

What Motivates Chinese Sports Fans to Subscribe to Athletes' Social Networking Service Accounts?

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중국 스포츠팬들의 운동선수 SNS이용 동기

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Abstract This study attempted to identify the motivational factors for using athletes' SNS among Chinese sports fans. The researchers posted a hyperlink of an online survey on a total of 8 Chinese Olympians' SNS(Weibo) accounts after obtaining the athlete's approval. A total of 274 surveys were gathered from the visitors of SNS. Of the 274 surveys, 33 were discarded because of missing values. Confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling revealed the following. Diversion, pass-time, athlete support, and technical knowledge were significantly and positively related to social media consumption while information, socialization, and fanship had no significant predictive effect on social media consumption.

요약 이 연구의 목적은 중국 스포츠팬들의 운동선수 SNS이용 동기요인을 분석하는 것에 있다. 8명의 중국 올림픽 선수들의 SNS(Weibo)를 선정하여, 선수들의 동의를 얻은 후 온라인 설문지의 하이퍼 링크를 선수들의 SNS상에 게시하였다. SNS를 방문한 스포츠팬들 중 총 274명이 온라인 설문에 참여하였으나, 질문문항의 일괄적인 처리 혹은 무응답, 오기입 등 신뢰성이 떨어진다고 판단되어지는 33부의 설문지를 제외하고 총 241부를 분석에 사용하였다. 확인적 요인분석과 구조방정식모형 분석을 실시한 결과, diversion, pass-time, athlete supports, 그리고 technical knowledge 동기가 SNS이용에 유의한 정(+)의 영향을 미치는 것으로 나타났다. 그러나 information, socialization, 그리고 fanship 동기는 SNS이용에 유의한 영향을 미치지 않는 것으로 나타났다.

Key Words : China, Motivation, Social media, Weibo

1. Introduction

1.1 Need for the Study

With the advance of social media, people now share more User Generated Content (UGC), such as useful information, pictures, and videos, with others quickly and easily through the Internet[1,2]. The popularity of social media has dramatically increased over the past few years and the number of users achieved 1.61 billion worldwide in 2013[3]. Social media's unique features,

such as awareness, presence, intimacy, and engagement, can be advantageous for companies and organizations with their public relations and marketing strategy[4-7]. Mangold and Faulds[7] argued that social media is a hybrid element of the promotion mix enabling customers to talk directly to one another while traditional media allowing only companies to talk to customers. Abeza and Reid[4] indicated that social media provides a better knowledge of consumers, advanced customer-organization interaction, and

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effective consumer engagement. Particularly, from a sport point of view, Kassing and Sanderson[8] suggested that social media is a powerful communication technology cultivating insider perspectives for sports fans by developing two-way communication and immediacy. Sheffer and Schultz[9] stated that sport fans have evolved from passive audiences receiving messages from the media to active participants generating and disseminating information with the social media. For this reason, adoption of social media platforms by sport teams, organizations, athletes, and fans has increased[8,10]. However, some countries, China in particular, the government has banned its citizens from accessing major global social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube[11]. Instead, Chinese residents are only allowed to use a Chinese social media platform, Weibo. Like other global social media platforms. Weibo has been used by various sports organizations, fans, and athletes in China[12]. For example, the London 2012 Olympics was often referred to as the Weibo Olympics in China based on the adoption and popularity of Weibo in sports talk[12]. More and more Chinese athletes set up Weibo accounts so that they could make their own personal announcement and interact with their fans. Athletes outside China (e.g., Kobe Bryant and Maria Sharapova) also established Weibo accounts to promote themselves in the Chinese sport market that has continually increased from 1.785 million dollars in 2006 to 2.913 million dollars in 2013[13-15]. This study, therefore, attempts to take the first step toward further research on social media use among Chinese sport fans by exploring fan motivation for subscribing to athletes' Weibo accounts.

1.2 Online Media in China

Information control has been one of important governing strategies in China since its establishment in 1949[16]. The Chinese government has feared the advent of the Internet and its application to mass media and its ability to allow the free flow and diffusion of

information[17-20]. Nevertheless, the number of Internet users in China has reached 618 million representing nearly half of the Chinese population and twice as many people than the United States [21]. The beginning of online media in China is traced to the Hangzhou Daily online edition newspaper that was launched in 1993[16]. Subsequently, the People's Daily and Xinhua News Agency launched its own online newspapers[16]. The first commercial portals, Sina.com and Sohu.com, were introduced in 1996[16]. Sina.com is considered as largest online news provider followed by Sohu.com. Both were originally search engines[22]. In 2009, finally, the first Chinese social media platform, Weibo, was launched and has nearly monopolized the market as the government has banned their citizens from using major global social media which originates outside China[11,23]. Basically, Weibo is a mini-blogging service allows users to post a short message, limited to 140 characters[24]. By choosing the follow function, users can read messages posted by other users[24]. Thus, Weibo is frequently compared to Twitter, one of the more popular global social media platforms, based on its similarity[25]. Weibo has 500 million users with 25% of them spending more than two hours a day on searching for news, interacting with friends, spending spare time[26]. While several studies have examined online consumption in China[25,27,28,29], there is a limited number of studies analyzing social media use, especially motivation, in China.

1.3 Online Consumption Motivation

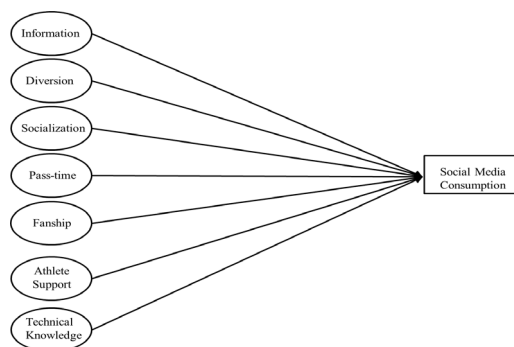
Bayton[30] defined motivation as "the drives, urges, wishes, or desires which initiate the sequence of events known as behavior" (p. 282). In the sport research field, Hur, Ko, and Valacich[31] developed the Scale of Motivation for Online Sport Consumption (SMOS), providing a reliable and valid analytical tool to measure online sport consumers' motivation and concerns. Since that foundational work, a number of studies have examined sport online consumption motivation through

various platforms such as website, blog, message board, and social media [32-37]. The motivational factors identified by previous studies could be categorized into, but not limited to, seven categories based on similarity of the definition including information, diversion, socialization, pass-time, fanship, team support, and technical knowledge.

First, information is explained as motive to get general information about things happening in sport[36]. The factor is similar to information gathering [32,38] and information pursuit[35]. Diversion represents the users' desire to escape a daily routine and seek pleasure through the Internet[31,36]. Diversion has been examined by previous studies with similar terms[35-37]. Socialization refers to users' desire to share experience and knowledge with others by developing social relationship with people who have similar interests on the Internet[31]. The terms such as interpersonal communication[36], interaction [32], and interactivity[35] are regarded as similar terms to socialization. Pass-time reflects a motive to simply spend free time through the Internet use[36,37]. Fanship explains users' perception of oneself as a huge fan of particular sports, athletes, or teams and following their achievements[32,36]. Team support refers to showing support for favorite athlete or team through the Internet[35,36]. Lastly, technical knowledge is defined as motive to learn specific knowledge of rules, skills and strategies from the athlete[36].

1.4 Research objective

Although many previous researches have examined motives for online consumption in sports[31,32,36], there has been a limited examination of the motivating factors behind social media use in China. Therefore, this study aimed to identify the degree to which motivational factor can predict Chinese sport fans' social media consumption focusing on Weibo. Proposed research model is presented in [Figure 1].



[Fig. 1] Proposed Research Model

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

Researchers posted a hyperlink of an online survey on a total of 8 Chinese Olympians' Weibo account after obtaining the athlete's approval. Therefore, fans who visited the Olympians' Weibo were asked to participate in a survey. The data collection procedure continued for a week from February 24 to March 3, 2014. A total of 274 surveys were gathered. All of the participants had Chinese nationality. Of the 274 surveys, 33 were discarded because of excessive missing values through the listwise deletion method. Of the respondents, men accounted for 51.9% ($n = 125$) and women accounted for 48.1% ($n = 116$) of the total. Most participants were age 17 to 19 (33.6%) and 20 to 24 (31.5%) with the mean age of 20.94.

2.2 Measurement

The overall motivation scale included three items for each of the previously identified seven motives (information, socialization, diversion, pass-time, fanship, athlete support, and technical knowledge). The items were blended and adapted from Hur, Ko, and Valacich's[31] Scale of Motivation for Online Sport Consumption (SMOS) and Seo and Green's[36] Motivations Scale for Online Sport Consumption (MSSOC). Prior studies indicated acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .60 to .88 [31,36].

Items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Social media consumption was assessed by the frequency of visiting, posting and reading message, or watching pictures and videos. For example, three questions such as "how often do you visit athletes' Weibo?", "how often do you watch the picture or video on athletes' Weibo?", "how often do you read the message or articles from athletes' Weibo?" were asked. Items were measured on a 5-point Likert-scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very frequently). All items were reviewed for content validity after discussion with scholars with expertise in sport online consumption, especially social media, before being adopted. Items on a questionnaire were developed in English and translated into Chinese. A backtranslation was employed based on Brislin's[39] suggestion. The original scales in English were first translated into Chinese by a native Chinese researcher who was fluent in English. To ensure the accuracy and equivalence of the translation, the translated version was then converted back into English by a scholar who was fluent in both English and Chinese. This process ensured that there were no discrepancies between the two versions.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using AMOS version 20.0 and SPSS version 20.0 for Windows. Following the two-step approach for structural equation modeling [40], a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted first to examine the psychometric properties of the proposed measurement model then structural equation modeling was conducted to test proposed model and the effect of motivations on social media consumption. This study employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) since prior studies examining motivations for online consumption[35,37] also used SEM to identify the motivational factors. Thus, SEM is thought to be proper research method for online consumption motivations.

The reliability was evaluated based on Cronbach's

alpha ($>.60$), construct reliability (CR) ($>.60$), variance extracted (VE) ($>.50$)[41,42]. Discriminant validity was assessed based on Anderson and Gerbing's[40] suggestion that if the confidence interval (\pm two standard errors) around the correlation estimate between the two factors does not include 1.0, the measure is regarded as having adequate discriminant validity. The overall model fit was assessed by the following fit indices: χ^2/df (<5.0), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) ($<.08$), the standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR) ($<.08$), and the comparative fit index (CFI) ($>.90$)[43].

3. Result

3.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

There were no extreme values of skewness and kurtosis exceeding 3.0[44]. All of the values of Cronbach's alpha (from .68 to .92), CR (from .60 to .85), and VE (from .52 to .86) were above the recommended cutoff criteria[41,42]. The confidence interval (\pm two standard errors) around the correlation estimate between the two factors did not include 1.0 [40]. In addition, there were no interfactor correlations exceeding the .85 cut-off value[45]. Therefore, the measurement exhibited adequate reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

The CFA with a maximum likelihood estimation revealed that the overall measurement model fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 424.862$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.529$, CFI = .911, RMSEA = .080, and SRMR = .073). Five items had the standardized loadings below the suggested .70 threshold[46]. Nevertheless, items were retained since previous studies suggested that they are theoretically relevant to their respective constructs [31,36]. Information about Mean, standardized factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, CR, and VE is presented in [Table 1].

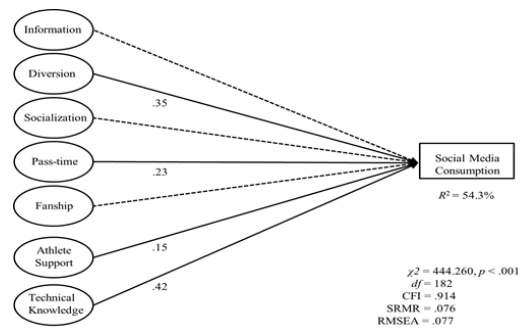
[Table 1] Mean, Standardized Factor Loadings, Cronbach's Alpha, CR, and VE

Items	M	λ	α	CR	VE
Information1	4.18	.72	.80	.81	.58
Information2	3.95	.86			
Information3	3.93	.67			
Diversion1	4.26	.86	.87	.83	.69
Diversion2	4.00	.90			
Diversion3	3.60	.78			
Socialization1	3.27	.83	.80	.67	.58
Socialization2	3.53	.79			
Socialization3	3.12	.65			
Pass-time1	2.73	.67	.78	.63	.54
Pass-time2	2.78	.80			
Pass-time3	3.76	.73			
Fanship1	4.25	.83	.68	.65	.54
Fanship2	4.02	.89			
Fanship3	3.84	.34			
Athlete support1	4.39	.84	.74	.71	.52
Athlete support2	4.38	.78			
Athlete support3	4.36	.50			
Technical knowledge1	3.47	.87	.92	.85	.85
Technical knowledge2	3.31	.91			
Technical knowledge3	3.19	.89			

3.2 Structural Equation Modeling

The overall structural model indicated good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 444.260, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 2.441, CFI = .914, RMSEA = .077, \text{ and } SRMR = .076$). The SEM revealed that diversion ($\beta = .35, p < .01$), pass-time ($\beta = .23, p < .05$), athlete support ($\beta = .15, p < .05$), technical knowledge ($\beta = .42, p < .001$) were positively related to social media consumption explaining a total of 54.3% of the variance in social media consumption.

However, three motivations including information ($\beta = .14, p > .05$), socialization ($\beta = -.15, p > .05$), and fanship ($\beta = -.22, p > .05$) were found to be significantly related to social media consumption[Table 2]. A result of structural equation modeling is presented in [Figure 2].



[Fig. 2] Result of Structural Equation Modeling

[Table 2] Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Path	β
Information → Social media consumption	.14
Diversion → Social media consumption	.35**
Socialization → Social media consumption	-.15
Pass-time → Social media consumption	.23*
Fanship → Social media consumption	-.22
Athlete support → Social media consumption	.15*
Technical knowledge → Social media consumption	.42***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

4. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the degree to which motives explain Chinese sport fans' online consumption of athletes' social media accounts. Results indicated diversion, pass-time, athlete support, and technical knowledge were positively related to social media consumption. Technical knowledge had the greatest influence on social media consumption ($\beta = .42$) followed by diversion ($\beta = .35$), pass-time ($\beta = .23$), and athlete support ($\beta = .15$). The current study, therefore, shows support for motivational factors that have been identified as important in previous studies[31,35-37]. However, factors including information, socialization, and fanship were not significantly related to social media consumption while previous studies indicated significant relationship[35,37].

Technical knowledge was originally suggested by Seo and Green[36] in the Motivation Scale for Sport

Online Consumption (MSSOC) and explains the motive to learn specific knowledge of rules, skills and strategies from the athlete. Previous studies examined information as the motive to obtain general information such as game result or schedule[37] rather than a specific type of information. Nevertheless, this study indicated that technical knowledge is the one of strongest motives predicting social media consumption among Chinese sport fans.

Diversion is the motive to escape a daily routine and seek pleasure through the Internet[31,35-37]. Hardin et al.[35] and Witkemper et al.[37] also found a significant effect of diversion on media consumption. Hardin et al.[35] specifically emphasized diversion as "using the site seems to have become of the daily routine of the users, which is vitally important for site administrators to understand" (p. 378). This study confirmed the importance of diversion among Chinese sports fans as well.

Pass-time appeared to be one the primary determinant in using the athletes' social media in this study, which is similar to other studies[31,36,37]. Athletes or organizers of sport management companies need to put an effort into making users, who visit social media platforms to simply pass-time, a loyal fan by developing the fan-athlete relationship[37].

Athlete support was also confirmed as a significant motive relating to social media consumption, which is similar to other studies[35,36]. Hardin et al. [35] suggested that team support could be related to the motive to gather information, in that fans high in team support seek to know as much as possible about their team. However, in this study, although athlete support was significantly related to social media consumption, information was not found to significantly predict social media consumption. It indicates the different result from Hardin et al.'s[35] suggestion requiring further research to identify the relationship between athletes (team) support and information.

Meanwhile, factors such as information, socialization, and fanship that were considered as important motives

for online consumption by previous studies [31,35-37] did not significantly predicted social media consumption in this study. It would be explained by cultural difference between Asian and Western/European. However, further researches on motivational factors for online consumption with cultural difference need to be examined to provide more detailed data.

In terms of practical implications, first, technical knowledge was the one of strongest motives predicting social media consumption among Chinese sport fans in this study. Thus, hyperlink to the instructional or technical skill video on other web-site, such as Youku the second largest video site in the world after YouTube[47], will be effective to satisfy users who highly motivated with technical knowledge since Weibo focuses on posting short message that is limited to 140 characters.

Second, this study confirmed the importance of diversion among Chinese sports fans as well. Diversion is the motive to escape a daily routine and seek pleasure through the Internet[31,35-37]. Thus, marketers need to include a wide range of contents that are not specifically related to sport or athletes such as interesting video or music. It would be more effective for driving Chinese sport fans into athletes' social media.

Third, although previous researches suggest that relationships can be developed through interactions[37,48], Chinese sports fans are not highly motivated by socialization in terms similar to interactivity. Relatively conservative and regulated Chinese culture by Confucianism or Communism[49,50] would possibly explain this observation. It also suggests that marketers need to establish unique marketing and public relations strategies for Chinese sports fans instead of using similar strategies for Western and European sports fans.

5. Conclusion

This study identified specific motivational factors

that could enhance Chinese sport fans social media consumption since identifying specific motivations driving users' attention can maintain and develop fan-athletes relationship[37,51]. The result of this study indicated that diversion, pass-time, athlete support, and technical knowledge significantly predicted social media consumption while information, socialization, and fanship were not significantly related to social media consumption. Therefore, in this study, Chinese sport fans tend to use athletes' social media to obtain specific knowledge of rules, skills and strategies from the athlete. In addition, they mainly use it to spend the free time and want to show their support to their favorite athletes. However, they are not likely to focus on taking general information about athletes such as game result or schedule or enjoying interpersonal communication, indicating a difference from previous studies in Western countries[35,37]. The result of this study strengthens the understanding of the way to use social media for more effective sport marketing strategies and provides theoretical data for further research of online consumption in China.

A limitation of this study came in the fact that researchers adopted only seven motives from previous studies from Western countries. There might be different fan motives based on the unique Chinese culture or regulations of government. Thus, future researchers need to find more diverse motives through both qualitative (e.g., interview or content analysis) and quantitative research. Another limitation is that participants were only from amateur athletes, Olympians' social media accounts. Therefore, researchers could include a wider range of sample from different type of athletes or sports organizations such as professional athletes, non-revenue sport organizations, or international sporting events.

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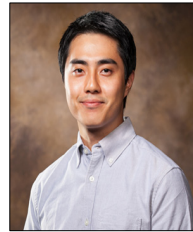
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