Dimensions of Social Media Usage Motivation of Ultimate Fighting Championship Fans: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Since the inception of social media, the number of social media users has increased rapidly (Perrin, 2015) and in turn, the new media have significantly influenced information acquisition over the traditional media and individuals’ purchasing decisions (Vollmer & Precourt, 2008). Many sport organizations utilize social media as a marketing tool to reach their current and potential consumers, and the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) is not an exception. After Zuffa LLC took over the UFC, the popularity of UFC has grown dramatically (Smith, 2016); however, the organization faces a number of challenges in maintaining competitive advantage in the crowded marketplace. Understanding the needs and wants of its consumers and accordingly formulating effective marketing communication strategies would be necessary for the UFC to make good use of social media platforms. While previous studies on consumer motivations of mixed martial arts (MMA) help shed light on underlying dynamics of MMA fans (Andrew et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2009), fan motivations to follow and use social media for UFC must be examined to systematically understand consumer behavior in this unique setting. The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory assumes that individuals are active evaluators of particular forms and contents of media to satisfy their needs (Katz et al., 1974). This theory is widely considered as an appropriate framework for exploring the reasons that cause and channel social media consumption (Cianfrone et al., 2011; Phua et al., 2017). Building on the U&G theory, the purpose of this study was to explore the dimensions of social media usage motivation of UFC consumers through a qualitative inquiry.

Qualitative data collection and analyses were undertaken by conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 UFC fans who were actively following and/or using various official UFC social media. The grounded theory approach was adopted for data analyses by following Charmaz’s (2006) guidelines. For the validity and trustworthiness of the analyses, Decrop (2004) and Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria were applied.

Findings revealed that UFC fans had five major themes of motivations to follow and/or use official UFC social media, which were labeled as obtaining information, social interaction, convenient accessibility, entertainment feature, and economic consideration. While a majority of these themes were similar to consumer usage of social media in other sport context, economic consideration emerged as a distinguishable factor. As UFC operates a pay-per-view system, many UFC fans followed social media to consume UFC inexpensively.

The findings of this study revealed preliminary evidence for further investigations into the conceptualization, composition, and impact of consumer motivation for UFC social media usage. Given the limited understanding of social media usage by UFC fans to gratify their needs and wants, the results of this study will enable researchers to verify the importance and relevance of identified social media motivational factors. The identified themes would also be helpful for UFC managers to tailor to specific consumer needs when promoting events through their social media.