A New Marketing Outlet of Professional Sport Franchises: A Study of Smartphone Application Usage Patterns in Professional Sports Clubs

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Communication Friday, May 30, 2014 20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Frick)

Abstract 2014-116

Smartphones are regarded as important devices for citizens who are living in modern society (Smith, 2009). As technology innovations have evolved, these mobile devices operate a myriad of applications (apps), which increase the functional aspects of mobile phones to a wide range of information services including information seeking, social networking, and even purchasing products (Wang, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2012). In their annual report, Vodafone Group (2013) defined a mobile application as “a software application usually designed to run on a smartphones or tablet device and provide a convenient means for the user to perform certain tasks” (p. 187). In addition, these technology innovations are likely to move smartphone users from traditional web browsers to using applications as “gateways” to Internet services (Xu, Erman, Gerber, Mao, Pang, & Venkataraman, 2011). With this popularity, acceptance of smartphone applications is an inevitable phenomenon among users.

In terms of smartphone application categories, sport-related applications are one of the most popular categories in App marketplaces for iOS, Android, and Windows Phone. According to the U.S. Census Bureau and eMarketer’s report (2013), 16% of smartphone consumers (the third largest portion among the categories) utilize their smartphones to seek out information through sport related applications. Consequently, there have been prevalent technology acceptance and diffusion of innovations’ patterns of sports applications with a variety of marketing efforts to attract consumers by sport organizations. In particular, professional sport teams’ official applications represent a rising marketplace and a new outlet to not only distribute news and information, but also increase revenue by selling tickets and licensed products.

Based on analyses of previous studies, two prevalent theories have been utilized to explain the relationships between new media acceptance patterns and consumers’ perspectives; technology acceptance model (TAM: Davis, 1989) and diffusion of innovations (DOI: Rogers, 1963). While extensive smartphone application studies have been conducted in telecommunication, informatics, and marketing areas (e.g., Persaud, & Azhar, 2012; Verkasalo, Lopez-Nicolas, Molina-Castillo, & Bouwman, 2010; Wang, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2011), there is a lack of smartphone related studies in sport management and communication. However, there are a number of studies in regard to traditional online marketing and its effect on consumers. For example, Hur, Ko, and Claussen (2011) developed a sport website acceptance model by using the technology acceptance model, and their findings indicated sport involvement and psychological commitment to a certain team played significant roles in consumers’ decision-making processes. In terms of online marketing of professional sport clubs, Ioakimidis (2010) investigated the media-based content and opportunities for fan interaction used by 12 professional sports teams in four top-tier leagues (hockey, football, rugby, and soccer) in North America and Europe. Based on a content analysis, the author found that the National Football League had more sophisticated online marketing strategies when compared to the other leagues analyzed (Ioakimidis, 2010).

Despite the increase in smartphone application development and usage, no study to date has specifically examined how teams are using smartphone applications. Given the rise in sport-related smartphone application development and usage it is important to understand what content and functions teams are offering to potential users. Examining this through the lens of the TAM and DOI may help in understanding not only how teams are utilizing the applications, but if they are providing content which may lead to consumer usage. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research questions:
RQ1: What content (e.g., news, scores, statistics, etc.) do professional sport franchises offer in their official smartphone applications?

RQ2: What functions (e.g., merchandise sales, ticket sales, etc.) are provided in official team smartphone applications?

RQ3: Are there observable communication or marketing strategies being utilized by teams in their smartphone applications?

Examining these questions will allow for the categorization of five major sports leagues’ official smartphones application content, including 30 Major League Baseball (MLB) teams, 32 National Football League (NFL) teams, 30 National Hockey League (NHL) franchises, 30 National Basketball Association (NBA) teams, and 19 Major League Soccer (MLS) teams. Second, based on descriptive data, the study will attempt to determine the key components that teams are utilizing to attract fans, and what kinds of functional aspects they have in their applications. Finally, this study will shed light on how to develop and maintain official applications for marketers, developers, and scholars.

Similar to the study conducted by Ioakimidis (2010), this study will conduct a content analysis with a total of 141 professional teams’ official smartphones applications. These teams are selected because they represent many of the most popular sports franchises in North America. Based on a pre-determined list of coding categories each team’s application will be analyzed to determine the content, functions, and marketing and communication strategies utilized across the teams and leagues. The results of the study will significantly contribute to sport management and communication literature in several critical ways. First, the current study will identify and describe the way in which teams are utilizing their official smartphone applications. Second, key elements for successful marketing modeling through the applications will be suggested. Lastly, the diagnosed application usage patterns will help in the development of unique and systematic application tools for developers.