Why We Follow: Exploring How Culture Shapes Users’ Motivations for Following Sport Organizations on Twitter and Weibo

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Space-time barriers between spectators and sports have been removed with the introduction of mediated technologies (Bowman & Cranmer, 2014). Obsolete relationships among sports fans, athletes and sports organizations have been replaced by contemporary communication fostered by social media, where sports fans can actively interact with their favorite athletes, sports organizations, media and each other (Sanderson, 2011). However, computer mediated communication appears in a social environment where personal behaviors are shaped by individual's values and norms (De Mooij, 2008; Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011). Users from different cultural backgrounds may have different perceptions, motivations, and patterns as utilizing different social media platforms.

As one of the largest economies in the world, China has a distinguished sports and social media market. Due to the concern of national security, international mainstream social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, are inaccessible in China, thus localized social media are dominated in this market. Weibo, a Chinese microblogging service, for instance, features similar functions as Twitter, but Gao, Abel, Houben, and Yu (2012) found that Chinese Weibo users exhibited different behaviors from Twitter users while using the service. Compared to Twitter users, Weibo users are not accustomed to using a hashtag to ensure their messages were receiving more attention and raising possible discussion in the future (Gao et al., 2012). Due to the uniqueness of the Chinese social media market, sports organizations need to develop more flexible and localized marketing and communication strategies to satisfy sports consumers' needs in this fast growing market.

The guiding framework for this study was uses and gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). The purpose of this research is to observe how users’ motivations on Twitter and Weibo are different when following sport organizations. Since the primary Weibo users are from collective cultures (i.e. Chinese), and the majority of Twitter users are from individual cultures (i.e. U.S.), this study will examine how cultures impact users’ motivations. In addition, this study also explores the relationship between team identification and users’ social media motivation. As Filo, Lock, and Karg (2015) suggested, there is an increasing need for researchers to study social media in the Asia and Pacific region in order to better understand the diversity of global social media market. This research will fill a gap of providing insights on whether sports social media users from different markets will display different motives when they consume similar social media platforms.

Uses and gratifications theory is the most commonly used theory to explain how media consumers’ social and psychological needs are satisfied by actively choosing media channels and information. This theory has guided sport communication researchers to explore the nature of sports and new media (e.g. Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Clavio & Kian, 2010; Clavio & Walsh, 2013).

Stafford, Stafford, and Schkade (2004) suggested that three dimensions associated with Internet-specific gratifications were content gratifications, process gratifications, and social gratifications. Content gratifications refer to as the messages carried by the medium (i.e. information and entertainment), which could satisfy consumers’ demands (Stafford et al., 2004). Process gratifications concern how the medium has been actually used (Cutler & Danowski, 1980). Internet users might be motivated by enjoying the usage processes where they are able to random browse and navigate the sites (Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Stafford et al., 2004). One of specific features of the Internet, interaction, which could satisfy users’ social gratification (Hoffman & Novak, 2006). Besides the three gratifications mentioned previously, literature also suggested sports social media users might be motivated by other factors of following athletes and sport organizations on social networking sites (SNS), such as escape (Park, Li,
Dittmore, 2015), passing time (Park et al., 2015), and curiosity (Kang et al., 2015). These motives could be categorized as personal gratifications.

Team identification may also have impacts on sports fans’ motives of consuming social media. Team identification is defined as customers’ personal commitment and emotional involvement with sport organizations (Milne & McDonald, 1999). Highly identified sports fans were found to be more likely to consume various media to follow information about a team than nonfans (Phua, 2010). Moyer (2012) revealed that sport fans with higher level of team identification were more likely to follow the team on Facebook, and also spend more time to viewing the information relating to the team. Therefore, it is necessary to continue exploring whether social media users’ different team identification impact their motives for consuming sports team’s social media account.

Research questions

To address the purpose of the study, Los Angeles Laker’s Twitter and Weibo users were selected to participate in the study. The Larker were viewed as an appropriate case since they have been identified as one of the most popular sports organizations on both platforms (Statista, 2015). As of September 2015, Los Angeles-based NBA team had attracted 4.47 million followers on Twitter, and its Weibo official Weibo account was followed by 1.9 million users.

Five research questions were developed in this study: 1) Do Weibo users have different identified motives using Weibo from Twitter users? If so, how do they differ? 2) What are the relationships between users’ motives of following the Lakers on Weibo and their usage pattern? 3) What are the relationships between users’ motives of following the Lakers on Twitter and their usage pattern? 4) How do the levels of team identification impact Twitter users’ motivation of following sports organizations? 5) How do the levels of team identification impact Weibo users’ motivation of following sports organizations?

Method

The developed instrument for this study was a survey. Since this study aimed to survey users on Twitter and Weibo, versions of the survey questionnaires were created in both English and Chinese. The survey in English was to measure the motives of Twitter users, and the survey in Chinese was applied to examine the motives of Weibo users.

The survey instrument consisted of: 1) five questions adopted from Fredrick (2012)’s study to measure user’s attitudes toward SNS; 2) the motivational scale that emerges from modified subscales from Motivations Scale for Online Sport Consumption (MSSOC) (Seo & Green, 2008), and subscales from Scale of Motivation for Online Sport Consumption (SMOS) (Hur, Ko,& Valacich, 2007); 3) three items from Kwon and Armstrong (2004)’s study was examined to measure team identification; and 4) demographic questions.

To answer developed research questions, the data will be analyzed using SPSS version 22.0. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) will be conducted to test the factorial structure of observed variables after collecting the data. MANOVA will be used to identify whether Twitter and Weibo users have different motives of following sports organizations. In addition, multiple regressions analyses will be conducted to assess which gratifications (content gratifications, process gratifications, social gratifications, and personal gratifications) could predict Twitter and Weibo users’ patterns and attitudes of using SNSs. To measure the relationships between users’ team identification and their motivations of following sport organizations, MANOVA will highlight whether their team identification will have impact on motivation of following sport organizations.

This is one of the first known studies to identify the cultural impacts in users’ social media motives and behaviors in a sport and social media context. Although this study is in progress, the researchers expect the results will provide a better understanding of the similarities and differences between Twitter and Weibo users, assist sports organizations and marketers to develop more effective social media strategies in different social media markets.