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Papers

Social media posters and lurkers: The impact on team identification and game attendance in minor league baseball

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Abstract

Social media has exploded over the past few years, with sport fans now actively contributing to social networks, blogs, news feeds and content-sharing sites. Because social media tools encourage user engagement, they should also increase consumer affiliation with their teams. However, not much is known about the attitudinal and behavioural differences between posters, sport fans who post content, and lurkers, those who post infrequently or not at all. This study, using mediation and moderation models of team identification and game attendance, confirms that both lurkers and posters identify with their teams and are likely to attend games. This study finds, however, that lurkers attend games more frequently than posters. These differences are discussed and recommendations are made to improve the use of social media by sport organizations. Suggestions for future research are also provided.

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Identifying and deploying social media applications has become a marketing necessity

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Introduction

Social media tools have empowered users, opened new communication channels, changed consumer behaviour and provided new challenges for marketers across a range of industries. Identifying and deploying social media applications has become a marketing necessity as corporations move beyond traditional web tools and embrace new technologies.^{1–4} The presence of professional sport teams within the social media environment continues to grow, providing sport fans with numerous opportunities to use interactive digital content in a variety of settings.¹ At the same time, sport team management are attempting to understand the value of these tools and develop better approaches to building team awareness and fan commitment. All teams are interested in social media activities that lead to new users, stronger relationships with existing fans

Only recently has social media begun to play a substantial role in the lives of sport fans

and, ultimately, increased revenues. Unfortunately, not much is known about which fans are most engaged in social media activities and how participation in social media activities affects team awareness, affiliation and revenues. This paper addresses some of these questions by examining how participation and interaction with social media affects team identification and game attendance of minor league baseball fans.

Prior sport marketing research has focused on team identification as a driver of sport consumption; however, much of this work has examined traditional interactions with fans such as attendance at games, purchases of season tickets and licensed merchandise, and traditional media usage. Only recently has social media begun to play a substantial role in the lives of sport fans and in the marketing strategies of sport organizations. To examine social media and fan interactions in sport, this paper first conducts a review of the literature on existing team affiliation outcome models, and examines the role of 'lurkers' (those who visit and follow teams at social media sites, but do not actively participate), and 'posters' (those who actively post and contribute to teams' social media sites). Hypotheses are developed to test the attitudinal and behavioural differences between posters and lurkers for game attendance and team identification. Finally, the research findings are discussed along with research and practitioner implications and future research directions.

Lurkers and posters

'Lurkers' is a term commonly used by the internet community to refer to those people who visit online communities but who do not actively contribute, or perhaps only minimally contribute, whereas 'posters' are defined as people who often and actively participate. Previous researchers have identified lurkers as either making no posts at all, or making very few posts over a time period.⁵ Lurkers tend not to post for several reasons including: not feeling any need to do so, needing more information from the community before making a contribution, not wanting to add to clutter by posting, software problems and not liking the community's dynamics.⁶ However, lurkers still believe they are part of the community and enjoy following the sometimes animated exchanges between active social media members. In comparison, posters get intangible benefits out of their activity in the form of helping others, emotional support and a sense of belonging. These activities can increase poster self-esteem as well as earn respect from other community members.⁷ Posters may also feel that they are an important and valuable part of the organization or brand. Posters may be viewed as active members of brand communities, and may be described as converts or zealots.⁸ Brand zealots represent a powerful promotional channel for consumer marketers; they help to build brand awareness, differentiation and excitement. Although social media communities have not been extensively studied by brand marketers, posters often act as brand zealots and form strong bonds with their favourite sport teams.

Although lurkers visit social media sites but do not post, they still represent considerable value to the social exchange. Without lurkers, there would be fewer readers of posted content; in fact, studies show that the majority of website visitors lurk rather than post.^{6,7} They also impact server traffic, and react to links, advertisements and other promotions.⁶⁻⁸ Lurker online behaviour can also be analysed and segmented, although targeting programs remain a challenge because lurkers prefer anonymity. If lurkers do not post, but read and act on fan reviews and other sport information presented by posters, they have nevertheless increased the value of the user community and its social connections.

Virtually all sports properties have a presence on social networks and regularly use social media to build team identification

Social media in sport

Social media tools and technologies have been classified into five main categories: blogs, social networks, content communities (eg YouTube), forums and bulletin boards, and content aggregators (eg RSS feeds).⁹ The increased availability of simple-to-use technologies helps users create content on their own terms, with or without official involvement on the corporate level.^{10,11} Virtually all sport properties have a presence on social networks, such as Facebook, and regularly use social media to build team identification and customer loyalty.^{9,12} The feeling of increased engagement and the appearance of behind-the-scenes access provides value to fans, as, according to McCarthy, 'it engenders them to your sport, your club, in ways that nobody could have imagined five years ago'.¹³ The fan-driven component of social media activity is particularly valuable in creating meaningful conversations and is so valuable that sport marketers have noted 'wins and losses matter, but the dialogue with our fans matters more'.^{14,15}

Blogging tools have made it easy to contribute to and comment on posts. One of the characteristics of successful blogs is the credibility and status of the poster,¹⁶ and many well-regarded sport bloggers tend to have a very large following. To increase credibility, blog posters often use reciprocal links to other bloggers and organizations. Many teams encourage and support these cross-links, including minor league baseball with links on its website under the umbrella term of 'Official Affiliate/Unofficial Opinions'.¹⁷ Twitter, a micro-blogging tool, also allows sport fans to strengthen connections with their favourite teams by following team and player 'tweets', which provides 'a level of proximity and immediacy that one cannot get elsewhere'.¹⁸ Social networks, such as Facebook, have made it extremely easy for friend to share or just read about others' interests, including sport. Today's sport organizations, including minor league teams, maintain their own Facebook pages where readers may simply read updates, indicate posts that they like, become fans to receive updates, or they may opt to actively post on the team's wall or upload video and photo content. For example, The Toledo Mud Hens Facebook page ranks first in minor league baseball, allowing almost 32,000 fans to interact in a variety of activities.¹⁹

Other collaborative tools, such as wikis and content-sharing sites (eg YouTube, social bookmarking sites), provide both sources of

information and ways for community members to actively contribute to a body of knowledge. The Portland Sea Dogs YouTube channel²⁰ includes video coverage of player highlights, hall of fame inductions, community events and behind-the-scenes access such as 'Sea Dog Cribs'. Finally, content aggregator tools such as RSS feeds also provide output, which can be shared on blogs and social networks, and ultimately become part of other posters' contributions.

Social identity and team identification

Social identity theory can be used to explain the development of community feelings and the perception of belonging to a brand-driven group. Social identity theory recognizes that individuals have both a personal identity and a social identity.²¹ Personal identity consists of characteristics such as interests, talents and abilities, while social identity is 'other directed' and focuses on feelings of group membership.²² Membership in a social group and the perception of group belonging may enhance a person's self-esteem, and often a person's definition of self becomes linked to the group.²³ In organizational contexts, customers that identify closely with an organization are likely to feel a sense of connectedness.^{24,25} Consumers who identify themselves with a brand community are more likely to be satisfied with the brand, develop strong brand loyalties and spread positive word-of-mouth referrals.^{23,26}

Social network analysis has also been used to examine how the self-reported social structure between individuals, groups or organizations affects beliefs and behaviours of those involved. This work originated with Barnes²⁷ who focused on relationships between people rather than individual attributes and characteristics. In comparison, social identity theorizes that an individual's internal self-concept is tied to an external social group. The use of social identity theory in this study is designed to reflect its prevalent use with team identification in the sport marketing literature.

Team identification is defined as 'the personal commitment and emotional involvement customers have with a sport team'

Within sport organizations, team identification is defined as 'the personal commitment and emotional involvement customers have with a sport team' (p. 15).²⁸ The psychological connection to a team allows a person to see the team as an extension of him/herself.^{29,30} This perceived connectedness also impacts the individual's involvement and investment within the group. Individuals characterized as high in team identification have been shown to attend more games,³¹ pay more for tickets,³² experience increased levels of satisfaction and motivation, and perceive higher service quality in their interactions with the team.³³ In addition, highly identified fans felt more positive about team accomplishments and invested more time and money in support of their team.³⁰ Highly identified fans were also more likely to see other fans as special and feel strong affiliations towards fan members who supported their team. Proactive use of strategies designed to strengthen identification have also been considered as possible contributors to long-term relationships between fans and team organizations.³⁴ The

role of team identification in media consumption behaviour, including the generation of word-of-mouth communications has also been researched,³⁵ as well as increased opportunities to strengthen team identification by tech-savvy consumers.³⁶ Thus, team identification is a key antecedent variable to a number of branding, loyalty and purchasing outcomes.

Hypotheses

Social identity theory supports the notion that membership within a group provides psychological benefits, including common norms and shared viewpoints with other members, and a perception of being different from others not in the community.³⁷ The community, brand and organization all become linked and self-identified through a new set of shared insider values and behaviours. The more the community members interact with the organization using social media, the more likely they will consider themselves members of the organization.

There is no clear evidence in existing literature that differentiating levels of social media participation generate different behavioural outcomes. In examining the differing motivations of those who create user-generated content, researchers concluded that posters were more driven by the need to feel a sense of community, connect with others and feel important within their social group than their lurker counterparts; however, both groups felt they were part of the community.³⁸ If different web consumers are relatively satisfied with their different participation roles,³⁹ then both posters and lurkers may be equally satisfied with the organization. Therefore, positive correlations are expected between web usage and team identification for social media posters and lurkers.

H1a: *There is a positive relationship between social media lurking activity and team identification.*

H1b: *There is a positive relationship between social media posting activity and team identification.*

For sport, the relationship between team identification and game attendance has been widely examined

In line with social identity theory, people support organizations that are congruent with their social identities. As members identify themselves as members of a brand community, they perceive the organization to be more attractive and worthy of support.⁴⁰ Consumption can be considered a focal point for a practising brand community, as members are able to display their brand competencies in a public consumption setting.^{23,38} For sport, the relationship between team identification and game attendance behaviour has been widely examined.^{31,41} Highly identified fans tend to attend more games and are more invested in a wide range of team-related behaviours such as traditional media consumption. Because both lurkers and posters who identify with the team have a stake in the team outcome, we expect that the relationship between team identification and game attendance will be the same for both groups.

H2a: *There is a positive relationship between team identification and game attendance behaviour for social media lurkers.*

H2b: *There is a positive relationship between team identification and game attendance behaviour for social media posters.*

As brand community members participate in practices such as retelling of community milestones and commemorating significant events and personal brand experiences, they generate, reinforce and perpetuate consumptive behaviours.³⁸ Members also gain status by displaying their brand knowledge and history to the community and the public at large. For sport teams, the commitment and emotional involvement that individuals have with a sport team may vary, but these attitudes have been shown to directly impact consumptive behaviours.^{35,36} Fan attitudes and emergent sense of team membership combine with team knowledge to directly generate value for brand community members.³⁸ It is possible that for brand devotees the value of the community participation may act as a substitute for the direct consumptive experience of attending a game (ie the value of web participation is its own reward). However, given the strong ties between community involvement and consumptive behaviours, social media participation is expected to directly generate the same team outcome behaviours for lurkers and posters, therefore:

H3a: *There is a positive relationship between social media lurking levels and game attendance.*

H3b: *There is a positive relationship between social media posting levels and game attendance.*

We model team identification as a mediator between social media lurking and posting behaviours and game attendance

To examine the hypotheses, we model team identification as a mediator between social media lurking and posting behaviours and game attendance via multi-step mediation analysis.⁴² The use of two social media models with parallel pathways for lurkers and posters (Figure 1) allows independent testing of the role of social media lurking and posting on antecedent variables. To test for subtle attitudinal and behavioural differences between lurkers and posters, we also investigate the combined mediation and moderation outcome effects of team identification with the team. Although specific hypotheses related to varying levels of web usage and postings are not considered, the analysis explores how different levels of social media

Figure 1: Social media mediation model

posting activity may lead to different attendance outcomes. The next section outlines the methodology, measurements, participants and data analysis used.

Methodology

Survey instrument

A questionnaire was constructed based on a review of the literature and the research questions. The questionnaire included four sections: (1) demographic information; (2) team identification scale; (3) social media lurking and posting behaviours; and (4) game attendance behaviour. An established five-item, seven-point Likert team identification (TI) scale was used in Section (2).³⁰ For the behavioural measurements of social media lurking and posting (Section (3)), respondents listed their total time spent per day both consuming and creating content in one of 12 categories such as sport shows on TV, team websites, social networking sites, blogs and Twitter. Finally, in Section (4), respondents responded to two single-item measures of the number of games attended during this season and planned attendance for next season.^{34,36} A pretest was undertaken to verify measurement scales and to identify social media preferences and usage.

Research design

Permission was obtained from a Double-A Minor League Baseball (MLB) team to use the consumer database of ticket purchasers. The team database contained approximately 2,500 names from respondents in five states in the Northeastern US. The survey was created online, and the minor league team solicited responses from their database via an email request and follow-up reminder note. Sample respondents were given the opportunity to win a ticket package for their participation.

A total of 492 survey responses were received, with a survey response rate of approximately 20 per cent, a good response rate for single wave, online database studies.^{43,44} The respondent sample contained 59 per cent male participants, a median age range between 41 and 50, median annual household income between \$40,000 and \$60,000, and education levels of 26.0 per cent high school and 41.5 per cent college graduates. We conducted several sample comparison tests to validate our survey responses. As a first step, we compared our sample respondent demographics to US and regional minor league baseball demographics. A 2011 Quantcast study of US minor league baseball team demographics reveals MLB fans to be 58 per cent male, median income between \$60,000 and \$100,000 and 43 per cent college graduates.⁴⁵ These national statistics compare favourably to our survey sample. In addition, our sample yielded similar demographics compared to local MLB baseball demographics, with gender ($M = 56.5$ per cent) and education ($College = 42.2$ per cent), and overlapping household income confidence intervals. Finally, we also used zip code data as a proxy for travel distance to the

**National statistics
compare favourably to
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baseball stadium, and found no significant commuting distance differences between sample lurkers and posters ($SED = 2.26$, $t = 0.4422$, $p > 0.05$). Overall, the survey respondents appear to be very representative of minor league baseball fans.

Results

Factor structure and reliability results were adequate with item loadings > 0.60 and alpha level $= 0.77$ for the standardized multi-item scale of team identification (TI). Factor analysis of the measurement scales were analysed with maximum likelihood estimation. The descriptive statistics highlighted significant changes in the means between the two web usage conditions for the dependent variables (Table 1). With a sample size of 492, there was adequate power to examine the study's model and effects (power $= 0.999$). Minutes spent lurking and posting minutes were bimodally distributed, with some heavy users and others not participating at all. The number of minutes of lurking varied by online media type, with fans primarily visiting sport news sites ($M = 4.64$), team websites ($M = 3.49$), and social networking sites ($M = 1.28$). Posters utilized social networking sites ($M = 12.87$), blogs ($M = 8.35$) and instant messaging and chat ($M = 7.05$). Not surprisingly, respondents reported that they regularly visited team-related online information sources (92.5 per cent); however, the majority of fans did not participate in the creation of social media content (not participate $= 50.9$ per cent).

Two identical mediation analyses were conducted for social media lurkers and posters. Correlation analyses were used to examine the relationships between web lurking and game attendance variables (H1a–H3a, Table 2). The effect of lurking was significant and positive for team identification ($r(470) = 0.274$, $p < 0.001$), consistent with H1a. Moreover, the effect of team identification was significant and positive towards game attendance ($r(470) = 0.210$, $p < 0.001$), consistent with

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Variable	Condition	Mean	SD	Mode
W _{Lurk}	Total minutes	12.29	9.96	4.00
	Sport news website	4.64	4.52	9.00
	Team website	3.49	1.33	4.00
	Social networking sites	1.28	2.19	0.00
	Blogs	1.06	3.24	0.00
W _{Post}	Total minutes	33.60 ^a	90.36 ^b	0.00
	Social networking sites	12.87	30.41	0.00
	Blogs	8.35	28.35	0.00
	Chat	7.05	33.64	0.00
TI	Summated scale	2.23	1.13	
GA	Games attended this year	3.35	1.33	

Note: W_{Lurk}=Social media lurkers; W_{Post}=Social media posters.

TI=team identification; GA=number of games attended this year.

^aMeans for Social media posters only (W_{Lurk} treated as missing data).

^bLarge SDs are due to a few extreme Social media posters.

Table 2: Model bivariate correlations

Variable	W_{Lurk}	W_{Post}	TI	GA
W_{Lurk}	—	0.249**	0.311**	0.139*
W_{Post}		—	0.108*	0.059 ^{ns}
TI			—	0.118**
GA				—

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; ns=non-significant.

H2a. Lastly, there was a significant and positive relationship between game attendance and social media lurking ($r(470)=0.139$, $p < 0.05$), supporting H3a.

The same data analysis process was followed for posters by examining the relationships between posting and game attendance (H1b–H3b) (Table 2). The effect of posting was significant and positive for team identification ($r(478)=0.108$, $p < 0.05$), consistent with H1b. Moreover, the effect of team identification was significant and positive towards game attendance ($r(470)=0.210$, $p < 0.001$), consistent with H2b. However, the effect of posting was not significant towards game attendance, H3b ($r(469)=0.059$, $p = 0.138$). Surprisingly, consumers who posted social media content for sport teams identified with their teams but were not more likely to (directly) attend games.

To further explore differences between lurkers and posters, a moderation and mediation analysis between the social media posting, team identification and game attendance was conducted.⁴² Two moderation models examined the incremental effect of posting any social media content on game attendance (Table 3). A dichotomized posting variable was used to test a combined moderation model, with the minority of respondents who create social media content coded 1 and the balance of respondents (43 per cent) who lurked coded 0 (Table 3). The 7.5 per cent of sample non-web respondents were eliminated from the analysis. To analyse lurker and poster models for moderation effects and confirm linearity, stepwise hierarchical regression analyses using mean-centred predictor variables were employed; however, the moderation effects for the team identification–game attendance relationships were non-significant ($W_{Post} XZ B=0.003$, $t = 1.94$, $p = 0.053$; $W_{Lurk} XZ B=0.093$, $t = 1.07$, $p = 0.286$). For the combined model with a dichotomized social media posting variable, the moderation variable remained non-significant ($B=0.080$, $t = 0.761$, $p = 0.447$).

Mediation of team identification on game attendance was established in both models by employing the three regression test (Table 4).⁴² For the lurking model, the modified Sobel test on the direct vs. indirect influence of lurking on game attendance yielded a significant statistical reduction ($z = 2.28$, $p < 0.05$). In particular, the influence on game attendance was reduced from $b = 0.032$ to $b = 0.016$ by accounting for the variance of team identification. The posting model yielded similar results, with the Sobel test ($z = 2.08$, $p < 0.05$) indicating a significant

Table 3: Hierarchical regression moderation tests

Predictor variable <i>game attendance</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ² and Step <i>R</i> ² change
<i>Social media posters</i>					
Step 1					<i>R</i> ² =0.123, <i>F</i> (2, 476)=6.81*
W _{Post}	0.001	0.001	1.09	0.281 ^{ns}	
TI	0.138	0.058	2.67	0.018*	
Step 2					$\Delta R^2=0.008$, <i>F</i> (3, 475)=0.05 ^{ns}
W _{Post} ×TI	0.003	0.001	1.94	0.053 ^{ns}	
<i>Social media lurkers</i>					
Step 1					<i>R</i> ² =0.164, <i>F</i> (2, 476)=5.98*
W _{Lurk}	0.016	0.007	2.41	0.017*	
TI	0.100	0.061	1.95	0.048*	
Step 2					$\Delta R^2=0.021$, <i>F</i> (3, 475)=2.86 ^{ns}
W _{Lurk} ×TI	0.093	0.006	1.07	0.286 ^{ns}	
<i>Combined moderation effects^a</i>					
Step 1					<i>R</i> ² =0.121, <i>F</i> (2, 476)=3.22*
W _{Post} ^a	0.027	0.007	0.585	0.559 ^{ns}	
TI	0.100	0.061	1.95	0.048*	
Step 2					$\Delta R^2=0.001$, <i>F</i> (3, 475)=0.59 ^{ns}
W _{Post} ^a ×TI	0.080	0.012	0.761	0.447 ^{ns}	

**p*<0.05; ns=non-significant.

^aW_{Post} (0=Social media lurkers only; 1=Social media lurkers and posters).

Table 4: Regression mediation tests

Predictor variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Dep. variable
<i>Social media lurkers</i>					
Step 1					
W _{Lurk}	0.032	0.005	6.86	>0.001*	Team identification
Step 2					
TI	0.144	0.059	2.54	0.015*	Game attendance
Step 3					
W _{Lurk}	0.016	0.007	2.41	0.017*	Game attendance
TI	0.124	0.060	2.00	0.047*	
<i>Social media posters</i>					
Step 1					
W _{Post}	0.002	0.001	1.94	0.048*	Team identification
Step 2					
TI	0.144	0.059	2.54	0.015*	Game attendance
Step 3					
W _{Post}	0.001	>0.000	1.08	0.281 ^{ns}	Game attendance
TI	0.138	0.058	2.37	0.018*	

**p*<0.05; ns=non-significant.

reduction of the strength of game attendance from *b*=0.002 to *b*>0.001 by accounting for the variance of team identification. Both analyses suggest that team identification mediates the influence of lurking and posting on game attendance. Because the regression test betas remained

significant for the posting model, team identification only partially mediates the posting–game attendance relationship. For posters, the web posting variable became non-significant in the third regression test equation, indicating full mediation of team identification on game attendance (ie the influence of posting activity on game attendance works directly through team identification).

How the model mediation effect may change as consumers become more involved with posting social media content was also examined. On the basis of the evidence of partial mediation in the game attendance models, the next test explored how posting moderates the mediation model of team identification on game attendance with Johnson-Neyman (J-N) normal theory tests and bootstrap resample estimates (Table 5).⁴⁶ The J-N tests estimate social media posting effects at the team identification mean ($M=2.23$) and ± 1 standard deviation values. The J-N model estimates were confirmed by running 5,000 bootstrap re-samples of the indirect effects. (By using bootstrapping, no assumptions about the shape of the sampling distribution are necessary for the inference tests.) The results show that indirect team identification effects significantly moderated the number of games attended only at very high levels of team identification (TI indirect effect @ -1σ , $\text{Coeff} = -0.022$, $Z = -2.75$, $p = 0.041$, Figure 2). Only very active posters become highly identified with a team, and it is

Table 5: Social media posters moderated-mediation tests

Predictor variable game attendance	Conditional Effects at TI=mean and ± 1 SD			
TI	Coeff. ^a	SE	Z	p
1.1041	-0.022	0.0098	-2.75	0.041*
2.2248	0.001	0.0066	0.645	0.372
3.3455	0.017	0.0113	0.711	0.477

* $p < 0.05$.

^aCoefficient= $\hat{a}_1 (\hat{b}_1 + \hat{b}_3 \text{ TI})$.

Figure 2: Plot of TI indirect effect vs. social media moderation

As fans consume content, they develop significantly stronger affiliations towards the team, and in turn are more likely to attend sporting events

Frequent visitors of web content are more likely to identify with their sport team

this additional team identification effect that in turn boosts poster attendance at games.

Discussion and conclusion

In the first social media consumption model, heavy use of sport-related internet media by minor league baseball fans was confirmed, with over 90 per cent of fans regularly using new media content. As fans consume content, they develop significantly stronger affiliations towards the team, and in turn are more likely to attend sporting events. These findings are consistent with prior sport media findings, which found that team identification was positively related to team behavioural outcomes.^{30,41} The social media consumption model also examined the direct and indirect effects of web media lurking on game attendance, revealing that lurking influences game attendance both directly and indirectly through increased team identification.

As expected, posters develop stronger attachments to their teams. However, the direct link between posting and game attendance was not significant (H3b). The mediation model suggests that posters are influenced to attend more games only via stronger team identification (indirect, H1b>H2b) rather by how many postings they create (direct, H3b). These findings suggest that posters participate with and derive value from team activities perhaps the same way many 'armchair quarterbacks' do: via vicarious enjoyment. Posters may use web-based tools to serve their own participatory and social needs for recognition and status.^{47,48}

The models presented in this study provide insight into understanding how social media usage influences consumer behaviour. The models suggest that team identification clearly mediates the influence of game attendance for both lurkers and posters, such that frequent visitors of web content are more likely to identify with their sport team, and it is this identification that, in turn, leads to increased game attendance. Many other sport researchers have emphasized the importance of team identification as an important driver of fan behaviour;^{30,31,33–36,49} the findings in this study extend the role of team identification into new social media. In addition, this study uncovers differences between lurkers and posters, as lurking also directly influences game attendance (partial mediation), whereas posting of new content increases game attendance only with increased team identification (full mediation). Lurking and posting behaviour may also reflect different consumer motivations and intentions, as fans who plan to attend games regularly may visit team websites for updated statistics and team information, whereas social media posters may participate with teams vicariously.

This study was designed to explore the differences between social media lurkers and posters. On the basis of the fact that all social media posters can also be lurkers, it was possible to explore the incremental impact of social media posting, over and above simple visiting or lurking. Because the moderation tests pointed to partial mediation of team identification on game attendance, the conditions under which

posting moderates the team identification/game attendance relationship were examined. The results show that only posters who are very highly identified with the team moderate that relationship and attend more games. Less identified fans may heavily participate with social media activities; however, these activities do not lead directly to increased game attendance.

These results offer sport marketers some suggestions for more effective and strategic use of social media tools in communicating with their consumers and fans. Sport organizations who are attempting to define customer segments should recognize the impact of lurkers and posters, and develop appropriate strategies that meet the needs of different segments.³⁵ For example, a team may develop the same social network and integrated web platform to post news content and advertise upcoming promotions for fans who are content to consume information or check team status. At the same time, more active, content-generating fans can find opportunities to interact at higher levels by posting comments, video and photographs on the team platform.

New strategies may be needed to recognize their status as posters in order to entice them to attend games

This study also found that although team identification increased with increased consumption of social media, lurkers were more likely to attend games than posters. This surprising result has implications for sport organizations as they consider different consumer motivations and strategies. If posters tend to experience a team more vicariously than lurkers, new strategies may be needed to recognize their status and entice them to attend games. Differentiated strategies can be used to take this a step further with the understanding that not all social media users are alike. For example, posters may respond to specially designed programs that recognize their contributions and commitment to the team. Highly credible or influential posters who have significant followings could also be recruited for promotional or other marketing events that lead to improved game attendance for both posters and lurkers.

A number of limitations should be recognized in interpreting the findings in this study. The use of a single team sample from a New England minor league baseball team may impact the findings, and further work is needed using a broader population. Respondents in this study also self-reported attendance behaviours and social media activities, which may create potential inaccuracies and bias. The findings should be replicated and expanded with different social media scales including usage data from social media analytic sites, as well as new attitudinal and propensity-to-communicate using social media measurement scales. In addition, the online survey methodology presents a number of sampling issues, such as self-selection bias, which may impact the generalizability of the findings.

The use of social media may provide value as a component of relationship marketing programmes

The continued growth of social media tools and the potential value to sport marketers present numerous areas for future research. Investigation into the use of social media tools as components of relationship marketing programmes might provide additional value to sport marketers and social media users. Many or most sport

organizations are using social media tools in an attempt to strengthen their brand identity. The linkages between branding and posters should be further investigated, especially with regard to how posters facilitate brand growth and potentially influence lurkers' team affiliation. Additional research is needed to assess the ability of social media to increase current game attendance and merchandise streams, as well as generating new sources of revenues. Future research could also be conducted to examine the motivational and emotional value fans obtain from using social media. In our analysis, we tested and extended team identification–game attendance models based on prior literature; however, it is also possible that a reciprocal relationship exists between social media and attendance. Future studies should investigate a potential feedback effect by analysing expanded structural equation models with reciprocal latent variable mediation links. Finally, we did not explore lurker and poster household lifecycle or lifestyle preferences. There may be strong relationships between household status, single, married, or married with children, and social media activity levels, which could be explored in future studies.

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