

Social media are integral for Australian professional sports – teams have professionalised their pages, and official hashtags allow us to connect around live matches. But my analysis shows that social media success isn't predictable when it comes to sports.

The most successful team doesn't have the most followers. The highest-profile games don't create the most engagement. And social media strategies diverge as much as on-field ones.

Social media are proving particularly important for niche and growing sports, given their limited coverage in the mainstream media. [Twitter was crucial](#) for netball at a time when broadcasters were ignoring it. Similarly, A-League teams have [taken to Twitter more effectively](#) than their counterparts in much bigger leagues, such as the English Premier League or the German Bundesliga.

The A-League's Twitter leaderboard

In terms of followers, one team stands head and shoulders above the rest. It's not the 2017 champions Sydney FC, but their cross-town rivals, the Western Sydney Wanderers. Sydney FC had nearly 64,000 followers by the end of the 2016/17 season. The Western Sydney Wanderers had 125,000.

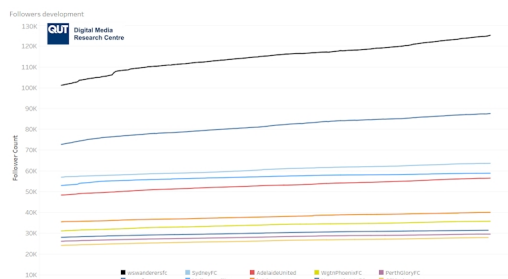
The A-League's most successful team, Melbourne Victory, sat between the two with 88,000.

Indeed, in spite of a somewhat disappointing season, the Wanderers picked up an additional 24,000 followers during the season. This is almost as many as the least followed team, the Central Coast Mariners, have in total.

The Wanderers' strong following is most likely due to the club's 2014 triumph in the AFC Champions League. This translated into a substantial volume of audience interest on Twitter.

The beautiful social media game: A-League winners and losers on Twitter

Written by Axel Bruns, Professor, Creative Industries, Queensland University of Technology

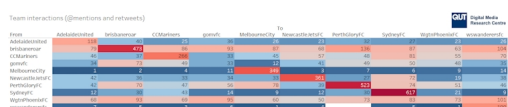


Twitter Digging for the Beautiful Game: Over the course of the 2016/17 season, Melbourne City, Adelaide United, Sydney FC, Perth Glory, Brisbane Roar, Western Sydney Wanderers, and Melbourne Victory were the most active on Twitter, with Sydney FC, Melbourne City, and Adelaide United taking it to the other teams

Whether or how teams engaged with each other on Twitter was one of the major ways in which social media strategies differed.

Over the course of the past season, Western Sydney Wanderers and Melbourne City hardly acknowledged their competition at all. They mentioned each other team barely more than ten times on Twitter.

The Brisbane Roar and Wellington Phoenix, on the other hand, took it to their opponents on Twitter as much as on the field. They mentioned and retweeted each opposition team some 60 to 90 times. Part of the story here is that the Roar account live-tweets most of its A-League, W-League, NPL and other matches, frequently mentioning opposing teams by their Twitter handles.



A-League team accounts' interactions over the course of the 2016/17 season. Axel Bruns / QUT Digital Media Research Centre

The ten teams mostly mentioned themselves – mainly because they retweeted messages that mentioned their own accounts. It may not be surprising to followers of the A-League that Sydney FC was the most self-referential during the past season, while Melbourne Victory's @gomvfc was least self-centred.

There's little evidence, too, of the great rivalries that the A-League organisation has been keen to promote. Fans may eagerly anticipate the Sydney and Melbourne intra-city derbies, but the teams involved hardly acknowledge each other's existence online.

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During the 2016/17 season, Melbourne Victory tweeted 73 times at the Brisbane Roar, for instance, but only 12 times at Melbourne City. Sydney FC mentioned the Central Coast Mariners in 43 tweets, but the Western Sydney Wanderers only nine times. No love lost there, then.

A hashtag lasts 90 minutes

Building on its collaboration with Twitter Australia, the A-League has adopted a standard system of hashtags that it encourages fans and teams to use as they tweet about each match. These take the form of #HOMEvsAWAY, with both teams represented by well-established three-letter acronyms. One-third of the 1 million tweets by, at and about the A-League teams over the 2016/17 season used these hashtags.

However, here too the major derbies fail to draw the crowd that the A-League might have expected. Altogether, the Melbourne derbies produced fewer than 2,500 tweets. And with only 3,100 tweets, their Sydney counterparts fared little better (the scoreless #SYDvWSW match in January generated only 839 tweets in total). Least popular, however, are the matches that make up the so-called “F3 Derby” between the Newcastle Jets and Central Coast Mariners – their three clashes generated barely 700 tweets in total.

Hashtags (HOMEvsAWAY)

Home	ADL	BRI	CCM	MCY	MVC	NEW	PER	SYD	WEL	WSW
ADL		4,024	1,698	2,808	8,728	2,412	4,553	3,233	3,206	7,112
BRI	2,363		1,401	3,300	7,725	2,151	1,875	7,888	3,178	10,230
CCM	2,446	2,898		3,271	1,845	214	3,351	2,523	1,649	2,834
MCY	6,099	7,025	2,124		1,247	4,161	14,279	3,359	2,373	3,229
MVC	2,135	9,265	4,813	1,169		5,527	5,609	3,074	5,333	3,708
NEW	3,459	4,473	515	3,044	2,297		2,266	3,971	1,505	1,821
PER	2,830	3,126	2,926	3,875	2,043	3,433		4,407	4,320	4,892
SYD	3,990	2,968	3,789	6,260	7,384	2,347	8,122		2,635	3,984
WEL	1,192	1,410	2,616	4,516	2,659	2,712	1,411	3,774		3,327
WSW	1,497	2,492	4,276	6,157	4,471	4,309	2,370	2,243	1,517	

A-League match hashtag activity over the course of the 2016/17 season. Axel Bruns / QUT Digital Media Research Centre

The most bankable teams, meanwhile, are the two Melbourne clubs and Brisbane Roar at home, as well as Perth, Melbourne Victory and the Western Sydney Wanderers away – on average, whenever they step on the field, football fans are most likely to get amongst it on the match hashtag as well.

The two high-scoring clashes between Melbourne City and Perth Glory, the tense Wanderers visits to Brisbane (especially including a penalty shootout in the play-offs), and the Berisha-inflamed grudge matches between Melbourne Victory and Brisbane Roar each rated especially well with Twitter audiences.

If the past season is any guide, rather than focusing overly on the not-so-classic derby matches,

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it is these rivalries that the A-League may wish to promote in the 2017/18 round. Let the fans decide which clashes they are especially passionate about: don't assume that intra-city contests necessarily generate audience engagement.

Disclosure

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/the-beautiful-social-media-game-a-league-winners-and-losers-on-twitter-84459>