Theory Utilization in Social Media Scholarship in Sport Studies: A Review

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Abstract

Research Background

Over the past decade, the scope, magnitude, and extent of social media (SM) use has been tremendous in the sport industry (Pedersen, 2014; Rowe & Hutchins, 2014). In light of this growing presence and the dynamic interrelationship between sport and SM, social science scholars are examining SM in various sport settings to gain insights into its manifestations, characteristics, and usage trends. Though SM’s scholarship is still relatively recent (Billings & Hardin, 2014), a number of scholars (e.g., Billings, 2014; Hardin, 2014; Hutchins, 2014; Pedersen, 2014; Pegoraro, 2014; Sanderson, 2014; Wenner, 2014) are urging researchers to advance and broaden their research agenda by (i) developing more sophisticated research questions, (ii) advancing the utilization of theories, and (iii) employing innovative research methods. As one critical element in the advancement of an academic discipline (Cunningham, 2013; Doherty, 2013), theory development helps a scholarship legitimize itself, build its identity and increase its self-reliance (Abeza, O’Reilly, & Nadeau, 2014). The question of how theories are used (or not used) in research is important as researchers try to ascertain their role in understanding, explaining and predicting the various topic areas in a field of study. Thus, the production of empirical evidence on the current state of theory utilization in SM scholarship will help determine weaknesses and strengths, reveal areas of improvement, identify developmental needs, and inform the research community on future directions.

Research Objectives

This study seeks to (i) identify and (ii) profile the theories used, advanced, and developed in SM scholarship in sport studies, and (iii) examine the utilization of the theories. Based on the findings the study identifies developmental needs.

Research Method

A cross-disciplinary (e.g., sport marketing, communication, psychology, sociology) census review of the SM academic literature published since 2008 (the earliest found) in academic journals in sport studies was conducted. For this purpose, six sport related online search databases were used, namely Academic Search (Ebsco Publishing), Google Scholar, Scopus (Elsevier), SportDiscus (SIRC), and Web of Science (Thomson Reuters). The search for journal articles was based on 12 keyword descriptors: social media, Web 2.0, new media, online, internet, social network/ing sites, Facebook, Twitter, 140 characters, Blog, YouTube, and message boards. The databases were queried for the keywords in the title, abstract and the keyword list. In order to ascertain that relevant work has not been omitted, a search was also conducted within 30 selected journals in sport management from those identified by Andrew, Pedersen, and McEvoy (2011). While other forms of publications provide a great deal of information (e.g. practitioner publications and reports, textbooks and edited volumes, masters and doctoral dissertations, and conference papers), they were not selected for inclusion as we specifically focus on academic (peer-reviewed) publications. The census review produced a total of 123 SM articles including 96 empirical research papers sourced from 29 journals published from January 2008 to June 2014. The full-length of the 96 articles was carefully read through to identify the utilization of theories in the scholarship.

Research Findings

Through a review of the 96 articles, we identified 26 theories and theoretical models. These theories and models originated from a variety of disciplines including sociology, marketing, psychology, information technology, mass media, and crisis communication. Of the articles, 52 used or made references to at least one of the identified 26
Theories. Uses and gratifications, and relationship marketing theories are the most cited theories (being used in 10 and seven studies, respectively). Parasocial interaction and agenda setting had been used in four studies while media framing, social identity theories, and image/reputation repair typology were each used in three studies. Theory of self-presentation, technology acceptance model, and gatekeeping theory have each been used in two SM studies. The remaining 15 theories and models have each been used in 14 different studies, namely psychological continuum model (PCM) (Mahoney, Hambrick, Svensson, & Zimmerman, 2013), integrative model of behavioral prediction and attitude functions (Wang, 2013), one-way and two-way models of communication (Dittmore, Stoldt, & Greenwell, 2008), technological determinism (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010), stewardship (Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2011), communication privacy management theory (Sanderson, 2011), feminist theory (Antunovic & Hardin, 2012), dialogical self theory (Browning & Sanderson, 2012), systems theory (Clavio, Burch, & Frederick, 2012), theory of planned behavior (Clavio, 2011), broom roles typology (Stoldt & Vermillion, 2013), homophily (Hull & Lewis, 2014), technological determinism (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010), press-agentry-publicity model of public relations (Gibbs & Haynes, 2013), cognitive dissonance theory (Kwak, Kim, & Zimmerman, 2010), and elaboration likelihood model (ELM) (Kwak, Kim, & Zimmerman, 2010).

The 52 studies that made reference to the 26 identified theories were further classified under Bryant and Miron’s (2004) eleven groupings of theory utilization. Three-fourths of the citations utilized their theories as a framework for the study (69.8%) and almost one-tenth of the articles (9.4%) expanded the theories or models referenced. Other uses of theory include mere references to the theories (7.5% of all references), supporting theories (3.8%), and new application of theories into SM studies (3.8%). Integration of theories also accounted for 3.8%, while discussion of a theory/praising accounted for 1.9%. Unfortunately, those aspects typically considered to be the primary components of theory construction (Bryant & Miron, 2004), such as proposing a theory, testing a new theory, critique of a theory, and comparison of theories are absent in SM scholarship in sport management research.

Implications
The majority of SM research in sport management (70%) uses theory as a tool to frame their studies. None of the studies reviewed proposed a theory, tested a new theory, critiqued a theory, or compared different theories. Moreover, only a few studies were found to support existing theories, to apply theories from other areas of study in social media setting, and/or to integrate different theories. As Cunningham (2013) and Doherty (2013) argued, theory is a critical element in the advancement of an academic discipline and as the SM scholarship advances its research questions, the issue of proposing, testing, critiquing and comparing theories would come to be essential. In fact, theory development can be one of the most challenging but also intellectually stimulating ventures in academia (Abeza, O’Reilly, & Nadeau, 2014). However, taking the uniqueness of sport and its dynamic interrelationship with SM, a development of homegrown theory will be essential for the advancement of the SM scholarship. Hence, scholars should be encouraged to compare, critique, and integrate theories in the context of SM. Further, they should test and apply theories from other fields into the context of SM, and eventually develop new theories. As Chalip (2006), Fink (2013), and Slack (1998) stated, scholars not only need to use existing theories to study sport but also to use sport to test and extend existing theories.