Understanding Sport Social Media Usage: An Examination of Uses and Gratifications Theory

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Existing sport management scholarship has sought to understand motivations of social media (SM) usage. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) is often used as the theoretical foundation for this research and is built on two assumptions: (i) consumers are purposeful in their media selection and (ii) are aware of their reasons for selection (Katz, 1959). Namely, consumers evaluate and select a media based on its ability to meet their needs, and only continue usage so long as their needs are satisfied. Based on UGT, existing scholarship has identified a plethora of motivations driving sport SM usage, summarized by Filo et al. (2015) as interactivity, information gathering, entertainment, fandom, and camaraderie. However, a critical examination of the appropriateness or application of UGT is needed given criticisms that the theory overstates consumers’ purposefulness and is individualistic and compartmentalized, making result synthesis difficult (Ruggiero, 2000; White, 1994).

To address these criticisms, this research revisited the original question motivating UGT’s development: what do people do with sport SM? Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 SM users, 11 males and 11 females aged 20-44 who had varying fandom levels, favourite sports, careers, and SM usage habits. Participants were recruited using a purposeful sampling strategy followed by a snowball technique following past research precedents (e.g., Collins et al., 2016). Interviews were transcribed, imported into Nvivo10, and then analyzed following Creswell’s (2013) seven-step process. Two overarching themes emerged: how SM was used, shedding light on how usage can range from habitual to purposeful, and why SM was used, identifying four motivations.

Findings revealed two important theoretical implications: (i) a core set of motivations driving SM usage and (ii) a need for an augmentation to UGT to help it overcome existing criticisms. First, SM usage was motivated by information gathering, entertainment, boredom, and connectivity regardless of platform or context, with further probing failing to confirm additional motivations such as fandom or camaraderie. This provides a core set of motivations future researchers can draw upon rather than continuing to identify new typologies of motivations for specific platforms and contexts. Second, findings indicated that not all SM selection and usage was as purposeful as outlined by UGT, but rather it could be done in a habitual, unconscious manner where users open their SM out of habit or without purposefully seeking it out to fulfill a need (e.g., open SM application because they unlocked their phone). Moreover, SM selection could be based off of learned preferences or biases, selecting their favourite platform, rather than seeking out the platform that would best fulfill their needs (e.g., favouring Instagram despite acknowledging Twitter as a superior information source). Consequently, the underlying assumptions of UGT may not be always met. Therefore, an augmentation to UGT is proposed to reflect this how component, specifically the range of habitual to purposeful consumption, in addition to the why component driving media selection and usage.

Managerially, this research provides sport and SM organizations alike with insights on how to develop mobile applications and execute SM strategies.