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Where is all the World Cup action? Not in Brazil

While the best players and teams in the world are competing on the pitch, major Internet and social media players are going all out for the 2014 FIFA World Cup, giving enthusiastic fans rich, real-time, second-screen experiences, introducing new platform features and even reviving old ones — all in the hopes of becoming the “destination” platform for real-time interactions and conversations about the soccer tournament.

Facebook reportedly has set its sights on the World Cup to help its efforts to have social media users view it as more of a platform for real-time conversations. Taking advantage of its relatively new “trending topics” feature, which shows the popular topics and hashtags that users are talking about, Facebook launched “Trending World Cup” as a “hub” for all things World Cup where fans can follow the tournament as it unfolds.

The content for this dedicated page is aggregated from the posts of Facebook users and, as the page states, the content is not officially associated with the World Cup, although players and teams are engaging in their own social media programs, and Trending World Cup aggregates that content on its page.

Trending World Cup includes scores and highlights from matches, a feed with real-time posts from users’ Facebook friends and anyone else that designates their posts as “public,” including World Cup players and teams, and an interactive world map displaying where fans of top players are located.

The platform has also designated a “Facebook Ref” — Facebook’s “Official Guardian of Standards” for the tournament. The ref’s page (facebook.com/FacebookRef) includes commentary and updates on the matches as well as humorous pictures and posts

in which a ref interacts with fans. These posts also appear on the Trending World Cup page.

The platform is also keeping track of game times and scores in the margin of users’ “newsfeeds” throughout the tournament.

Users can access Trending World Cup directly at facebook.com/worldcup. Clicking on posts in which their friends share that they are watching a specific World Cup match will also give users access to the page, as does clicking on the soccer ball icon on the home page of the Facebook phone app.

In its June 10 announcement about Trending World Cup, Facebook also advised users to get to the page by clicking on the Trending World Cup topic in the trending feed on the right side of the screen in users’ newsfeeds — but the topic does not always appear there because the trending topics change in real time and reflect what users are talking about across the entire platform.

Despite the fact that users may actually be talking about topics other than World Cup soccer, Facebook reported that, as of June 30 (about halfway through the monthlong tournament and right as the round-of-16 knockout matches were starting), the platform has had more than 1 billion interactions on the topic, and more than 220 million users have posted “liked” or commented upon what other people are saying about the tournament.

According to the company, no other single event has generated as much activity in the history of the platform. In fact, the World Cup has so far generated more Facebook interactions than the 2014 Winter Olympics, the 2013 Super Bowl and the Academy Awards combined.

Much of the interaction — reportedly around 85 percent — comes from users outside the United States, which is not entirely surprising given that approximately 80 percent of

SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK

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Facebook users live outside the U.S. and because soccer is less popular as a spectator sport in the U.S. than it is in the rest of the world.

Facebook is not the only social media platform that is seeing much activity and interaction around the World Cup. “Love Every Second” is Twitter’s tagline for its World Cup “coverage,” which the micro-blogging site reportedly sees as an important opportunity to show advertisers and investors in the newly public company that it can sustain user growth, retention and monetization and that the platform can be successfully used as a real-time marketing platform.

The company expects that nearly 60 percent of tweets will be related to the World Cup during the tournament and, in a blog post before the start of the games, the site touted its “coverage” as “the only real-time World Cup global viewing party,” where users “can track all 64 matches, experience every goal and love every second, both on and off the pitch.”

Attempting to make its platform a “destination site” for fans to enjoy the action, Twitter offers users a match scoreboard they could add to their home page to keep track of scores in

real time.

While the trending topics feature is new to Facebook this year, tracking hot topics using hashtags has long been a feature on Twitter. The site announced two official hashtags for users to follow the action as well as the “hashflag” country icons it first introduced during the 2010 World Cup. When users putting a hashtag symbol in front of a three-letter country code, that country’s flag shows up in the user’s tweet.

World Cup official sponsor Sony has also jumped into the social media game by creating a mobile-friendly “social media broadcast channel” tailor-made for the World Cup. “One Stadium Live” (football.sony.net) curates content from three social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook and Google+) to highlight hot topics and updates from around the world, giving fans a one-stop destination for global conversations — a “snapshot of how the world is feeling” — about the games, players and stories surrounding the World Cup.

The site also features profiles and statistics on all 32 teams and their players as well as newsfeeds in six languages. During the matches, the site’s “Match Live” feature will deliver

a real-time filtered stream of what fans around the world are saying about the game.

From a newsroom in London, a team of moderators will be working around the clock (and in six time zones) to curate content in English, Portuguese, French, German, Spanish and Japanese. Their goal is to

feature the “best conversations,” guard against negative topics such as racism and make sure nothing makes Sony look bad.

The site will use “natural language processing” that “studies and learns language patterns” rather than relying on key words or hashtags to group conversations in different

languages into relevant topics for viewers.

Of course, one goal of the site is to connect fans to products behind the brand’s multimillion-dollar tier-one sponsorship of the World Cup. Sony reportedly wanted the site to have an e-commerce component and to offer products to visitors but

decided against the initiative for logistical reasons.

Facebook, Twitter and Sony, among others, are betting that lively and impassioned conversations will be generated as they vie to become the “destination” platform for fans’ second-screen experience of the World Cup tournament.