

# Social Media and Female Sports Audiences: A New Look at Old Assumptions

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## Abstract

As a follow-up to previous research, this study took a uses and gratifications approach to more clearly define sports media consumption patterns among women. Based on survey data from more than 2,500 respondents nationwide, it was found that women use social media differently than men in regards to sports. Specifically, women more often use social media for information-seeking, personal/social reasons, and to access content not available in traditional media. Implications include the need for new approaches to reach a traditionally underserved audience.

## Introduction

The sports media business is built on several long-held audience assumptions, chief of which is that men and women consume sports differently. It has been generally believed that there are different motivations for consuming sports, such as the notion that men are more interested in mediated sports and watch more of it.<sup>1</sup> But many of these assumptions were grounded in studies that took place before the rise of the Internet and social media. Such technologies could greatly impact gender motivations for sports consumption.

This raises the valid question of whether these assumptions about sports audiences are still valid in an era of public-generated content and engagement. One more recent study found that, in general, men seem to have a greater interest and consume more sports content than females, but with an important exception within the category of heavy sports consumers.<sup>2</sup> For those who consume more than three hours of sports media a day, women were more interested in and consume more sports media than men. Furthermore, the same study showed that women significantly used social media for sports purposes

more than men.

The motivation behind why women use social media for sports purposes, however, remains unclear and was the purpose of this study. This study more closely examined the motivations and habits of sports media audiences, particularly in the area of gender differences in regard to sports social media use. The study drew on its access to an extremely large database, the results from which created a more accurate modern picture of sports media audiences' motivation in using social media.

## **Literature Review**

### *Sports Audience Assumptions*

Sports industry in America is big business. A report by Plunkett Research estimated the entire U.S. sports industry generated 470 billion dollars in 2012.<sup>3</sup> Sports fans are hungry for content and as a result online sports consumption is on the rise. According to a 2007 survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 45% of adults gained information online.<sup>4</sup> By 2012, two out of three fans reported consuming sports online.<sup>5</sup> In an earlier study by the Pew Center, researchers found that although men pursued and consumed online information more aggressively, and were more likely to participate in an online fantasy league than women, there was a significant increase in the number of women seeking online sports information.<sup>6</sup> What remains to be seen, however, is the motivation for the increase in the sports female audience.

One common assumption of studies is that men and women consume sports media differently. They have different motivations for consuming<sup>7</sup> and consume at different levels, with men consuming much more than women.<sup>8</sup> A report by MIT Communications showed that males comprised two-thirds of the sports audience, causing sports media along with sports advertisers to target male viewers.<sup>9</sup> Such approaches typically include more coverage of male sports and athletes compared to women.<sup>10</sup>

Even though more recent studies tend to support these findings, such assumptions may be outdated. According to Schultz and Sheffer, when considering the general population, men tend to consume more sports media than women.<sup>11</sup> However, when looking at those people who consume a lot of sports (three or more hours per day) women actually consume more than men, and do so via the Internet/social media. This suggests that the difference between men and women is at the low end of the consumption scale, not the high end. In other words, of those people who consume a lot of sports, women are not that much different from men.

But because these older assumptions remain for the most part unchallenged, traditional sports media outlets continue to ignore and marginalize female sports audiences. This includes presenting stereotypes that minimize female athleticism,<sup>12</sup> suggestions that female athletes are inferior,<sup>13</sup> under-representations of female athletes,<sup>14</sup> and the sexualization/heterosexualization of female athletes' physical appearance by commentators.<sup>15</sup> In general, a negative bias exists within the coverage of female sports.<sup>16</sup> *Social Media Use*

The number of Americans using social media sites significantly rose in the past few years. According to a Pew Research Center report, in 2005 only 8% of adults online used a social network site, but by 2011 that rose to 65%.<sup>17</sup> Fry found that there were more than 500 million Twitter users worldwide with over 340 million tweets per day.<sup>18</sup> According to Jones & Fox,<sup>19</sup> most people use the Internet to socialize and communicate beyond one's circle of friends. In regards to social network users, researchers have distinguished the following three dominant character traits: neuroticism, extraversion,<sup>20</sup> and openness to experience.<sup>21</sup> Further research<sup>22</sup> has shown that developing relationships and gaining knowledge are two motivations that also drive social media use. Sarno<sup>23</sup> suggested that people use social media, and especially Twitter, to connect in real time with others who share the same common interest. Included in sharing/gaining knowledge via the Internet [and or social media] is the ability to interact and/or collaborate. More than one-third of all net users sent instant messages via social media and used it to socialize with people they already know<sup>24</sup> and to receive advice and gather/share information.<sup>25</sup> Raine, Purcell, and Smith<sup>26</sup> found that people use social media 82% of the time to participate in a group. In other words, they concluded that people use social media with a purposeful theme.

However, similar to sports consumption, gendered differences occur within social media use. Women generally use social media to build a sense of community and maintain relationships compared to men.<sup>27</sup> Fallows<sup>28</sup> research showed that men participated more in online fan clubs or community groups than women, and that women valued the positive effects online communication brings. Women are more enthusiastic online communicators, but men pursue and consume online information more aggressively than women. Furthermore, in their study of the use of blogs, Pedersen and Macafee<sup>29</sup> found that women used blogs for the social interaction element, while men sought more information. Hamburger and Ben-Artzi<sup>30</sup> found that women who went online for social service needs were more introverted and lonely than men.

With the development of social media, however, the characteristics of female users have changed. Quan-Haase<sup>31</sup> argues that personality traits, which caused some to hide behind the anonymity of the web, now reflect more of an extrovert trait. People can redefine themselves or selectively present certain personality traits.<sup>32</sup> With social media, people tend to communicate with a variety of people, but with common interests.<sup>33</sup> Correa, Hinsley and de Zuniga<sup>34</sup> believe social networking sites by nature attract female users. Social networks seem to reflect like-minded individuals, something researchers refer to as homophily, which provides the user with a certain level of comfort or safety.<sup>35</sup>

In regards to online/social media knowledge sharing, Chou<sup>36</sup> posits that perception of self-appraisal or a

sense of self-worth/recognition determines participation. Chou officially refers to this as performance expectancy and perceived identity verification (PIV). Social media users seek to be understood, which correlates to one's self-worth. According to Correa, Hinsley and de Zuniga, "Anxious and nervous people use these services [social media] to seek support and company."<sup>37</sup> According to Bargh & McKenna,<sup>38</sup> social media and the Internet provide a different set of expectations than traditional communication. These alternative communication expectations may allow women to feel better understood/confident using social media for sports. If this is true, then perhaps this fear of "lessening one's self-worth" aided in stifling women's comments or involvement in traditional sports media and helped create this misconception regarding the level of female sports fandom.

If so, women may use social media for sports purposes to fill a content void, feel accepted/understood, or to obtain information that is not available via traditional sports media.*Theory*

In their theory of Uses and Gratification (U&G), Blumler and Katz<sup>39</sup> suggest that the public is ultimately goal-oriented and actively seeks and uses media. Through media use, the public seeks satisfaction or gratification of certain individual needs and desires through multiple channels of communication. In today's media climate, users have the ability to combine different platforms to achieve greater satisfaction. As stated earlier, through social media the public has a stronger voice and role in the communication process. No longer solely dependent upon traditional media for sports information, consumers can now create, share, and seek information elsewhere. In U&G, certain needs such as emotional connections, informational desires, and status are met.<sup>40</sup>

In the original U&G theory, 35 motivations were separated into five categories (cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, and tension release needs). Park, Kee and Valenzuela<sup>41</sup> reduced those categories into the following four primary gratification dimensions in regards to using Facebook: socializing factor, entertainment factor, self-status-seeking factor and information-seeking factor. Within information seeking, people learn how to make sense of the world and themselves.<sup>42</sup> Expanding on this definition, Shao<sup>43</sup> applied the U&G theory to investigate the appeal of user-generated media (UGM) and determined people engage in UGM for self-expression and self-actualization in three main uses (consumption, participation or production). In regards to participation, Shao<sup>44</sup> posits that individuals use UGM to fulfill a social interaction need with others that share their same values and interest.

Furthermore, Ancu & Cozma<sup>45</sup> found that people were motivated to seek political information via social media because they could socially interact with candidates and other supporters. Through this social interaction function, users experience a decreased sense of estrangement and an increased self-acceptance and acceptance by others.<sup>46</sup> In this social media environment people can communicate with less personal restrictions and criticism, in a type of safe zone.<sup>47</sup>

Having been historically ignored or overlooked by traditional sports media outlets, female sports fans

may be motivated to use social media to satisfy their sports gratification needs.

## **Research Questions and Methodology**

Based on the literature review, the following research questions were developed:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: Of the four Uses and Gratification factors (socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information seeking), which factor motives females the most to use social media in regards to sports consumption?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: Of the four Uses and Gratification factors (socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information seeking), which factor motives males the most to use social media in regards to sports consumption?

According to previous research, overall men aggressively seek more information online than women. This questions gauges whether this remains the case when using social media for sports, as well as serving as a comparison benchmark in regards to motivations with female sports fans.

RQ<sub>3</sub>: Do female sports fans feel more confident discussing sports via social than traditional forms of media?

Based on the literature review, social media users (especially female users) feel an increased sense of acceptance and communicate with less personal restrictions and criticism in this safe zone. Therefore, this question sought to gauge whether female sports fans feel more accepted and/or confident discussing sports via social media than other traditional forms of sports media (this pertains to the level of one's self-worth or level of acceptance). In addition, this question encompassed the suggested notion of a content void found in traditional sports media in regards to female sports fans.

These research questions were investigated through survey data provided by Prosper Insights & Analytics of Worthington, Ohio. The American Pulse™ survey is collected online by Prosper exclusively utilizing Survey Sampling International's (SSI) U.S. process covering topics such as sports, politics, pop culture and the economy. For the October 2013 survey, there were a total of 35 questions on a variety of topics related to consumer behavior. The researchers had the opportunity to attach nine sports media questions to address the research questions. Specifically, the nine questions were:

- I use social media for sports entertainment purposes (disagree, neutral, agree).
- Sports communication via social media is more personal (or social) than traditional media (disagree, neutral, agree).
- I feel confident discussing sports via social media than other forms of communication (disagree, neutral, agree).
- Social media allows me access to sports content not available via traditional media (disagree, neutral, agree).
- I use social media to obtain sports information (disagree, neutral, agree).
- I think my posts regarding sports on social media matters (disagree, neutral, agree).
- I find it easier to discuss sports via social media than other forms of communication (disagree, neutral, agree).
- On average, how much sports (in hours) do you consume sports through social media on a daily basis? (I don't consume sports, 1 hour or less, 2 hours, 3 or more hours)
- Which Social Media site do you use most often in regards to sports communication? (FaceBook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Blogs, Other)

The October 2013 sample included 2,582 respondents from across the country. The sample was random, which made the results both generalizable to larger populations, and given its size, accurate within +/- 1%.

The authors acknowledge the limitations of using a large data set not specifically designed for the study and not administered by the researchers. For example, there were some demographic differences between the sample used and the U.S. population. According to the 2010 census, the U.S. Caucasian population was 72.4%, and females (51%) slightly outnumbered males (49%). In the sample, the Caucasian population was 83%; gender percentages more closely reflected those in the census with 55% females and 45% males. More demographic information on the sample can be found in Table 1.

Table 1:  
Demographic Information of SSI Survey (*N* = 2,582)

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<i>Category</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Gender	1192	
Male	1390	
Female		
Age		
18-24	304	11.8
25-34	289	11.2

35-44	422	16.3
45-54	415	16.1
55-64	616	23.9
65+	536	20.8
Race		
White/Caucasian	2150	83.3
Black/African-American	188	7.3
Asian	102	4
Multi-racial	48	1.9
Native American	22	0.9
All other	42	1.6
Education completed		
Less than high school	15	0.6
High School	460	17.8
Tech or Vo-tech	177	6.9
Some college/no degree	530	20.5
Associates/Professional degree	291	11.3
Bachelor's degree	600	23.2
Post college study or degree	479	18.6

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Note: Residents of all 50 states were represented in the sample, with the highest percentages from California (8.8), Florida (8.0), Texas (6.3), and New York (5.6). The geographic distribution roughly corresponded to U.S. Census data.

However, Hussein lists the many advantages of using such data sets in research, including greater statistical precision, the ability to reach substantial samples sizes that are typically very difficult to achieve, and lower research costs. "The opportunities to test theories, generate new knowledge for practice and evaluate different outcomes are numerous. With such great potential, analyzing large data sets is gaining international recognition as a valuable method in research."<sup>48</sup> According to Sharland,<sup>49</sup> ignoring such data sets means "valuable opportunities are being lost ... to explore changing patterns and outcomes, and relatedness of these to wider social and developmental change."

## Results

The data were analyzed in terms of two distinct groups-the overall group of respondents ( $N = 2,583$ )

and those who consumed more than two hours of sports media per day and were considered heavy users ( $N = 655$ ) (Table 2).

Table 2:  
Amount of Sports Consumed via Social Media Daily

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	Male	Female
None	308 (26%)	642 (45%)
1 hour or less	455 (39%)	487 (35%)
2 hours	235 (20%)	158 (12%)
3 hours or more	157 (14%)	105 (8%)

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Note:  $N = 2,582$

In the overall group, 37% said they use social media (SM) an hour or less to consume sports, while 15% said they consumed two hours, and 11% consumed three or more hours daily.

As expected, there was a significant difference within this group between men and women  $t(2,545) = 10.74, p = .001$ , in that women said they consumed less sports. This group also said it used Facebook (47%) most often, while 27% of respondents chose other, followed by Twitter (6%), YouTube (5%), and both LinkedIn and blogs had 1% each. But there was no difference in the heavy consumption group in terms of time spent consuming,  $t(655) = .03, p = .97$ . In terms of type of SM used for sports consumption, there was a significant gender difference in this group in that females preferred Facebook more than males ( $\chi^2 [6, N=655] = 36.84, p = .001$ ) (Table 3).

Table 3:  
Social Media Platform Use

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	Overall	Heavy Consumers	Male	Female
Facebook	1,202 (47%)	399 (60%)	204 (53%)	195 (74%)
Twitter	148 (6%)	71 (12%)	48 (14%)	23 (9%)
YouTube	139 (5%)	49 (7%)	34 (10%)	15 (6%)
Blog	25 (1%)	9 (2%)	5 (2%)	4 (2%)
LinkedIn	32 (1%)	9 (2%)	7 (3%)	2 (1%)
Other	676 (27%)	81 (13%)	65 (18%)	16 (8%)

Note:  $N = 2,582$  (Overall),  $N = 655$  (Heavy Sport Consumers-Gender)

RQ<sub>1</sub> investigated which of the four U&G factors female sports consumers rely on most often when consuming sports via SM, while RQ<sub>2</sub> gauged male motivations. Respondents were asked on an individual basis whether the motivations were a factor in using SM for sports consumption (agree, disagree, neutral). The overall female responses ( $N = 1,392$ ) were mixed. Forty nine percent of females agreed they were motivated to use SM both for information seeking and to socialize, 41% use SM based on sports entertainment needs, and 38% for self-seeking needs. Overall male responses ( $N = 1,155$ ) were similar to female responses. Males indicated yes more often to the socializing factor (54%), followed closely by information seeking needs (51%), sports entertainment need (47%), and self-seeking motivation (42%).

However, the motivations significantly changed based on hours spent consuming sports via SM. Of the four Uses and Gratification factors, females considered heavy sports consumers ( $N = 263$ ) responded yes most frequently to the entertainment factor (78%) compared with 71% of males ( $N = 392$ ). Females (77%) indicated that they use SM based on social motivations more than males (70%)  $\chi^2[1, N=655] = 3.619, p = .07$ . The same is true for self-status seeking motivations (73% females, 63% males)  $\chi^2[1, N=655] = 7.35, p = .006$  (Table 4).

Table 4:  
Gender Uses and Gratification Factors Based on Heavy Sports Consumers

SM Sport Entertainment	Male	Female
No	114/29%	22/22%

Yes	278/71%	205/78%
	$\chi^2(1, N=655) = 3.66, p = .05^*$	
SM More Personal		
No	117/30%	61/23%
Yes	275/70%	202/77%
	$\chi^2(1, N=655) = 3.619, p = .07$	
More Confident Discussing Sports via SM		
No	155/40%	71/27%
Yes	237/60%	192/73%
	$\chi^2(1, N=655) = 10.41, p = .001^{***}$	
SM Access Sports Content Not Available Traditional Media		
No	126/23%	58/22%
Yes	266/68%	205/78%
	$\chi^2(1, N=655) = 7.44, p = .006^{**}$	
SM Access Sports Information		
No	133/34%	58/22%
Yes	266/68%	205/78%
	$\chi^2(1, N=655) = 8.19, p = .004^{**}$	
MY SM Posts Matter		
No	147/37%	71/21%
Yes	245/63%	192/73%
	$\chi^2(1, N=655) = 7.35, p = .006^{**}$	
Easier Discussing Sport via SM		
	158/40%	71/27%
	234/60%	182/70%
	$\chi^2(1, N=655) = 5.74, p = .01^{**}$	

Note:  $N = 655$  (392 Male, 263 Female); two or more hours daily equates to heavy sports consumption

Previous research indicates that overall men are more aggressive information-seekers online than women, but this was not supported in this study among the heavy consumption group. Interestingly, 68% of males who consume two or more hours of sports daily said they were motivated to use SM to access sports information compared with 77% of female respondents ( $\chi^2[1, N=655] = 8.19, p = .004$ ).

RQ<sub>3</sub> sought to answer whether females feel more confident discussing sports via SM than other

traditional forms of media, and a majority (73%) of women indicated that they do. In addition, 77% of women who consume two or more hours of sports daily think discussing sports via SM is more personal, while 78% indicated that they use SM to obtain sports information that is not available via traditional forms of media. What that other information is remains unclear.

Once again, there were significant gender differences regarding these motivations in using SM for sports. Of the male heavy sports consumers, 60% said they felt more confident discussing sports via SM compared with 73% of female respondents ( $\chi^2[1, N=655] = 10.41, p = .001$ ), 60% of males felt it easier to discuss sports on SM compared with 70% of females ( $\chi^2[1, N=655] = 5.74, p = .01$ ), and 68% of males compared with 78% of females said that SM allowed them to access sports content not available via traditional media ( $\chi^2[1, N=655] = 7.44, p = .006$ ) (see Table 1)

## Discussion

Women consume sports media, at least those women who can be considered heavy media consumers. It has traditionally been believed that men have a greater interest in sports and consume much more of it compared to women, but that does not appear to be the case for those who consume at least two hours of mediated sports per day. These results confirm more recent research on consumption patterns.

More importantly, the findings suggest important differences between men and women in the heavy sports consumption group regarding social media (SM) use and sports content. In this regard, women are actually more likely than men to use SM for sports information-seeking, are more confident discussing sports on SM vs. traditional media compared to men, and believe that SM is more personal and social than the traditional media in terms of sports. Additionally, women believe SM allow them to access sports content not available on traditional formats.

These findings have important implications for the current sports media landscape, especially as the role of social media continues to increase. Extensive research has demonstrated that the female sports audience is underserved and largely ignored. The creators and distributors of sports content look at the female audience as a homogenous whole, and in that regard the numbers are not big enough to create significant change. "If women are your target audience, there are much more efficient ways to reach them," than television, says Stephen Master of Nielsen Sports.<sup>50</sup>

According to Nolting,<sup>51</sup> this creates a Catch-22 situation in which the media ignore women, who in turn ignore the media. "Female fans do not consume sports media because it does not appeal to them, since sports media organizations have not invested the time and resources to ask female fans what they want in sports media." Most attempts to reach female sports audiences are framed through the traditional media such as television. One of the most common approaches is to offer female sports on television,

figuring that women audiences will want to watch women athletes, but this approach typically fails.<sup>52</sup>

Instead, we suggest that the sports media look to social media as a means of reaching female audiences. As Pew Research has noted, “Historically, women have been especially avid users (of social media). Between December 2009 and December 2012, women were significantly more likely than men to use social networking sites in nine out of ten surveys we conducted. During this period, the proportion of women who used social media sites was 10 percentage points higher than men on average.”<sup>53</sup> In addition, both the technology to access sports in this manner and the demand for more content is growing. This creates a financial incentive for content providers and advertisers, as they can either advertise directly to women on SM, or use SM to transition female audiences to traditional media. “The heaviest users of social media are also the same people that watch the most on television,” said Stephen Nuttall of YouTube Sports, “and so it would appear that the use of social media is stimulating TV viewing.”<sup>54</sup>

This approach would not necessarily mean using SM to throw women more women’s sports, which would be simply recycling failed ideas. The findings here suggest that women view SM as more personal and social than the traditional media, but they also want information and the ability to access content not available to them on traditional media. Perhaps the greatest use of SM could be in granting access to an audience hungry for information, validation, and community, but one that has so far been shut out of the process. The SM have proved ideal in helping women gain more power and access in other areas, such as feminism and ethnic equality.<sup>55</sup>

In 2013, a Fan Engagement Study<sup>56</sup> attempted to learn more about how sports fans use social media. The findings showed that:

- Facebook remains the most widely used social media channel for sports
- Game day social network interaction is on the rise
- Fans frequently engage with content that advances a storyline or provides a point of view
- Nearly 70% of sports fans who “like” or follow brands on social media are willing to take additional action, including purchase
- “Digital *engagement* and sports is now a social norm,” said Bret Werner, Vice President of Catalyst Consulting, which conducted the study. “Pre, during or postgame, the sports fan has (a) variety of digital channels to engage in conversation. Social media allows for the game to never end.”<sup>57</sup>

These findings would seem to suggest SM as the ideal method of reaching women, especially when considered in combination with the findings of this study in which women expressed a greater desire to use SM for sports discussion, access, and information-seeking. But the problem seems to be that so far, very few content providers are using SM in this way. Hardin<sup>58</sup> observed that “although the technology has presented liberating possibilities for women’s sports, those possibilities aren’t being met. Instead,

the new media platforms are replicating the discrimination and bias that has always been a part of old-media framing of women's sports."

The researchers suggest that the findings of this study be used as a starting point to address this problem and begin a movement to connect female audiences with sports through social media.

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