Exploring the Motives of Sport-related Mobile Applications among College Students

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An estimated 69.5 million Americans aged 13 years and older own a smartphone (comScore, Inc, 2011). The number of mobile phone users switching from a traditional mobile device to a smartphone is predicted to increase as more smartphones become available at lower prices. In fact, more than 70% of Americans who currently subscribe to non-smartphones will likely join the upward trend in the near future (Entner, 2010). Access to mobile applications represents a significant reason for consumers making the switch from traditional mobile phones to smartphones. Mobile applications are software programs and tools, developed specifically for use on smartphones. They are available to smartphone users for a small fee or even for free depending on the application provider (Android Developers, 2011). The convenience factor has attracted users to the smartphone world where they can keep track of everything at their fingertips. The applications provide users with convenience while giving developers a chance to advertise what they wish to promote.

With such popularity of smartphones, software developers offer applications in a variety of categories: books, business, communication, education, entertainment, finance, health and fitness, media and video, medical, news and magazines, photography, shopping, transportation, travel, weather, and more (Android Developers, 2011). Sport-related mobile applications represent one of the most popular categories, and they come in a variety of forms from personal fitness to team fandom applications (Biersdorfer, 2010). The top grossing iPhone applications as of September 2011 included Golfshot: Golf GPS, MLB.com At Bat 11, ESPN Radio, NFL Fantasy Cheat Sheet 2011, iSolunar Hunting & Fishing, and Basketball Sport Ultimate Review (Apple iTunes, 2011).

Smartphone users no longer wait for access to a computer or newspaper before obtaining the scores of their favorite team. Instead, they can use sport-related applications such as At Bat and ESPN ScoreCenter to quickly gain information regarding their favorite teams and view game highlights. For sport spectators, applications for professional and collegiate teams provide their fans with information via mobile sites which mimic their websites. Other sport-related applications cater to consumers interested in fitness. Workout trainer applications show videos and images of professional trainers to help users get into shape.

The popularity of sport-related mobile applications is undeniable. Yet few studies have addressed this emerging technology, particularly why people use the sport-related mobile applications and how much time is actually spent on using them. To their credit, researchers have examined general Internet and mobile phone usage. Studies have employed the uses and gratifications conceptual framework to examine why consumers use mobile phones (Lee, Ryu, & Kim, 2010; Lin, 2008; Rice & Katz, 2008; Wei, 2008; Wirth, von Pape, & Karnowski, 2008), social media sites (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; PTEGR, 2010), and the Internet (Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009; Ha & Fan, in press; Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004) as information and entertainment sources. Studies have also examined the motives for such usage, particularly using the Internet for sport consumption (Hur, Ko, & Valacich, 2007; Seo & Green, 2008).

Considering the lack of research on mobile applications in sport contexts, this study will extend the uses and gratifications conceptual framework by examining mobile phone applications in the sport industry. The purpose of the study is to explore the actual usage of sport-related mobile applications among college students and the motivating factors. The study will address three research questions:

1. What sport-related mobile applications do consumers use?
2. What motives drive consumers to use these applications?
3. What relationships exist between potential motives and usage?

Data collection is currently under way at a large Midwestern university. The study will use a cross-sectional survey design, collecting data from college students who take sport administration and physical activity classes. Survey items were adapted from two studies examining seven sport-related Internet consumption motives (Hur et al., 2007; Seo & Green, 2008). The study included nine additional items for motives plus open-ended questions regarding the types of sport applications used and the amount of time spent on using them. A panel of experts reviewed the survey items to establish content validity. The researchers also conducted a pilot study with one class of approximately 30 students, who helped assess the readability and functionality of the survey instrument. The feedback and comments received from the pilot study were incorporated into the final survey questionnaires, which were then distributed to college students taking sport administration and physical activity classes.

The collected data will be analyzed using SPSS 19.0. A reliability analysis will be conducted using Cronbach’s alpha. To answer RQ1, the researchers will utilize a frequency table to identify and rank the popularity of the applications used by the respondents. For RQ2, the analysis will begin with an examination of descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations for the motives and actual usage. Finally, RQ3 will be answered using multiple regression analysis to examine the relationship among the independent variables (motives) and dependent variable (usage) and determine which motives influence usage.

The study will capture information regarding college students and their motives for using sport-related mobile applications. The results should provide more in-depth insights as to which applications college students use and why they use them. The results may also suggest possible relationships among attitude towards new technology (mobile applications), intention to use, and actual usage based on Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989; Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989). This research will provide critical information for sport marketers and researchers, helping them to better understand the meaning of usage antecedents and consequences in the context of sport-related mobile applications.

The popularity of mobile application usage could be further enhanced by identifying the motives that are shown to be important in this study. As mobile application usage grows, the traditional way of communicating with sport consumers will also change (Martin, 2011). Based on the identified motives, sport marketers can develop applications to meet the needs and desires of sport consumers. Furthermore, they can employ target marketing and segmentation strategies after they understand the usage and motives that are fundamental to sport consumer behavior. The presentation will provide more detailed results and implications of this study as well as ideas for future research.