Exploring Smartphone Usage: What Are Fans Doing With Their Smartphones?

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The introduction of smartphones has changed the way sport fans follow their favorite sports, teams, and players (Kang, Ha, & Hambrick, in press). The most prominent fan activities for smartphone users include accessing online sports content (e.g., social media sites, blogs) and watching video and live sporting events (Tode, 2012). This sport content has changed the way fans experience and interact with their favorite sports. Sport fans not only access this content while on the move, but also enjoy multitasking while watching sports on television. Fans access real-time information (e.g., player stats) on their smartphones to enhance their viewing experience. Similarly, sporting facilities have newly integrated Wi-Fi services to provide online access for smartphone users while at the game. However, not all fans access smartphone content the same way. A fan’s individual level of fanship influences various aspects of sport consumption behavior (Dietz-Uhler & Lanter, 2008).

Sport fan behavior involves connecting with others who share similar interests, purchasing goods supporting their fandom, watching and attending the games, and collecting information regarding their favorite teams and sports. The degrees of involvement in such activities vary depending on the level of their fanship. The level of fanship may also differ depending on the sport they follow. For instance, Wann and Branscombe (1993) found college fans to have stronger fan identification than other sport fans. They also stated highly identified fans feel a strong bond between fans and teams. Depending on the degree of their fanship, sport consumers are encouraged to utilize technology in order to further engage in fan activities.

Smartphones today provide the means for fans to establish and validate this bond via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, message boards, and other apps and online resources. Schurr, Ruble, and Ellen (2007) indicated sport consumption is maximized when a de facto association between an individual and a group is combined with social support and encouragement for attendance. Fans of winning teams often identify with their favorite team specifically, while fans of losing teams may identify with the sport domain (i.e. nature of sport) rather than a specific team (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). Therefore, examining the role smartphones play in a fan’s social connection with a team and the levels at which these connections occur (player, team, and/or league) will provide helpful information towards understanding current sport consumption behavior trends.

The popularity of online sport content continues to provide sport fans with ways to better interact and connect with their favorite sports, teams, and players. To better understand how sport fans utilize online sport content, researchers have examined sport consumers’ internet usage (Hardin, Koo, Ruhley, Dittmore, & McGreevey, 2012; Hur, Ko, & Claussen, 2012; Seo & Green, 2008), social media sites (Clavio & Walsh, 2013; Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011), fantasy sports (Dwyer & Kim, 2010), and smartphones (Ha, Kang, & Ha, in press; Kang et al., in press). Yet studies are limited as researchers primarily focused on understanding why consumers took advantage of the examined technology. Considering this limitation, the purpose of the study is in two folds. First is to understand how sport consumers use smartphone to consume sport and second is to examine smartphone usage behavior among different type of sport consumers. The study will address the following research questions:

RQ1. Which communication channels (i.e., social media, official team websites, smartphone push notification, sport fans’ online community, apps, text, email) do sport consumers use when following sports?
RQ2. How does smartphone usage differ for sport consumers who follow college sport, professional sport, and ones who follow both college and professional sport?
RQ3. How does fan identification influence sport fans’ smartphone usage?
RQ4. How does fan identification differ for smartphone users? (i.e. college sport fans, professional sport fans, and fans who follow both college and professional sport?)

Data collection is currently underway using Amazon MTurk, an online crowdsourcing marketing service, and a cross sectional survey design. The participants are sport fans who are smartphone users that reside in the United States. All survey items were reviewed by a panel of experts to establish content validity. Prior to distributing the survey on MTurk, a pilot test with college students who own an Amazon account was conducted. The feedback and comments derived from the field test and pilot study were incorporated into the final survey questionnaires.

Once data collection is complete, the data will be analyzed using SPSS 21.0. In order to answer RQ1, the researchers will utilize a frequency table to identify and rank the popularity of the communication channels used by the respondents. For RQ2, a series of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests will be used comparing three groups of sport consumers (i.e. professional sport fans, college sport fans, and fans who follow both professional and college sports) in terms of their frequency of smartphone usage. In addition, descriptive statistics will be used to determine what sport consumers are examining in regards to leagues, teams, and players. For RQ3, the relationship between frequency of smartphone usage and fan identification (e.g., low, medium, high) will be examined using multiple regression analysis. Finally, RQ4 will be answered by using an ANOVA test to compare fan identification of the three sport consumer groups capture information regarding smartphone usage depending on an individual's fan identification.

Specifically, the current study will examine fans’ sport consumption behavior through the lens of today’s smartphone technologies. The results will provide in-depth insights as to how sport fans use their smartphones and what differences exist between fan groups based on sports they follow and fan identification. Additionally, the result will provide practical information that are necessary in understanding exactly what sport consumers are doing on their smartphone to follow their favorite sport. The study results will theoretically expand previous studies by examining fan behaviors specific to smartphone usage.

Several practical implications could result from this research. As sport managers gain a greater grasp of how their fans utilize smartphones in connection with their sport, they may invest more time and effort into maximizing these benefits. Fraser (2007) found loyalty and fan identification are positively related, and Wann and Branscombe (1993) found highly identified fans were willing to spend more money at the game. If smartphone usage is positively related to fan identification, then sport managers may wish to spend more time understanding how they can increase their connection with fans via smartphones through apps or other methods. If, to the contrary, there is no relationship between smartphone use and identification, then sport managers may wish to decrease or change their current smartphone marketing investments. There are also implications for potential corporate sponsors based on these results, as some sports may yield a greater return on investment than others in terms of smartphone advertising.