Why We Follow: An Examination of Parasocial Interaction and Fan Motivations for Following Athlete Archetypes on Twitter

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According to Sanderson (2011), “Social media are inherently designed to facilitate human connections” (p. 494). That being said, the connections formed through social media have yet to be explored in their entirety. The majority of sport-specific studies that have been conducted thus far have focused on how athletes (i.e., Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010) and organizations (i.e., Sanderson, 2011; Wallace, Wilson, & Miloch, 2011) utilize social-media platforms. According to Clavio and Kian (2010), few sport-specific studies have analyzed social-media platforms from the audience (i.e., fan) perspective. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to utilize both parasocial interaction (PSI) and uses and gratifications to explore the similarities and differences between followers of one predominantly social and one predominantly parasocial athlete on Twitter.

Review of Literature

PSI

PSI is defined as one-sided and mediated interaction between a media user and a media persona that resembles social interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956). However, with PSI, the message is controlled by the media persona (Cohen & Perse, 2003). Various constructs have been found to correlate with PSI including uncertainty reduction (Perse & Rubin, 1989), social attraction (Rubin & McHugh, 1987), attitude homophily (Turner, 1993), perceived realism (Rubin et al., 1985; Rubin et al., 2003; Rubin & Perse, 1987) affinity (Rubin, 1979; Rubin et al., 1985; Rubin & Perse, 1987) amount of time spent with the medium (Grant et al., 1991), and instrumental media use (Kim & Rubin, 1997; Rubin et al., 1985). While these constructs have manifested in traditional media outlets, they have not been applied to a social-media context. Therefore the following research questions were employed:

RQ1: What are the differences and similarities between followers of a predominately PSI athlete and followers of a predominately social athlete with regard to the salience of PSI?

RQ2: What are the differences and similarities between followers of a predominately PSI athlete and followers of a predominately social athlete with regard to common PSI correlations?

Uses and Gratifications

This research is also grounded in the uses-and-gratifications perspective (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), which shifts from a direct effects perspective to assessing how users consume media to fulfill certain needs (Fisher, 1978). Ruggiero (2000) posited that the uses and gratifications perspective is a “cutting-edge theoretical approach” that can be used in the early stages of new communication media (p. 27).

Uses and gratifications research has revealed various motives for using Internet technologies and social media. It becomes worthwhile to examine how motivations differ between followers of athletes who promote specific interaction styles on Twitter as interactivity has commonly been identified as an important motivation for social-media use (i.e., Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hambrick et al., 2010; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Therefore, the following research question related to the uses-and-gratifications approach was developed:

RQ3: What are the differences and similarities between followers of a predominately PSI athlete and followers of a predominately social athlete with regard to trends and motivations of Twitter use?
Method

Participants for this study were acquired through purposive sampling. A link to an Internet-based survey was posted on the Twitter feeds and Facebook pages of the two athletes chosen for this study. The survey link was also posted on Twitter by prominent sport media members within the athlete’s geographic area. The sample (N = 336) consisted of followers of one predominately parasocial (n = 123) and one predominately social athlete (n = 213). These athletes were chosen based upon the results of an interaction-specific content analysis of athlete tweets conducted prior to this study (i.e., Author (in press)).

Results

For RQ1, a significant difference was found between the two follower sets for PSI (t(324) = 7.05, p < .05). The mean for the social athlete was significantly higher (M = 48.24, SD = 7.85), in comparison to the mean for the parasocial athlete (M = 41.89, SD = 7.85).

With regard to RQ2, significant differences were found between the two conditions for affinity (t(228.29) = -3.13, p < .007), perceived realism (t(331) = 2.86, p < .007), uncertainty reduction (t(286) = 3.53, p < .007), social attraction (t(173.05) = 4.36, p < .007), and attitude homophily (t(261) = 5.67, p < .007). The means of the social athlete were significantly higher for perceived realism (M = 15.96, SD = 3.18), uncertainty reduction (M = 14.09, SD = 5.05), social attraction (M = 16.06, SD = 2.59), and attitude homophily (M = 12.98, SD = 3.46) in comparison to the means of the parasocial athlete for perceived realism (M = 14.91, SD = 3.28), uncertainty reduction (M = 11.96, SD = 4.87), social attraction (M = 14.36, SD = 3.44), and attitude homophily (M = 10.42, SD = 3.69). The mean for affinity was significantly higher for the parasocial athlete (M = 12.98, SD = 5.27) in comparison to the social athlete (M = 11.19, SD = 4.58). No significant mean differences were found for instrumental media use between the social athlete (M = 17.83, SD = 3.85) and the parasocial athlete (M = 17.65, SD = 4.07).

In order to answer RQ3, two exploratory factor analyses (EFA) were conducted. The factors for the social athlete included consumption (18.72%), admiration (12.35%), promotion (11.37%), and community (10.98%). All factors had eigenvalues over 2. For the parasocial athlete, the EFA revealed four factors including news group (16.87%), modeling (11.82%), engaged interest (11.13%), and media use (10.34%). All factors had eigenvalues over 2.

Discussion

The development of PSI was significantly higher among followers of the social athlete. This finding is logical considering that attributes of PSI are similar to those of social interaction (Giles, 2002) and that individuals often behave in ways that closely resemble actual social relationships when they are involved in PSI (Gleich, 1997; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Additionally, data analysis revealed a sense of heightened interpersonal closeness based on the interaction style of the athlete. Specifically, interpersonal constructs were heightened among followers of the social athlete, while followers of the parasocial athlete relied more heavily on media based constructs in their interaction patterns. In conclusion, this study answered the call placed by Pegoraro (2010) in which the author proposed that the next step in sport-specific Twitter research is to query fans that follow professional athletes. Furthermore, this study demonstrated that PSI and its associated constructs could be tested quantitatively within the realm of sport and social media.