

Investigating the Role of Social Networking Sites in a Running Context

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Introduction

Due to ever-evolving advances in communication technology, social media have become exceedingly popular (Acar, 2008; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Of social media platforms, social networking sites (SNS) appear to be among the most widely-adopted. The result has been a dramatic increase in the number of users, many of whom have integrated SNS into their daily practices (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Indeed, 64% (174 million) of Internet users in North America reported using Facebook during the last quarter of 2011; Twitter (39%; 105 million) and LinkedIn (15%; 40 million) also demonstrated high levels of popularity (Internet World Stats, 2012).

Some scholars have put forth that new media forms have the capacity to reshape the lives of individuals in such areas as work, social relationships, and leisure (e.g., Leung & Lee, 2005). Extant research found that social media—especially SNS—have the potential to foster user engagement in certain activities such as politics, music, shopping, and entertainment (e.g., Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). Other studies have indicated that SNS has a positive effect on psychological well-being, including overall life satisfaction as well as satisfaction in specific domains (e.g., social life) (e.g., Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). While the SNS phenomenon has drawn attention from academics and practitioners alike, there is still much unknown as to its potential role in certain aspects of life such as physical activity.

Scholarly research appears to suggest that SNS can play dual roles; that of a behavioral outcome resulting from involvement as well as a catalyst responsible for driving other activity-related behavior. For example, studies in marketing communications have shown that activity involvement induces SNS use by facilitating such communication behaviors as seeking information and sharing experiences (e.g., Dwyer, 2007). Others have indicated that SNS use can lead to increased engagement in an activity as well as improved life satisfaction (e.g., Valenzuela et al., 2009). These demonstrated relationships can support the notion of a mediating role of SNS. That is, exploration of SNS use in this context could aid in understanding how physical activity involvement influences salient health and mental benefits (i.e., running engagement and social life satisfaction).

For the purposes of exploring SNS use in a sport context, the current study focuses on the specific context of running. In order to determine the mediating role of SNS use for running-specific content, the study examines running involvement and frequency of running behavior (i.e., miles run per week), and the cognitive evaluation of social aspect of life experiences. Given that SNS represent an online community which can be characterized as having two distinct functions: informational and social (Dwyer, 2007), the research hypotheses draw upon theories in media (information) richness and social capital, each of which has been utilized by scholars to explain certain outcomes (i.e., activity behavior and social life satisfaction) related to SNS use across a variety of contexts (e.g., Ramirez & Burgoon, 2004).

Methods

Data were collected using an online survey of 23,793 participants registered for a running event (i.e., including marathon, half-marathon, and 5K distances) located in a major metropolitan area in the southeastern United States. The race organizers sent an e-mail message to all registered participants one week prior to the deployment of the survey to alert them of its pending arrival and to encourage them to complete the survey. The final day of data collection was two weeks after the initial launch of the survey. The first page of the survey discussed the purpose of the research, provided directions for completing the survey, ensured confidentiality, and explained that those who

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completed the survey would be eligible for a prize drawing.

A total of 3,476 participants completed the survey, representing a 14.6% response rate. Of the survey participants, 70.9% (n = 2,463) self-reported as current SNS users for running-specific content. The demographic profile of the current running SNS users included a gender balance (47.2% male and 52.8% female) and the mean age was 37.9 years old. Ethnicity was predominantly Caucasian (56%) followed by Hispanic (35%), and 58% reported being married or living with a partner. The sample was highly-educated, with 89% possessing at least an undergraduate degree and the mean household income was 103,763 (USD) per annum. The vast majority of respondents (80%) were U.S. residents and 67% were non-local participants (i.e., did not live in host community).

The survey included scaled measures for all constructs of interest, including: a three-item scale of Running Involvement (Funk et al., 2011) and single-item measures of frequency running-related SNS use, frequency of running behavior (i.e., miles/week), and social life satisfaction (i.e., extent to which running event influenced social life satisfaction).

Results and Discussion

In following Baron and Kenny's (1986) three-step approach, the mediating effect of the use of running-related SNS was examined. Satisfying the first condition of mediation, running involvement predicted both running behavior ($\beta = .223, p < .01$) and social life satisfaction ($\beta = .338, p < .01$). Next, the role of the mediator (i.e., amount of time spent using running-related SNS) as a predictor of running involvement was examined. The second requirement of mediation was satisfied, as results indicated that running involvement directs frequency of running-related SNS use ($\beta = .143, p < .01$). Use of running-related SNS demonstrated a positive, significant influence on running behavior ($\beta = .068, p < .01$) and social life satisfaction ($\beta = .138, p < .01$). Given that running involvement remained a significant predictor after the mediator was entered, evidence was provided for partial mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

The current study demonstrated support for the theoretical potential of running-related social media to serve as an engagement platform that can augment the influence of involvement on the physical and mental benefits of participation in the activity itself. In this regard, it would appear that SNS can act as both a 'pull' (i.e., directs engagement as a behavioral outcome) and a 'push' (i.e., facilitates engagement in physical activity) factor in a running context.