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Don't Tweet On My Lawn: Does Age Impact Social Media Use in Sport?

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The utilization of social media in marketing and communication of sport-related branding continues to grow in importance to both the sport industry and those who study it. This relatively new phenomenon has helped to augment the intersection of fans, teams, and sponsors, by increasing both brand awareness and interactivity between these and other stakeholders. As Internet-based sport-related branding continues to grow in importance to the sport marketing sector (Silverstein, 2011), it becomes important to examine the way in which demographics affect the processing of these branding experiences in the online environment.

Traditionally, age has been an important demographic for marketers to consider (e.g., Rein, Kotler, & Shields, 2006), along with other factors. However, very little attention has been paid to age as a variable for examination in social media use and sport, with neither scholars nor practitioners examining this variable's impact on consumption and use. Social media use has been perceived primarily as the province of teenagers and young adults, with recent studies indicating that 80% of this demographic uses social media on an average day (Bioscholar, 2011). However, recent changes in online and social media audience demographics may be cause for sport entities to re-think their branding and marketing strategies. A recent examination of social media use found that, from 2009 to 2010, the usage of social media by those aged 50 and older nearly doubled, and at the time of the report comprised 42% of individuals surveyed in that age bracket, with 47% of those aged 50-64 now using social networking (Pew Internet, 2010). Furthermore, Clavio (2008), in an examination of collegiate sport message boards, found that users skewed older than had been previously thought, with over 77% of users reporting an age of 30 or older, and over 25% reporting an age of 50 or greater.

As the trends in social media usage by age seems to have shifted, this study's purpose was to see if these trends exist in sport and examine the impact of age on consumption of sport social media, utilizing the tenets of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). The TPB was proposed by Ajzen (1985), as a continuation and extension of prior theoretical inquiry of the Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Both theories attempt to explain how attitudes ultimately predict behavior, which in this instance would be the willingness of certain age groups to interact with sport related brand experiences throughout various social media outlets. The theoretical construct of TPB indicates that individuals are more likely to act upon intention when it is combined with attitudes, behavioral control, and perceived norms. While this study does not aim to examine the psychological antecedents of control or norms of individuals in relation to age and online social media brand use, the central tenets of TPB provide us the ability to make assumptions about the relationship between these two areas. Due to the relative nascence of social media usage among many older individuals, it would stand to bear that either their behavioral control or behavioral intent, or both, would be lower than younger individuals who have been utilizing sport-focused social media for longer periods of time. Similarly, subjective norms among older individuals in relation to social media brand interaction would be lower than their younger counterparts.

In order to examine if there are significant and observable differences between age groups among professional sport fans who are Twitter users, this study utilized a large (N = 1,729) dataset of fans of six professional sports teams in North America. These fans are identified as users of Twitter, and were provided a link to an online survey instrument. Respondents were asked to provide demographic information, including age, and were then asked to respond to a series of three scales that focused on informational and commercial uses of Twitter in sport. Users were asked to respond on a 5-point Likert-type scale to the level of appeal that certain functions of their favorite team's Twitter account held for them. These functions included such items as latest team news, news on individual players,

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exclusive deals or offers from the team, latest photos, and special offers from team sponsors. These items were derived from an exhaustive examination of available sport and social media literature, and in consultation with both scholars and practitioners familiar with social media.

Following this process, an exploratory factor analysis was performed on the data using direct oblimin rotation, and three factors were revealed. One factor, commercial, focused on commercial aspects of the team Twitter feed, and contained five items. A second factor, informative, focused on general information and media content of the team Twitter feed, and also contained five items. The third factor, access, dealt with in-game news and information, and contained two items. The three factors combined to explain 67.2% of the observed variance. Reliability analysis found that all three scales exceeded an alpha of .78.

Following reliability analysis, a series of MANOVAs were performed on each of the three scales utilizing a fixed factor of age (with age groups of 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, and 55+). Analysis of the commercial factor found that there was significant difference between the age groups on these dimensions, using Wilks' criterion ($\Lambda = .936$, $F(4, 1631) = 5.413$, $p < .001$), and for four of the five scale items, with only service, support, or product news lacking significance at the .05 level. Analysis on the informative factor found that there was significant difference between the age groups on these dimensions using Wilks' criterion ($\Lambda = .973$, $F(4, 1631) = 2.243$, $p = .001$); however, only two individual items, latest photos and latest videos were significantly different at the .05 level. Finally, analysis of the access factor found that there was significant difference between the age groups on these dimensions using Wilks' criterion ($\Lambda = .977$, $F(4, 1631) = 4.735$, $p < .001$), and both scale items showed significant differences across groups.

The results indicated that there were indeed significant and identifiable differences among age groups, and those differences did not necessarily follow a negative linear path. In most cases, the estimated marginal means for individual scale items were highest for the 18-24 age group and lowest for the 55 and older group, but there were some exceptions discovered. For instance, the results for the informative factor scale items latest team news and team insider news that I can't get anywhere else, the group with the highest mean score was the 35-44 age group. Other items, such as latest photos and latest videos, saw significantly higher mean scores from the youngest group. The results supported the application of the TPB to sport and social media analysis, and invites further study into the effects of age on social media use in sport communication and marketing.

Furthermore, the results indicate that sport entities wishing to engage in marketing and promotion through social media may need to take steps to condition and train their older audiences to more fully accept social media as an appropriate avenue of communication. Consistent with the tenets of the TPB, social media must be viewed as both useful to the individual and subjectively valued among the individual's peer group. These results indicate that a significant gap does exist between the older and younger groups of professional sports fans surveyed, but also that different types of social media usage vary based upon particular cultural characteristics of individual age groups. Therefore, sport marketers and managers must carefully analyze their social media audiences and undertake targeted educational and normative actions to encourage fans of various age groups to engage in the social media marketing and communication messages being provided by the organization.