Collegiate Sport Fans Allegiance: The Mediating Effects of Twitter Usage

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Relevance/Significance/Purpose

Allegiance has long been considered one of the most notable research topics in sport studies (e.g., Duncan, 1983; Depken, 2000; Funk & Pastore, 2000; Smith, Patterson, Williams & Hogg, 1981; Wakefield & Sloan, 1995; Wann & Branscombe 1990). Allegiance is defined as “the range of all those elements which induce citizens to give their loyalty to institutions of governance, which whether national, international or supranational” (Milward, 1997, p. 11). In context of sport, when fans’ thoughts and behavior become “persistent and resistant to change” toward their specific teams, that can be a form of allegiance (Funk & James, 2006). Hence, allegiance fans are those who have formed strong connections to their favorite team, and these attitudes strengthen their psychological involvement.

Twitter has grown dramatically since its inception in 2006, totaling more than 500 million users as of early 2013 (Gupta, Goel, Lin, Sharma, Wang, & Zadeh, 2013). Twitter is one of the most popular communication technologies used by both fans and sport organizations (Clavio, 2011), and allows individuals, organizations, and other social groups to connect with one another (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010). Accordingly, it is likely important for sport management scholars to understand Twitter and its effect on fan-team relationships (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010).

Consequently, the purpose of this study was to examine the mediating effects of Twitter on the formation of fan allegiance using the revised Psychological Continuum Model (PCM), which reflects fans’ psychological development to allegiance with a particular sport team.

Literature Review

Funk and James (2001) first constructed the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) as a platform for understanding the development of sport fans allegiance as a psychological process, and argued that it began with awareness and proceeded through attraction, attachment, and loyalty. The revisions (Funk & James, 2006) to the PCM have increased our understanding of how an individual moves through the four original stages (i.e., awareness, attraction, attachment, and loyalty), showing how each stage helps him or her reach the next stage (Funk & James, 2006). This model is a logical next step in consumer behavior research because it explains the complexity of the human mind more accurately compared to current models (Funk & James, 2006). Since individual processes are believed to be flexible in an ever-changing environment (Chelladurai, 2001), this model also provides integrated sociological and psychological factors, resulting in particular hierarchical outcomes (Funk & James, 2006).

Twitter, currently one of the most popular social network services in the world, allows users to post messages or tweets up to 140 characters (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Johnson, 2009), and provides two-way communication tools to reach users in an innovative and unique way through images, videos, and messages (Zhang, Sung, & Lee, 2010). In addition, this real-time network allows users to share information through personal messages (Waters & Jamal, 2011), and offers a “place” for posting instant, breaking sport news and direct communication between athletes, sport teams, and fans (Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012). Within the sport media landscape, Twitter plays a significant role as both, strategic marketing and managerial tools, enabling sport fans to heighten their allegiance (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Hutchins, 2011).
Methodology

In this study, 412 surveys were collected from fans attending four men’s baseball games at a mid-sized southern university during the spring 2013 season. Of the 412 collected surveys, only 212 were Twitter users who followed the Men’s Baseball team’s Twitter account. The survey instrument was adapted and modified from the existing literature on Team Association Scales (TAS) (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Davis-Sramek, Droge, Mentzer, & Myers, 2009) and Twitter usage (Blaszka, 2011). The TAS instruments measured attributes and benefits (39 items), attachment properties (9 items), and loyalty (7 items). Twitter instruments assessed Twitter usage while watching a sport game and Twitter usage before and after watching a sport game. All items measured the respondent’s commitment toward a favorite team and Twitter usage on a scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Multiple linear regression (MLR) analyses were used to examine the data.

Results and Discussion

In order to examine the mediating effect of Twitter usage with respect to fan allegiance, this study was conducted using a three-step process recommended by Barron and Kenny (1986). Specifically, the process was tested at two different time periods: one was during the four baseball games and the other was before or after the games. When the assessment was made during the game, the results of step 1 indicated that team identification (β = .54), nostalgia (β = .20), and success (β = .05) were positively related to attitude formation. In the second step, team identification (β = .51), nostalgia (β = .22), and success (β = .19) were positively related to team allegiance. Given that these three variables were entered after the mediator, the evidence indicates full mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Considering that we assessed Twitter usage before or after watching the game, the first step indicated that team identification (β = .51), nostalgia (β = .20), and success (β = .18) of the 13 attributes and benefits were positively related to attitude formation. Step 2 showed that team identification (β = .38), nostalgia (β = .21), and head coach (β = .18) were positively related to allegiance. The beta weights in Step 3 revealed that the relationship between allegiance and Level 2 outcomes of team identification, nostalgia, success, and pride in place were fully mediated through Level 3 attitude formation as a mediator.

The results demonstrated a significant relationship between Twitter usage and team allegiance reflected through a high level of psychological connection to a specific team. Based on the results of this study, practitioners can identify a unique market segment from surveyed participants, which could help them attract and reach team allegiance through Twitter. Specifically, more Twitter usage regarding a specific team influences fans with weak attachments, to strengthen their attachment toward a team and increase their Twitter usage. Since this study shows the positive relationship between the frequency of Twitter usage and fan allegiance, it could target participants with lesser Twitter usage to increase their frequency, thus, increasing new marketing and communication strategy related to Twitter. Finally, the empirical evidence of this study can provide a better understanding of the growing phenomena of social media and the trends of Twitter usage in sport study context. This study could extend to include other kinds of social media and their effectiveness during interactions between sport organizations and sport fans.