analysis of the posts comprising the data, including illustrations. The last section of the article presents the conclusion and describes management implications and suggestions for future research.

2   Literature review

Hashtags are similar to keywords in that they represent a topic or theme that categorises the message. It is a word or phrase which is preceded by the hash sign (#) and is frequently used in SNS to identify the topic under discussion or the message itself. Although hashtags are frequently used in SNS such as Facebook and Instagram, their origin and popularity are associated with Twitter.

2.1   Hashtag activism

Hashtags have also been widely for integrated debates on social media. They identify what the debate is and provide everyone with a link, thus connecting all the opinions and posts on the topic. The use of hashtags in digital movements gave rise to the term hashtag for activism, also known as #hashtivism (Duvall and Heckemeyer, 2018; Kim, 2017). Today, most of the SNS campaigns that go viral are supported by hashtags that drive and categorise publications and even highlight the most popular discussion topics. Consequently, the hashtag has become a catalyst for online chatting and a mechanism for organising offline protests (Duvall and Heckemeyer, 2018; Ellcessor, 2018). Through hashtags, supporters can share information and give substance to mobilisations. Hashtag activism has opened a space for new discussions on social movements regarding minorities and marginalised groups. This type of mobilisation is particularly effective for raising awareness on social issues, among others.

Hashtag activism has long been used for feminist causes. Since 2012, many feminist movements have mobilised through hashtags (Table 1). Feminist campaigns have gained momentum over the years; they are now globalised and have a great reach across the

network. In 2013, the hashtag #banbossy criticised the use of the word 'bossy', suggesting that it discourages girls and women from pursuing leadership positions. In 2017, the #Metoo hashtag opened up space for sexual harassment reports, and received 12 million posts, comments, and reactions from 4.7 million users around the world, in just 24 hours. When used for social causes, hashtag activism can give a voice to a wide range of issues (such as gender, sexuality, race, and class) in the hopes that a more effective coalition can result (Clark, 2014, 2016). Everyone speaks together through the hashtag. Twitter has also become a place where activists challenge community causes and leverage the power of activism through hashtags, speaking on specific topics to attract attention (Drüeke and Zobl, 2016; Kim, 2017). Users express their opinions and emotions on SNS and often end up speaking out against events, people, institutions and brands.

2.2 The role of emotional bond in hashtag activism

Users who participate in hashtag activism have an emotional connection to the movement (Horowitz, 2017), whether for the cause or for those involved. When a brand or an organisation is included in the protest, either as a target of criticism or a driver of it, a consumer's emotional connection to that brand often leads them to mobilisation. Commitment and love generate consumer-brand attachment (Alvarez and Fournier, 2016), and are key elements as to why activists participate in a mobilisation.

Strong, positive emotions such as love are often mentioned with regard to football fans. Generally speaking, fans are individuals who have an intense interest in and feel involved with a certain team (Crawford, 2004). This leads fans to develop powerful feelings for their favourite team and athletes (Rhee et al., 2016; Vallerand et al., 2008), and one of these feelings is love (Dwyer and Kim, 2011). A fan's favourite team provides invaluable experiences and affects several aspects of his or her life, including family activities (Tamir, 2020). Fans are committed to their teams; they suffer with the defeats and cheer every achievement (Wann et al., 2001). Similarly to brand love, they show a strong connection with the brand's purposes and values.

Consumers engage with brands in different ways and develop an emotional relationship with them. The consumer-brand relationship is a connection between an individual and a brand (Kumar and Kaushik, 2018). Some connections are stronger than others. Loyalty, commitment, trust, and even love are some of the feelings that brand awareness arouses in consumers. Brand love is a concept used to describe passionate consumers, those who consider the brand irreplaceable and feel anxious about its unavailability in the market (Bagozzi et al., 2016; Batra et al., 2012), and experience a deep and lasting affection for the brand (Langner et al., 2016). It is a strong emotional bond, based on the understanding of what the product does and who it serves. According to Albert et al. (2008), brand love includes the following characteristics:

1   passion for a brand

2   brand attachment

3   positive brand assessment

4   positive brand response

5   love declarations to the brand.

Brands provide consumers with unique experiences. From an identification process, consumers build a strong and favourable brand relationship (Kumar and Kaushik, 2018). Love is also one of the many emotions that a brand can stimulate in its customers. Brand lovers also become advocates of that brand (Kemp et al., 2012). Brand love is considered to be the strongest relationship between brand and consumer, since whoever loves a brand makes it irreplaceable and becomes its prominent supporter. In fact, brand lovers advocate the brand's values and connect with other consumers who share the same feeling (Parrott et al., 2015), creating a significant flow of online and offline communication (Dessart et al., 2015). They disclose information and are engaged in their favourite brand cause (Bilro et al., 2018). Brand lovers exceed the loyal customer status, as they are consumers willing to talk about the values, qualities, and benefits of the brand to anyone who wants to listen. These consumers create a dynamic and interactive relationship with the brand and spread it on their social context.

Obviously, brand love depends on the experience and relationship between the consumer and the brand. The love for a brand refers to a consumer's desire for brand experiences. They are intimate with the brand, remain in touch and share the same feelings (Alnawas and Altarifi, 2015), and are ready to support it in times of difficulty as it reminds them of their mission and values. Still, when a brand deviates from its positioning, brand lovers often engage in collective actions and challenge companies to change their strategy (Minocher, 2019). Issues of injustice, dishonesty, or even actions that disregard company values are major reasons why consumers manifest (Romani et al., 2015). Following these contributions, the first research question is defined:

RQ1   How does brand love affect hashtag activism towards the brand?

2.3   Customers' brand control on SNS

Passionate, conscious and sovereign consumers have empowered themselves (Papaoikonomou and Alarcón, 2017) online and offline. For instance, they actively take part in dialogues on SNS and act as co-creators of products, services, and experiences (Füller et al., 2010), they disseminate their opinions and may act as brand ambassadors (MacIntosh, 2017; Maderer and Holtbrügge, 2018). Online platforms have become the place where brands and consumers exchange information (Shao et al., 2015), resulting in social networking, recommendations and satisfaction. Hence, listening to consumers and taking their opinions into consideration has become essential for brands and companies (Gensler et al., 2015; Obeidat et al., 2017). Companies acknowledge the importance of mapping content shared by consumers on social networks, nurturing them into brand evangelists. Both brand communities (Gummerus et al., 2012) and influencers (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019) are particularly important in this dynamic online dialogue amongst consumers, due to the reach and impact of the opinions they share with other consumers. In fact, brand ownership is increasingly shared between consumers and the brands themselves (Goodman et al., 2011; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016), and is particularly demanding for marketers, who must constantly monitor and deal with the mentions about the brand they manage. Consequently, companies need to analyse the feelings published on social media (Ghiassi et al., 2016) to understand the consumer's point of view (Istanbulluoglu, 2017; Melancon and Dalakas, 2018). Lovers, haters (Kucuk, 2016a, 2016b), and influencers play an important role in the brand image and influence the opinions of other online users, consummating the collective power that SNS enables

consumers (Kim and Johnson, 2016; Li, 2016), thus resulting in online control over brands.

As a result of these contributions, a second research question is proposed for this article:

RQ2   How do brand lovers use hashtag activism to control the brand?

3   Method

This article aims to further understand hashtag activism with brands, particularly with activists who are brand lovers. Two research questions were defined based on our literature review. To address the proposed research questions and considering that hashtag activism occurs on SNS, we adopted netnography for the empirical part of this study. As Kozinets et al. (2018) and Kozinets (2013) explain, netnography is a practice that analyses content from online environments (e.g., words, images, drawings, photographs, and sounds). Lugosi and Quinton (2018, p.18) say that netnography "embraces the multi-temporal and multi-spatial nature of internet and technology-mediated sociality and the practices of researching it." It has been used by extant literature (e.g., Ahuja and Alavi, 2018; Loureiro et al., 2019) to look into SNS users' posts and interactions. The behaviour of SNS users, particularly on Twitter, comprises multiple roles with several streams of interaction. As an exploratory research approach, it allows the researchers to scan the actions of individuals, understand their voices, and assimilate their collective online interactions (Kozinets, 2013; Reid and Duffy, 2018).

Sentiment analysis was also conducted as a complement to this study. Sentiment analysis provides more in-depth feedback on an event (Shayaa et al., 2018), often used to interpret a user's speech and analyse perceptions (Ghiassi et al., 2016; Mäntylä et al., 2018). The written content available on social media conveys information about the author's emotional state, his judgment and evaluation (Etter et al., 2018; Kabakus and Kara, 2017; Pang and Lee, 2008; Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2013). Sentiment analysis uses methods, techniques, and tools that detect and extract information, such as opinion and attitudes, and interprets them (Mäntylä et al., 2018), providing information on the user's feelings about the publication (Etter et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2018). This approach has been used by extant literature for studying SNS content (e.g., Abdullah et al., 2018; Saif et al., 2016). Based on the data analysis, a list of feelings has been coded. Tweets without text (e.g., including only the hashtag) and without expressing emotions (e.g., informative) were coded as neutral. The tweets were independently examined by two researchers, and the two analyses were compared to identify dissonant interpretations.

A combination of netnography and sentiment analysis was chosen to understand what fans are saying. First, netnography enabled the interpretation of fans' activist behaviour on Twitter (Kozinets, 2002, 2019). Then, sentiment analysis further exposed the emotions pertained in the messages (Chang, 2018). Hence, the combination of methods provided a more comprehensive understanding of the hashtag's underlying intentions.

We opted for the combination of netnography and sentiment analysis to understand more deeply the behaviour of Corinthians fans. In a first stage, netnography was carried out to deepen our perceptions regarding the fans' behaviour (Kozinets, 2002, 2019)

through social networks. Then, sentiment analysis was combined with netnography, seeking to perceive the emotions conveyed by the messages (Chang, 2018) published on Twitter. Through the combination of methods, it was possible to present a more complete perception of the fans' purpose when using hashtags.

Sports brands are interesting contexts to study brand love, since fans are in love with their teams. This is particularly visible regarding football, as fans and clubs have a bidirectional relationship: supporters are the key element in a club's life, and the club occupies a place of importance in the supporter's life (Maderer and Holtbrügge, 2018). This is the case in Brazil, where football is considered the national passion, and the relationship between fans and teams is marked by love and hate, providing an engaging setting for this research. Other contributions in the literature (e.g., Shuv-Ami et al., 2018; Baena, 2016) have also studied brand love in sports marketing and football, thus confirming its relevance as a research topic.

This study focused on the hashtag #JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao [meaning 'Juninho at Corinthians no']. This hashtag was chosen for several reasons. The hashtag was created spontaneously by Twitter users who are fans of the football team. Its impact was totally organic, generating high levels of engagement for a short period (one week). It refers to the case of a football player who was arrested in October 2017 for assault, the charges were filed by his ex-girlfriend. On 7 August 2018, the football player was traded to the Sport Club Corinthians Paulista (Corinthians). Hours after the verbal agreement between the team and the player, a spontaneous activist movement began on Twitter against the signing. #JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao was one of the most popular hashtags in Brazil. Due to the negative repercussion on SNS, the Corinthians decided to cancel the contract two days after they had announced it.

As the focus of this study was hashtag activism, only tweets that included this hashtag were considered. Data extracted comprised all the information about each tweet, including date and time of the post, user information, written content, and the number of retweets. Tweets and retweets were subject to analytical coding, an explicit procedure in which words, phrases and expressions are attributed to certain parts of a text to represent the idea that can be abstracted from the data (Kozinets, 2002). Through the analytical coding procedure, it was possible to establish a thematic structure with two important stages in the hashtag journey: the disappointment in signing the player and the celebration when the contract was cancelled. A sentiment analysis was also conducted to further understand the arguments in support of both feelings (disappointment and celebration). Tweets were then coded according to their dominant negative (e.g., annoyance, anger, frustration, discontent) and positive (e.g., happiness, joy) emotions. Tweets with no text (e.g., only include the hashtag) and no expressive emotions (e.g., informative) were coded as neutral. The tweets were independently analysed by two researchers and the two analyses were compared to identify different interpretations.

The hashtag was monitored for six days, from 7to 12 August 2018. The sample comprised 773 posts, which were retweeted 8,192 times and earned 13,180 likes. The sample was obtained as follows. On the first two days of the activism, 7 and 8 August, the number of posts with the hashtag amounted to 1,150 and 1,865 posts, respectively. Due to the high number of posts, 20% (230 and 373) were randomly selected for the analysis. On the other days (August 9 to 12) the sample comprises all the posts published with the hashtag (Table 1).

Table 1 Sample

	7 August*	8 August*	9 August	10 August	11 August	12 August	Total
Posts	230	373	117	15	5	33	773
Retweet	7,747	270	26	90	51	8	8,192
Like	12,034	547	52	185	321	41	13,180

Notes: The * symbol indicates that for these dates, the sample comprises 20% of the total number of posts, randomly selected.

Corinthians is the second biggest football team in Brazil in terms of number of fans (Redação Globo Esporte, 2018), estimated at 27 million. It is also the Latin American football team with the highest number of followers on SNS, and the fifth in the world (Ferreira, 2019). @Corinthians, the official page of Sport Club Corinthians Paulista, has 5.97 million followers.

It is important to note that this article does not intend to analyse events or even the accuracy of the data, and disclaims any opinion bias. The tweets, posts, and news stories used in this article are all publicly available on Twitter.

4 Results

The #JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao hashtag's first appearance on Twitter happened shortly after the news that football player Juninho had signed with Corinthians. A Twitter user kicked off the activism movement by directly criticising the signing, sending a comment in to the club's SNS page (@Corinthians) with the following hashtag and message:

> "@Lia004_: Cancel that shit, we do not want women aggressors here @Corinthians #JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao (7 August 2018, 16:23)."

As pointed by the literature, hashtag activism has a purpose (Clark, 2016) and uses the hashtag as a catalyst to propagate its message through debates and online protests (Duvall and Heckemeyer, 2018). #JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao was setup to fight against a management decision, inciting the club to change its action, and assuming a collective voice on behalf of the fans. Indeed, this SNS user and club fan created a hashtag that expressed her unwillingness to accept the club's action and shared the message with her network. The literature mentions that, when dissatisfied, consumers disseminate negative brand content to the largest number of potential recipients to make their message meaningful (Istanbulluoglu, 2017; Minocher, 2019). In the dissemination of activist messages and perspectives, the social and structural connections allowed by social media platforms become important means of dissemination (Ellcessor, 2018). After this first tweet, the hashtag was seen, replicated, and thousands of others shared the message. Within the next few days, the hashtag had high sharing rates (Table 1), was featured in Twitter's trending topics, and earned the attention of other media, including media reports, TV shows, and blogs.

4.1 Activist discourse of fans

Delving into the data, the tweets using the hashtag *#JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao* often include:

- Insults against a player.

- Criticism directed at the club's management board.

- References to the club's values and positioning as a feminist brand.

- Assertions on the incongruence between previous actions in favour of women and the signing.

Hence, many of the negative comments were explained by the perceived incongruity between the hiring decision and brand positioning. Many tweets recall the actions taken by the club to reinforce its values related to gender equality and the efforts to create a favourable environment for female fans and players. #RespeitaAsMinas [respect girls], #NãoÉNão [no means no] and #CaleoPreconceito [silence prejudice] were some of the hashtags previously used by the club in its marketing communication, namely aiming to further integrate women in football, attract this segment and raise awareness about the importance of feminism today. The fact was that the club's communication and marketing actions had been developed under values of equality and feminism, a topic that was seldom mentioned in the club's SNS posts. As an example, on the same day the activist movement started, the club published on its SNS pages a post about the importance of the *Lei Maria da Penha* – a law sanctioned in Brazil in 2006, which aims to protect women from domestic and family violence.

> "@corinthians: It has been 12 years since the Maria da Penha Law was introduced, but there is still a lot of violence (physical and psychological) toward Brazilian women. #Corinthians supports the fight for equality, respect, and life. Do not silence the abuse, report it. Call 180. #NenhumaAMenos (7 August 2018, 11:11 am)."

The hashtag used in this post #NenhumaAMenos [Everyone Counts] reinforces the involvement demonstrated at the club's official page with regard to feminist causes. Hours later, many users retweeted that post and questioned the coherence between feminism-related posts and the sports management actions. Here is one example:

> "@_desscp: 5 hours ago, Corinthians made a post to support Maria da Penha Law. At 19:50 Sport of Recife announces that the club from São Paulo hired Juninho, a 19-year-old player who assaulted his girlfriend last year. #JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao, we do not support the hiring of this player (7 August 2018, 4:47 pm)."

Moreover, many users joined the discussion by simply posting the hashtag, often combining it with the ones created by the club itself under its communication strategy associated with social values and feminist causes:

> "@Claudia42753352:   #RespeitaAsMinas   #JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao (7 August 2018, 8:32 pm)."

Hence, these users pointed their perceived contradiction between the role played by the team in approaching the female audience, and the board's actions. One tweet example that questions the coherence between communication and sports management is:

> "@luanatatedesco: The team uses the [campaign] 'respect the girls'. The team allows women's free entry into the scrimmage. And then you want to hire a guy who assaulted his woman, where's the logic in that????? #JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao (8 August 2018, 4:37)."

The club's slogan 'The People's Team' and club idols also published tweets to highlight the historic partnership between the club's board and its fans. They upheld the campaigns aimed at maintaining the democratic vision of the club.

> "@Bstruzani: #JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao … The people's team, Corinthian's Democracy, Dr. Sócrates, is no place for female aggressors… @Corinthians respect the girls (8 August 2018, 13:23)."

These findings are in line with the literature that stresses that consumers who are struggling to find brand-enhancing elements, are open to sharing negative opinions with companies during online interactions (Melancon and Dalakas, 2018). In this case, brand supporters express negative feelings against the brand's actions, which they find incompatible with the brand's promises.

4.2 *Feelings disseminated with the hashtag*

Ghiassi et al. (2016) explain that tweets associated to a brand are an expression of the users' opinions on the brand and tend to contain either strong positive or negative feelings. This was clearly the case with the first post, and with the ones that followed, the great majority expressing negative emotions. Similar to feelings often used to express brand hate such as total displeasure, unhappiness, and strong brand dissatisfaction (Kucuk, 2016b), this case shows very negative posts by participants who actually show a strong attachment to the brand. The hashtag itself has strong negative feelings implicit in its purposive message, emphasising the rejection of a club's decision, with an imperative tone in the sentence.

The most direct way of identifying emotions is to use words that demonstrate feelings or category labels (Abdullah et al., 2018). During the six-day analysis, negative feelings (e.g., frustration, indignation, shame, anger, rage, and contempt) were more frequent than positive (e.g., joy and optimism) and neutral ones. This was particularly evident during the first two days when negative feelings dominated the hashtags (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Feelings categorisation per day (see online version for colours)
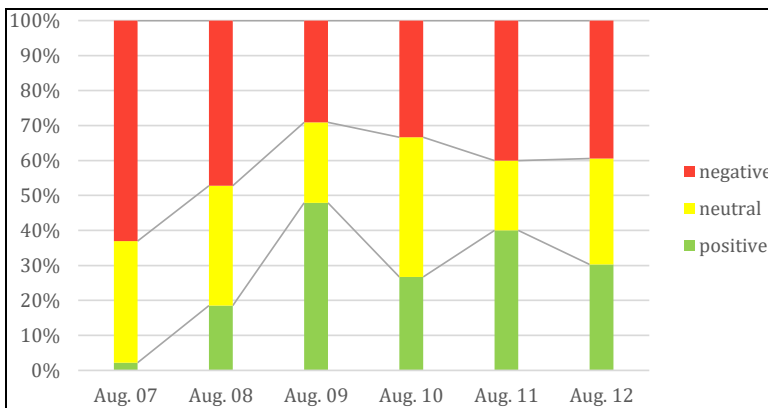
In his blog on 8 August, sports commentator Juca Kfuri (Kfouri, 2018) confirmed that the Corinthians had cancelled the contract. Some fans started celebrating the club's decision, claiming they had won the battle:

> "@siilcarvalho: We won! #RespeitaAsMinas #VaiCorinthians [Go Corinthians]
> #JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao (8 August 2018, 13:52)."

On 9 August, Corinthians football club released a statement on its website saying that Juninho's contract had been cancelled due to the negative repercussions surrounding the signing:

> "As a result of the many fans protesting against the signing of Juninho, we state that he will not be a member of our team. Current times demand mindful congruence with the feminist cause, superimposing any other considerations." (Globo Esporte Web, 2018)

Consequently, the posts using the hashtag #JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao showed a rise in positive feelings like joy and happiness, as the fans celebrated their active role in the club's decision. Terms like 'victory' and 'we won' were some of the messages we categorised as positive.

> "@MTPC1910: Victory! @Corinthians have released official statement on their interest in signing Juninho. Due to fan backlash, the signing will not happen. OUR VOICES ARE POWERFUL! #MTPC [Movimento Toda Poderosa Corinthiana, i.e., Almighty Corinthians' Woman Movement] #tireomachismodecampo [remove chauvinism from the field] #JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao (9 August 2018, 3:04 pm)."

The mobilisation subsided over the next three days, resulting in a greater balance between positive and negative message posts, as shown in Figure 1.

> "@_jucampelo: The way *Juninho was smiling during the interview and the lawyer saying he will sue the São Paulo football club make me sick!!!* #JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao (12 August 2018, 8:20 am)."

However, it is important to note that after the signing had been officially cancelled, the number of posts became much smaller, as shown in Table 1. Moreover, the negative posts in the last few days focused more on the possible legal actions against the club for cancelling the contract.

4.3   Fans' perceived power over the club

Since the beginning of the hashtag activist movement, fans have been aware of their power over the brand. The hashtag itself is authoritative. The first tweet expresses a collective will, speaking on behalf of the brand's fans, later supported by the massive replication of the hashtag. After the signing was cancelled, one user wrote 'our voices are powerful' in capital letters, which could be interpreted in many ways, such as the more generic voices from fans to women's voices, and particularly the voices of a feminist movement of the Corinthians' fans (MTPC).

As noted by Obeidat et al. (2017), most negative reviews aim to help brands improve, and provide feedback for the company to solve a problem. Often, they are important to alert brand managers to an issue. Here, the reach and spread of the hashtag empowered the fans, sustained by the strong attachment to the club and to the feminist values it embraces. Overall, the case of the #JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao confirms the general contributions in the literature about the empowerment of passionate consumers (Kim and Johnson, 2016; Li, 2016; Papaoikonomou and Alarcón, 2017) who actively participate in SNS discussions (Füller et al., 2010; MacIntosh, 2017) regarding the brand they love.

In the so-called country of football, fans are passionate about their team, and brand love makes them guardians of its values, including feminism. The repercussions of this hashtag demonstrate that when fans realise something is not according to what they believe to be the essence of their brand, they may join forces to protect the brand they love. In this case, the team recognised the importance of building relationships and enabling social conversations with fans (Goodman et al., 2011), which is fundamental to the success of a healthy connection between brands and their customers.

5 Conclusions

In line with the literature that portrays passionate sports fans as main defenders of their team (Shuv-Ami et al., 2018; Vale and Fernandes, 2018), this article shows that hashtag activism is used by football fans to protect the club's image and interfere with its management. Football clubs recognise the importance of fans and take their wishes and desires into account because fans are essential to their existence (Tamir, 2020; Wann et al., 2001). Fans are always mindful of any changes in direction or action a team may take, and react via embedded hashtag messages which are reshared and spread across the SNS (Van Haperen et al., 2018), thus creating a spontaneous online campaign. The hashtag analysed in this article (#JuninhoNoCorinthiansNao) expressed the fans' dissatisfaction and sought to reverse a player signing which the football club's managers had made. Like any hashtag activism, the campaign highlighted a cause and mobilised other fans through its dissemination on SNS (Duvall and Heckemeyer, 2018; Ellcessor, 2018).

Combining netnography (Kozinets, 2019) and sentiment analysis (Zhang et al., 2018) allowed us to follow the hashtag's journey. The fans' discontent with the signing of a particular player summarised in a hashtag facilitated digital mobilisation. Once the signing was cancelled, the hashtag took on a new meaning, and fans celebrated their achievement. Overall, this article demonstrates that hashtags may act as opinion aggregators, and hashtag activism enables fans to come together in search of a shared purpose. The organic reach of hashtags offers important opportunities for customers to express their opinion and feelings, whether positive or negative (Kucuk, 2016b).

This article also demonstrates that brand love turns fans into guardians of the brand's values, protesting when something is not consistent with its essence (Kemp et al., 2012). When fans' opinions are heard and their questions are answered, their attachment to the brand is strengthened. As brand lovers, these fans are also guardians of the club's beliefs and overall power. Hence, fans assume their role as gatekeepers, warning about perceived inconsistencies between the brand's actions and values (Numerato, 2018; Vallerand et al., 2008).

Regarding the management implications of this study, several aspects stand out. First, brands in general, including sports clubs, must carefully define their strategies to meet the expectations of their brand lovers, including making their actions consistent with the brand's promises and values. In the case of the hashtag under analysis, fans exposed very negative emotions regarding what they described as a lack of alignment between the brand's actions and its values, in this case, feminism. Moreover, careful attention should be paid to fan discourse on social media about brand issues, particularly hashtags, to have a timely reaction to protests. Indeed, for a consumer-brand relationship to exist,

companies must invest in ways of creating a dialogue that provides almost instantaneous feedback (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016) to guide brand management and avoid a crisis. This is especially important with brand love, as customer involvement is a valuable asset that must be nurtured – even if that means rapidly changing a management decision in order to meet a fan's request – conveyed by a hashtag attack. Interestingly, though, this study also shows that once they achieve their goal, fans rapidly change their messages into positive emotions and apparently their victory strengthens their attachment to the brand. As such, the empowerment that hashtag activism provides may be challenging to managers, but it also contributes to a more passionate and involved fan community, one that is willing to help the brand reach its overall success.

5.1   Limitations and future research

This study is not without its limitations, particularly with regards to the characteristics of the sample. It presents the results of one hashtag with a short duration of six days and encompasses a randomly extracted sample of 20% of the posts in the first two days, and all posts in the following four days. Moreover, the hashtag that provided the empirical data for this article was directed toward a football club and portrays a feminist hashtag activism initiative. Consequently, the interesting results that were obtained require additional research to further validate findings. Topics for future research could include other hashtags directed at brands from different sectors such as food, beverages, automotive, clothing, or other products or services that use brand love strategies. Other social causes (for example, the environment) also need further study to better understand the impact of hashtag activism and the factors that explain its success. Comparing hashtags with implicit positive and negative emotions is also a topic for future research. This study analysed brand lovers and their actions, but it would also be interesting to study the managers' point of view regarding hashtag activism.

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