

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF TWITTER SPORTS CONSUMPTION MOTIVES AND RELATIONSHIP WITH FUTURE INTENTIONS: A PERSPECTIVE FROM ATHLETES' FOLLOWERS

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-Abstract-

The purpose of the study is to examine the relationship between Twitter consumption motives with future behavioural intentions from athletes' followers' perspective. Data were gathered from respondents using a structured self-administered questionnaire in a university located in southern Gauteng, South Africa. Exploratory factor analysis was used to identify the dimensions of Twitter consumption motive using principal component analysis. A five-factor structure emerged and these factors were labeled skills, information, economic, pass time and accessibility. Moderate, positive correlation coefficients were observed between the economic, information and pass time dimension with future intentions. The regression analysis showed significant predictive relationships with the economic and information variable with future behavioural intentions. This study provides a focused examination of Twitter consumption motives, which can offer valuable insights into athletes' managers seeking to nurture interactions with the outside world, especially in the social media context. Therefore, understanding the motives that drive users' interest in Twitter engagement will also provide sport marketers with information that can be used to develop targeted promotional campaigns in order to increase followership.

Key Words: *Twitter, consumption motives, athletes, future intentions*

JEL Classification: M31

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many athletes have been expanding their influence beyond their sport by demonstrating interest in a variety of social activities and businesses (Svensson, Mahoney & Hambrick, 2015). In the light of modern media culture, contemporary athletes are considered a social sign, carrying cultural meanings and ideological values that summon the desire and need for identification. Within the same vein, the 'athlete brand' has emerged from the multi-plurality of the social media environment (Ruihley, 2010). As such, athletes are considered not only as vehicles for advertisements or product endorsement, but also as cultural products, that can be sold as real brands (Mahan, 2011). In fact, with the globalisation of athletics competitions such as the Olympic Games, Paralympic Games, as well as the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) world championships, social media can deliver innovative experiences and interactions to strengthen relationships between athletes and supporters (Mahan, 2011).

The thematic analysis of Sherwood and Nicholson (2013) postulated that social media sites enable vital stakeholders to monitor news, conduct research and discuss issues with their audiences. Such audiences may comprise active sports fans who are affiliated strongly to specific teams or athletes and use Twitter to share thoughts and immediate reactions to news and sports events, entertainment, celebrity gossip and personal experiences either publicly or with one's network of followers (Thomas, 2011). Individuals can tweet while watching a game, providing a new and enriched fandom experience (Pegoraro, 2013). Similarly, Thomas (2011) alludes to at least 21 percent of the audiences in 2008 consisting of casual spectators and curious individuals who were seeking out social media information by reading updates of others regarding the performance of specific teams and players are not excluded (Svensson et al. 2015). However, this figure is expected to be higher, to date, since Twitter has been successfully used as a tool for enriching 'organisation-public relationships.'

While commonly known as a micro-blog, Twitter is positioned as a platform for active participation in publishing and sharing short (140 characters or less) messages with others within a user's social network or Twitter page (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). Any individual is eligible to join these asynchronous electronic conversations; whereby, Twitter is accessible over an Internet connection on both mobile and desktop device applications (Twitter, 2008).

The explosion of Twitter is noted by its outstanding position among the top three social networking sites in the world alongside Facebook and MySpace platforms (Pegoraro, 2013). Twitter has become a popular online social network for professional athletes seeking to connect directly with their fans without message filtering from the public relations departments of sports organisations (Fisher, 2009). However, despite these potential advantages and the increasing proliferation of social media, there is only limited research that examines social media usage in sport management (Mahan, 2011; Wang, 2013). More precisely, there is scant empirical evidence on Twitter sports consumption motives, from a fan perspective (Clavio & Kian, 2010).

2. TWITTER SPORTS CONSUMPTION MOTIVES AND FUTURE INTENTIONS

The theoretical definition of Twitter sport consumption motivation is vague. This is because media research has focused primarily on the influence and effect that Twitter has on the audience rather than the actual motives behind media usage (Ruihley, 2010). Consequentially, Blazska (2011) operationalised Twitter sports consumption as “the behaviour in sport that can be a predictor of how a person identifies oneself with a team or individual”. In other contexts, Twitter sports consumption has also been defined as behaviour associated with propagating sport-related information (for example searching for and gathering information about one’s favourite team, player, coach, or sport) via the Twitter medium (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). While both definitions allude to behaviour, this phenomenon has been discussed from two viewpoints that indicate both passive and active attitudinal functions. First, from a social identification perspective, Twitter sports consumption relates to the process of following favourite teams and/or athletes simply because the individual feels attached to the sportsperson. This implies that although followership may be unintentional, the user will continue to send or receive tweets since they identify with the sport or team (Clavio & Kian, 2010). Conversely, by drawing from the involvement theory, the second definition alludes to specific behavioural patterns that support the notion that individuals can purposefully seek out ways to become active in sports media consumption (Clavio, 2008b). This study followed the latter school of thought by alluding to those Twitter sports fans that actively seek out as much information as possible on Twitter while exchanging important links, sports graphics and other

news information about their favourite sportsperson via Twitter handles (Clavio, 2008b). Drawing from this, a definition of Twitter sports consumption was coined in this study as ‘the pre-disposition to actively use Twitter as the primary media source of news relating to a user’s favourite team or athlete’.

The uses and gratifications theory was nominated as the underlying theory to set the undertones for this study. The theory states that media consumers have different motivations to use the media and to obtain gratifications from media uses (Clavio & Kian, 2010). Motivations are one’s inner drive to obtain an outcome, whereas gratifications sought are the purposes or consequences of the motivational attitude (Wang, 2013). While used in tandem, both motivations and gratifications sought are concepts that are based on the functions and consequences of media uses since media uses serve different functions and psychological or social outcomes. A core assumption of uses and gratifications studies is that audience members are active in their selection of media use behaviour in order to be goal-oriented (Johnson & Yang, 2009). This active audience is able to exercise their free will to interact with the media by choosing which user to follow since each user is an information source. They are purposive and conscious selectors of messages that fulfil personal needs. This implies that Twitter users are conscientious and goal-directed in their behaviour (Johnson & Yang, 2009) and they are fully aware of their needs, before they decide to tweet.

Liu, Cheung and Lee (2009) applied the uses and gratifications (U&G) theory to improve the understanding of media choices and usage by exploring the gratifications sought by Twitter users within a youthful student sample. After conducting a second-order confirmatory factor analysis procedure, Liu et al. (2009) established eight motives, namely self-documentation, social interaction, information sharing, pass time, self-expression, medium appeal, entertainment and convenience. Furthermore, the study looked into the relationship between the identified seven factors with satisfaction and consequentially, continuance intentions and the results of their study established a positive model fit.

Johnson and Yang (2009) utilised a 15-item multiple scale and established two motives for Twitter use, namely social motives and information motives. In agreement with the social motive, other scholars (Clavio, 2008a; Clavio & Kian, 2010; Witkemper, Lim & Waldburger, 2012) contended that sports fans seek out gratifications that pertain to the mediated use of Twitter for purely extrinsic value.

This implies contributing to tweets purely for self-expression and emotional release. In addition, Ruihley (2010) outlined three main categories of sport fan motivations, namely emotional (entertainment, eustress, self-esteem and escape), cognitive (learning and aesthetic) and behavioural motives (release, companionship, group affiliation, family and economics).

The instrumental use of Twitter includes the propensity to share and convey messages and information (tweets, images, videos, links etc.), which Fisher (2009:1) referred to as “the users’ motive for information sharing and documentation of sport-related content”. Similarly, Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh & Greenwell (2010) performed a content analysis on how professional athletes communicate with their fans and established that the communication categories were based upon the interactivity, fanship, promotion, content, diversion, entertainment and sports information factors. Kassing and Sanderson (2010) tracked tweets by professional athletes and the corresponding responses from fans and noted that the use of Twitter stimulated interactivity and subsequently nurtured an insider perspective among the followers.

Wang (2013) concluded that online customer experiences are related to future intentions. The more positive the customer’s experience, the more likely he or she is willing to re-use the service. In this respect, the estimation of future intentions is the most commonly used compromise in the field of consumer behaviour. Therefore, future intentions to use Twitter for sports-related interactions point to the strength of an individual’s intention to continue using that platform in the future (Johnson & Yang, 2009). Therefore, future intentions are an important parameter for determining the overall efficacy of Twitter as a sports communication media choice. Future intentions are “a type of behavioural intention” that is correlated with the behaviour itself (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Put simply, the future intentions variable is as an indicator of the success of an online system. Therefore, future intention is a measure of one’s possible action or intention, which predicts the likelihood of an individual behaving in a particular way.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to examine the relationship between Twitter consumption motives with the behavioural intentions of athletes’ followers.

4. METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research approach was followed in the current study, using the survey method. Survey methodology following a cross-sectional research design is accepted broadly and has been used by numerous studies in past examinations of Twitter-sports uses and gratifications (Seo & Green, 2008; Clavio & Kian, 2010).

4.1 Participants and sampling method

The sample consisted of individuals (older than 18 years) who reportedly followed and tweeted about at least one of their favourite sportspersons or sports-related content within the last 12 months. A non-probability convenience sampling procedure was used to recruit respondents by selecting those subjects that are accessible to the researchers for exploratory phases (Malhotra, 2010). Convenience sampling was more appropriate for this study as it was difficult to obtain formal access to readily available lists and databases of Twitter sports followers from anywhere in South Africa.

4.2 Instrument design and data collection

Since a few Twitter sports-consumption related studies that focused on U&G were identified (Clavio, 2008b; Hambrick et al. 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Browning & Sanderson, 2012), it was not possible to adopt a holistic instrument to measure Twitter sports consumption motives. Therefore, items used in this study were operationalised from previous research based on their cross-cultural validity. The scale used by Witkemper et al. (2012) was adapted for economic motives sub-scale (3-items) and the skills acquisition sub-scale (6-items). Sheldon's (2008) scale on Facebook motives among a student cohort was operationalised for the pass time (3-items), information (4-items) and accessibility (3-items) sub-scales. Adaptation was made by substituting the words 'social media' with 'Twitter following' to increase consistency in the unit of analysis. The future intentions sub-scale was adapted from the study of Pentina, Zhang and Basmanova (2013). The survey instrument utilised a five-point Likert scale anchored along strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The questionnaire also contained a section on demographic variables and Twitter media usage information. Two trained research assistants played an active role in explaining the purpose of the study to the respondents. Voluntary participation was

encouraged and the respondents were informed that they were able to withdraw from the study if they wished to do so. Of the 250 questionnaires that were distributed, 167 were returned, while 14 were discarded because they either were spoilt or had missing values, leaving only 153 usable surveys for subsequent statistical analysis.

5. RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

The reliability assessment for the instrument was ascertained by computing the Cronbach alpha coefficient values, as shown on Table 1. According to (Malhotra, 2010), Cronbach's alpha coefficients above 0.70 are regarded as being acceptable in social science enquiry. Table 1 reveals that the scale possessed sufficient internal consistency, as demonstrated by Cronbach's alpha values ranging between 0.709 and 0.845. On the other hand, content validity was established through a questionnaire pilot-test with a sample of 30 conveniently selected respondents. Exploratory factor analysis was conducted with a view to establish construct validity of the scale. The factor structure showed absence of cross-loadings, thus providing evidence of discriminant validity. Subsequently, the items loading on an individual construct were related theoretically to each other, demonstrating high convergent validity. Furthermore, regression analysis was conducted to ascertain the predictive validity of the study.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Profile of the respondents

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0. There was a fairly even distribution between the number of male (n=76; 49.7%) and female participants (n=77; 50.3%) in the sample. A large number of respondents were in the age range between 22 to 25 years (47.1%). With regard to the length of time that the Twitter followers had spent following their favourite athletes, approximately 35 percent of the sample (n=54) alluded to having sent tweets within the past 12 months, whereas 52 percent (n=79) and 13 percent (n=20) conceded to having more than two years in Twitter followership, respectively.

6.2 Exploratory factor analysis and psychometric properties of the scale

Table 1 provides a summary of the factors, labels and psychometric evaluation of the scale.

Table 1: Psychometric properties of the scale and exploratory factor analysis

Dimension	Alpha (α)	Items	Explained variance	Description
Skills acquisition	0.842	6	17.510	The skills, knowledge and abilities, which restrain their usage of Twitter and its related functionalities
Information	0.845	6	16.948	Tweets provide quick access to large volumes of relevant athletes' information (facts, links, news, knowledge, ideas etc.). Users are able to receive insight into an athlete's teammates, team, or sport, such as details about practices and training sessions or recent competitive events and results as they happen.
Dimension	Alpha (α)	Items	Explained variance	Description
Absence of economic constraints	0.786	3	11.810	The absence of financial costs relating to expending money in the purchase of data bundles so that Twitter users can have a minute-by-minute update of the activities of their favourite athletes.
Pass time	0.737	3	11.296	To follow athletes as an ephemeral relief when bored, when free from mainstream activities, or when in need of some activity to occupy one's time.
Accessibility	0.709	2	8.441	Availability of an appropriate device for accessing the Internet such as a personal computer, tablet or Internet enabled cellular devices.

To ascertain whether the motivation statements coalesced into identifiable factors, an exploratory factor analysis procedure was conducted on the responses to define the underlying factor structure in the study. Results of the Bartlett's test of sphericity were significant at $p < 0.000$, inferring that the data set was not an identity matrix with zero correlations. In addition, a chi square value (χ^2) of 1365.976 and a KMO measure of sampling adequacy at a value of 0.753 (> 0.50)

were established, further confirming appropriateness of the data set for factor analysis.

The principal components method was applied using Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalisation, which converged in six iterations. Principal component analysis was considered appropriate for the current study as it establishes which linear components exist within data and how each of the variables contributes to that component (Field & Miles, 2010). The default measure used in this study (as in most statistical software packages) was to use Kaiser's (1956) "eigenvalues greater than one", scree plot and factor loadings (≥ 0.50) criterion. Furthermore, item reduction and scale purification were undertaken whereby items with low factor loadings, communalities and low-item-to-total correlations were investigated with a view to enhance "interpretability of the factor structure" (Malhotra, 2010). This analysis yielded five identifiable factors that combined to explain 66 percent of the observed variance, which is considered satisfactory for factor extraction (Malhotra, 2010). These factors were labelled skills, information, economic, passing time and accessibility.

6.3 Tests for association: Twitter motives and future intentions

Table 2 reports on the Pearson parametric correlation coefficients (r) that was computed with a view to examine the existence of a relationship between the five Twitter sport consumption motives and future intentions.

Table 2: Correlation analysis (Twitter consumption dimensions versus future intentions)

Construct/Dimension	SC	IM	EC	PT	AC	FI
Skills (SC)	1.000					-.008
Information (IM)	.039	1.000				.304**
Economic (EC)	.286**	.013	1.000			.280**
Pass Time (PT)	.206*	.476**	.329**	1.000		.202*
Accessibility (AC)	.178*	.069	.315**	.111	1.000	.041
Future intentions (FI)	.008	.304*	.280**	.202*	.041	1.000

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

A simple linear regression procedure was conducted with a view to establish the predictive relationship between the predictors (Twitter consumption motives) and their relative measurement response (future intentions). The model results are

reported in Table 3. In this regression procedure, the independent variables were entered into the equation one at a time. The regression analysis revealed that the five Twitter consumption dimensions ($R^2=0.382$) explain approximately 38 percent of the variance in the intentions to participate in Twitter followership.

Table 3: Regression analysis model results

Twitter consumption dimensions	Dependent Variable: Future intentions to use Twitter						
	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	T	Sig.	Collinearity statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
Skills	-.052	.084	-.049	-.614	.540	.881	1.135
Information	.402	.100	.348	4.019	.000*	.751	1.332
Economic	.245	.073	.285	3.328	.001*	.765	1.307
Pass time	-.035	.090	-.036	-.390	.697	.670	1.492
Accessibility	-.025	.067	-.030	-.376	.708	.882	1.134
R = .618 $R^2 = .3819$ Adjusted $R^2 = .3825$ F change = 6.225 * Significant at $p < 0.05$							

Stringent examinations were conducted with a view to corroborate the assumptions of linear regression models along with co-linearity diagnostic checks. First, the correlation matrix was examined for existence of multi co-linearity, namely if the predictor variables correlate too highly ($r > 0.9$) with each other (Malhotra, 2010). None of the correlations in Table 2 reached a value of $r > 0.9$ hence the data was considered suitable for linear regression analysis. Field and Miles (2010) further suggested that if the variance inflation factor (VIF) is greater than 10 then the predictor variables are correlated among themselves, hence co-linearity is a cause for concern. In this case, the regression model was deemed appropriate for the data as the VIF values ranged between 1.134 and 1.492. Moreover, tolerance levels that fall below 0.1 indicate serious co-linearity problems, whereas those tolerance values that are below 0.2 may potentially cause co-linearity problems. The tolerance statistics for the predictor variables ranged from 0.670 to 0.882 indicating that there was no co-linearity within the data set.

Consistent with theoretical expectations, motivations to utilise Twitter to follow athletes did affect future intentions in a positive manner. With regards to the information dimension, moderate, positive correlation coefficients were observed with future intentions ($r=0.304$; $p < 0.01$). The results of the regression analysis also reveal that sports information sharing is a statistically significant predictor of future intentions to participate in Twitter sports consumption ($\beta=0.348$; $t=4.019$;

$p=0.000$). Hence, the results of this study corroborate the assertion that on Twitter, each user is both an information seeking and information sharing source. This is because the participants alluded to the fact that they are able to acquire large volumes of relevant athletes' information through tweets (Clavio, 2008a). As such, it becomes apparent then that Twitter has become a "one-stop-shop" for obtaining a quick supply of new or upcoming information about a team or athlete (Witkemper et al. 2012).

Since the beta weight informs the researcher about the relative importance of a predictor in predicting the criterion, it was deduced from the regression model that a large absolute beta weight indicates that the scale/factor outperforms the other scales/factors in terms of predicting the dependent variable. In this study, the information motive reported the highest beta value (0.348) at $p < 0.000$ significance level indicating that this dimension has the greatest influence in predicting the future intentions of consumers to send or receive tweets regarding their favourite athletes. These findings have been reported in previous studies with different labels being used to support the salience of this dimension. For example, Hambrick et al. (2010:460) labeled it Twitter information sharing, Seo and Green (2008) used the summative term content, while Browning and Sanderson (2012) named the factor information access.

Moderate, positive correlation coefficients were observed between the economic dimension with future intentions ($r=0.280$; $p < 0.01$). The theoretical value of including the economic motive in the correlation analysis procedure was to see if people planned to continue using Twitter based on its economy as a sports media vehicle. Items along this dimension were reverse-coded to indicate that the majority of students are concerned about over-indulgent expenditure that is associated with purchasing data bundles, while frugality of the Twitter platform in the majority of cases enhances the adventure of having a minute-by-minute update of the activities of their favourite athletes. Moreover, the results of the regression analysis also revealed that economic constraints are a statistically significant predictor of future intentions to participate in Twitter sports consumption ($\beta=0.285$; $t=3.328$; $p=0.001$). Akin to the constraints theory proposed by Crawford and Godbey (1987), future intentions to tweet about athletes is motivated by the possibility of spending less financial resources than they originally budgeted for or spending less money than they were originally prepared to spend either in purchasing the devices or mobile technology with which to

access Twitter (Clavio, 2008b). Hence, the results of this study assert that there is a statistically significant relationship between the economic dimension and future intentions to participate in Twitter sports communication among a student cohort. Nonetheless, extant literature indicates that the price of online micro-blogging has considerably decreased such that the question of cost has become an insignificant issue when it comes to Twitter, which is regarded as a free social media application for users (Witkemper et al. 2012). Perhaps this result may be explained by the nature and location of the sample i.e. South African students might still experience anxiety in the outlay of financial resources required when opting to follow their favourite athletes using social media networks. The implications therefore, would be that if the financial resources happen to be insufficient, this might incapacitate or impede the students' inherent desire to follow their favourite athletes on Twitter.

The regression model reported no statistically significant relationships between the skills dimension ($\beta=-.049$; $t=-.614$; $p=0.540$), pass time dimension ($\beta=-.036$; $t=-.390$; $p=0.697$) and accessibility ($\beta =-.030$; $t= -.376$; $p= 0.708$) dimensions against future intentions to use Twitter for athletes' followership. The insignificant p -values reported in this regression model ($p >0.05$) suggest that changes in the predictor (future intentions) are not necessarily associated with changes in tweeting behaviour; therefore, skills constraints, passing time and accessibility are not likely to provide meaningful additions to the model since changes in the predictor's value are not directly related to changes in the response variable.

7. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION AND PRACTICAL RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

The study contributes to the extant literature by extending the understanding of Twitter motives for engaging with professional athletes. In so doing, the study responded to calls to better understand why fans interact with social media (Clavio & Kian, 2010) and to gain a rich contextual perspective of the relationship between such motives with future intentions to participate on Twitter (Johnson & Yang, 2009). Furthermore, this study poses managerial implications since the use of social media can be viewed as an emerging and important facilitator of sports brand communities. Professional athletes and sports organisations currently using Twitter can establish that the findings of this study are useful towards initiating

and implementing strategies for satisfying the needs of existing and potential users of the Twitter platform.

8. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study provides a fine-grained and focused examination of Twitter consumption motives, which can offer insights that are particularly valuable to athletes' managers seeking to nurture interactions with their fans, especially in the social media context. Although the study is situated within the sports field as a foundation for future endeavours, the discussion of Twitter consumption motives and how these impact the manifestation of intentions to tweet is also applicable in other domains. Moreover, an understanding of the motives that drive users' interest in Twitter engagement also provides sport marketers with information that can be used to develop targeted promotional campaigns in order to foster increased followership. Resultantly, this knowledge provides building blocks for rich, specific and tailor-made sports communication material, which is sought after by young Twitter users.

The selection of a university as a survey site and the restricted size of the sample (153 respondents) posed noticeable limitations in this study. The use of students as respondents might raise some issue of external validity if the students' profiles and performances are significantly different from the studied population. In view of this, future research should widen the number and nature of units of analyses beyond the student context in order to accommodate heterogeneity among the Twitter sports market segments and to align appropriate marketing strategies thereof. Nonetheless, tertiary students represent a web-educated and social media skilled consumer cohort and both of these characteristics are requirements for Twitter use.

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