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Acceptance, motivations, and usage of social media as a marketing communications tool amongst employees of sport national governing bodies

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ABSTRACT

National governing bodies (NGB) of sport are not-for-profit organisations that typically receive less mainstream media coverage and have much smaller marketing budgets than mainstream professional sports. Therefore, they must seek alternative methods from mainstream media and traditional marketing in order to increase brand awareness and reach fans and stakeholders. While all sport organisations stand poised to benefit from social media, NGBs seem to be a segment of the sport industry uniquely positioned to capitalise on social media's benefits. Because there is currently no known literature on NGBs' use of social media, this study examined the role that social media plays within NGBs in the United States including employees' acceptance of social media, motivations to use social media, and the organisation's current usage of social media. An online survey was distributed to NGB employees in the spring of 2012, and results revealed that contrary to studies on other sport organisations, NGB employees reported high levels of acceptance and motivation to use social media regardless of demographic factors. Additionally, NGBs seemed to use social media as a communications tool to a greater degree than as a marketing tool. Implications for international and niche sport organisations are presented in the conclusion.

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1. Introduction

Scholarly research on social media and its marketing communications role within the sport industry is rapidly expanding. Research on this topic to date has focused on consumer responses to sport-related social media (e.g., Mahan, 2011), consumers' usage of social media (e.g., Clavio, 2011), methods utilised by sport organisations to engage fans (e.g., Ioakimidis, 2010), content on sport organisations' social media websites (e.g., Waters, Burke, Jackson, and Buning, 2010), the ways in which athletes present themselves on social media sites such as Facebook (e.g., Butts, 2008) and Twitter (e.g., Pegoraro, 2010), and social media policies for athletes (e.g., Sanderson, 2011).

Throughout the literature addressing social media's role in sport organisations, it has been identified as a valuable relationship marketing tool that has the ability to "build meaningful relationships through opportunities for communication, interaction, and value" (Williams and Chinn, 2010, p. 436). Furthermore, Ioakimidis (2010) noted that utilisation of online communities allows consumers and fans to have a virtual home where they can connect with others,

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express opinions, and feel a sense of belonging. Interacting with other fans or the sport organisation itself in an online social media setting might also increase a fan's level of identification with the sport organisation, as illustrated in Broughton's (2010) report that 61% of Major League Baseball (MLB) fans and 55% of National Football League (NFL) fans considered themselves bigger fans of the leagues since they started following their favourite teams on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Additionally, 51% of MLB fans and 43% of NFL fans reported spending more time watching the league as a result of following their favourite team on such sites. Michaelidou, Siamagka, and Christodoulides (2011) noted that using social media does not require a great financial investment, and the relatively low cost is certainly a benefit of utilising online social media as a marketing communications tool.

While research has documented the benefits of social media and the usage of social media from sport consumers' standpoint, a greater understanding of sport organisations' attitudes towards social media and motivations for using it is important, as it will shed light on the organisations' strategic intent and current social media practices. It will also allow sport managers to better understand and evaluate the ways in which similar organisations utilise new media platforms, and understand how to more effectively utilise such platforms. O'Shea and Duarte Alonso (2011) noted that much of the existing literature on marketing communications and technology is focused on "the end-user, the consumer" (p. 199). Of those researchers who have focused on the content creator (i.e., business organisation) instead of the consumer, Day (2011) asserted that social media is a source of complexity in today's market environment and businesses must become more adaptive in order to succeed. Stoldt (2012) surveyed college sports information directors to determine their social media usage, perceptions, and experiences in the college athletics setting, and concluded that one common flaw amongst respondents was a lack of organisational assessment of social media use. Stoldt (2012) noted that this "represents an area in which considerable disparity exists between current practice and best practice" (p. 10). Another study focused on the organisational perspective involved a survey of meeting industry professionals, in which Lee (2011) found that age had a significant influence on the acceptance of new technologies such as online social media.

National governing bodies (NGB) of sport seem to be one segment of the sport industry that could greatly benefit from social media, as these organisations are not-for-profit and operate on rather limited budgets when compared to those of professional or even collegiate sports. While all sport organisations stand poised to benefit from social media, most NGBs do not have budgets allowing for full utilisation of traditional marketing outlets such as paid television, radio, print, internet, and outdoor advertising methods. Therefore, social media offers a new and inexpensive method by which to increase brand awareness, reach more fans and stakeholders, and maintain public interest in non-Olympic years when traditional media coverage of these organisations is typically at its lowest. All 204 countries that compete in the Olympic Games have NGBs for those sports in which they compete. Examples of NGBs in the United States include USA Gymnastics, USA Track & Field, USA Swimming, and USA Volleyball, amongst many others.

The sports represented by NGBs can largely be considered niche sports, or those that do not receive mainstream media coverage on a daily basis (Greenhalgh et al., 2011). According to Greenhalgh et al. (2011), "niche sport properties must create and sustain their own publicity, market share, and fan base in order to survive" (p. 42). Similarly, Eagleman, Pedersen, and Wharton (2009) explained that while mainstream sports like men's football and basketball enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship with the mass media, it is much more difficult for other sports to generate awareness and build fan bases, and such sport organisations must seek other means by which to achieve these goals. Although NGBs' sports and athletes typically receive greater attention during the time periods surrounding the Olympic Games, in the U.S. they are largely ignored by mainstream sports media during the three years between Olympics and therefore must attempt to generate publicity using methods outside of traditional media relations. To illustrate this, Leslie King, Vice President of Communications for USA Gymnastics, said her organisation attempts to overcome the difficulty of receiving mainstream media coverage by, "working to make our Web site more robust, as well as using social media to expand our outreach" (Eagleman, 2010, p. 283). To date, there is no known literature on NGBs' use of social media, nor on their employees' acceptance of and motivations for using social media.

Social media offer a unique marketing communications method by which niche sport organisations like NGBs can attempt to overcome previous challenges such as low interest levels from fans in non-Olympic years, less media coverage during non-Olympic years, and lower marketing budgets than other sport organisations. Based on these concepts, the purpose of this study was to examine the existing role of social media within NGBs in the United States, including NGB employees' acceptance of social media, motivations to use social media, and the organisations' current usage of social media.

While this study examined only U.S.-based NGBs, similar sport governing organisations are present in all countries that compete in the Olympic Games, and therefore the results of this study can serve as a guide, comparison, or learning tool for NGBs around the globe in terms of social media utilisation and strategy. Additionally, the findings from this study are useful for other niche sport organisations, both U.S.-based and international, that do not benefit from a symbiotic relationship with the mass media that mainstream sports in their respective countries have long enjoyed. The implications for these organisations are presented in the discussion section.

2. Literature review

According to Keller (2001), "Marketing communications are the means by which firms attempt to inform, persuade, incite, and remind consumers – directly or indirectly – about the brands they sell" (p. 819). Marketing communications allow organisations to have a dialogue with their consumers and can also serve as the voice of a brand (Keller, 2001). A wide and varied range of marketing communications methods exist, including all forms of advertising, promotions, publicity, public

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