

Sport team mascots as communication tools: Determinants of mascot Twitter followers

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Abstract

The sporting world has experienced a major impact with the emergence of social media as it has helped bridge the communication gap between fans, athletes, and professional organizations. One effort to further improve communication between fan and organization is to utilize a mascot in social media. Sports teams can disseminate information to numerous fans through mascot Twitter account and improve their promotion strategies. Drawing on the theory of reasoned action (TRA), this study was designed to examine determinants of team mascot Twitter followers. Analyzing 76 mascot Twitter accounts (i.e., 17 NFL, 25 NBA, 18 MLB, and 16 NHL), the current study revealed that the number of tweets is the most important predictor of the number of mascot twitter followers, controlling for various factors. Incorporating a mascot into social media marketing communication strategies can enlarge the platform where sports organizations can effectively distribute promotional messages to consumers.

Keywords: social media, anthropomorphism, mascot, twitter.

Introduction

The emergence of social media impacts every industry allowing numerous corporations to utilize social media to communicate with consumers (Naylor, Lamberton, & West, 2012). The various ways in which communication is used through social network sites (SNS) are an integral part of understanding the current trends in the society at large. Numerous studies have been conducted to understand how users including celebrities and companies can utilize SNS to improve their marketing communications (Achen, 2015; Clavio & Kian, 2010; Clavio, Walsh, & Coyle, 2013; Kwon & Sung, 2011; Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Among the wide variety of SNS platforms, Twitter has received tremendous attention in the business community due to the enormous active user base. It was reported that more than 320 million active users and more than 500 million tweets are posted in each day in December 2015 (Smith, 2015). It is also noteworthy that Twitter is the online platform that organizations can reach consumers without the considerable amount of financial resources and geographic constraints (Kwon & Sung, 2011). Due to such benefits, the use of Twitter has been a particularly common communication strategy (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010).

Various sport entities also utilize Twitter with the goal to improve their marketing communications (Armstrong, Delia, & Giardina, 2014; Delia & Armstrong, 2015; Hambrick, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010). Delia and Armstrong (2015) found that that the use of Twitter can improve the effectiveness of advertising as consumers create buzz on Twitter. In addition, athletes and sport event organizers also utilize Twitter to directly connect with their fans (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Hambrick, 2012; Hutchins, 2011).

Passionate sports fans follow Twitter accounts of sport entities because it provides access to insider information or recent happenings of the athletes and sports organizations (Sanderson, 2011). Ricardo Kaka, for example, has nearly eight million Twitter followers, which illustrates that fans of Kaka want further access to the athlete above and beyond his playing of games (Gaines, 2012). This example demonstrates that promoting products and services through Twitter account can directly reach numerous consumers at any given time, which in turn, can greatly contribute to the improvement of interactive marketing communications.

One additional effort to further improve the effectiveness of marketing communication is the utilization of mascots. Consumers tend to find human characteristics in inanimate objects (e.g., mascots) and develop favorable attitudes toward the objects (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Garretson & Niedrich, 2004). Displaying human characteristics, mascots have begun to establish themselves as influential figures in the business community (Patterson, Khogeer, & Hodgson, 2013). For example, anthropomorphized mascot characters commit themselves to communicating with consumers through various mediums acting as a representative for an organization. For instance, Brown (2010) emphasized that popular mascots such as the 'GEICO Gecko' greatly contribute to companies' promotional campaigns as a spokesperson. The GEICO Gecko's Twitter account currently has more than 50 thousand followers, which indicates that GEICO can disseminate promotional messages to mass consumers through the Twitter medium.

A mascot is also an important symbol in American sports (Strong, 2004). Although there have been controversial arguments regarding mascots in American sports (Connolly, 2000; King & Springwood, 2000), a mascot is commonly utilized by sports organizations to communicate with fans. Of note, mascots tweet many posts to show the game-day interactions with fans in real-time to make the fans feel connected with the team. Many sports fans respond to the effort of the sports organization by following the mascot's Twitter account. For example, Puddles, the Oregon Duck, has nearly 55,000 Twitter followers while Bailey, from the Los Angeles Kings, has about 42,000 followers (Hickman, 2015). These examples can demonstrate that sports organizations can utilize mascot's Twitter feeds to further disseminate promotional messages to many sport consumers. However, a question still remains: What are determinants of sports mascot Twitter followers? The purpose of this study is to explore the factors that predict the number of mascot Twitter followers in professional sport settings. The authors argue that (1) the number of tweets that mascot Twitter account posts and, (2) the number of Twitter accounts that mascots follow on Twitter positively influence the number of consumers who follow mascots on Twitter. Revealing this query will provide insight into industry professionals regarding ways to enlarge marketing communication channels with mascot.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

Mascots and Social Media

Social media is designed to reinforce human relationships and connections via simple and convenient communication among group members. Interestingly, people tend to find a sense of human nature in non-human objects in social media (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007). Furthermore, when using computers people tend to use adjectives, such as user-friendly, interactive, or supportive, when describing their experiences. Similarly, products are given human characteristics like personality by consumers (Aaker, 1997). Likewise, consumers may also treat non-human objects, like their cars, as close friends or loyal partners and establish relationships with them (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Fournier, 1998). In fact,

anthropomorphized brand characters can positively influence young consumers' recognition and attitude toward products (Neeley & Schumann, 2004). Marketing managers create anthropomorphized brand mascots such as 'Tony the Tiger' from Kellogg, 'Gecko' from GEICO, and the 'Aflac Duck' from Aflac to communicate with consumers in an attempt to receive fruitful return-on-investment. For instance, Brown (2010) emphasized that popular mascots such as the GEICO Gecko greatly contribute to companies' promotional campaigns as a "spokesperson". In fact, more than 50,000 consumers follow the GEICO Gecko's Twitter account. The sport industry is not an exception in this trend. Thompson, et al (2016) found that sport organizations (i.e., professional tennis) can strategically attribute personalities to a sport event by utilizing social media, which develops deepens the relationship between fans and the sporting event. Thus, it is reasonable to surmise that sport fans also develop relationship with mascot. However, in the field of sport management, there is a gap in research that addresses on the role of mascots in the social media landscape.

Sanderson (2011) argues that social media has become the powerful communication platform for sport organizations and fans in sport industry. Incorporating brand mascots into social media communication strategies can further help athletic organizations engage in world dialogue. Since sports mascots are often seen as friendly figures and reflect the teams' spirit and regional characteristic, they are an important component of the communication methods in communication strategies. For example, 'Mr. Met', who represents New York Mets, is one of the most popular historic baseball symbols and communicates with fans by showing his dedication to the team through live tweets (e.g., the act of tweeting during the athlete performance as opposed to after the event has concluded). Fans also enjoy communicating with him by tweeting at him, retweeting, and favoriting his tweets. This is evidenced by the number of mentions, tweets, retweets, by a number of Mr. Mets' followers (Hickman, 2015). Twitter has been considered an effective communication channel from the global sport business perspective, because it is an inexpensive way to disseminate information to consumers and is not influenced by geographic constraints (Kwon & Sung, 2011). If sport teams successfully utilize mascots in Twitter marketing communication strategies, they can enlarge the platform where sport teams can reinforce communication with their fans and send promotional messages via the use of their mascots.

Why Do Consumers Follow Mascots on Twitter?

From the marketers' point of view, increasing the mascot Twitter followers is an important task as it can help in the dissemination of promotional messages to consumers. The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) can provide a useful explanation as to why consumers follow mascot Twitter accounts. TRA predicts consumer behavior based on attitude and subjective norms (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

Attitude refers to individuals' perception of a focal object (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Consumers are more likely to engage in a volitional behavior when they have favorable attitude toward the focal object (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). To increase the number of Twitter followers, it is crucial to let consumers establish favorability toward Twitter accounts because attitude is a powerful predictor of human behavior (Ajzen & Driver, 1992). Essentially, a favorable mascot can receive numerous followers on Twitter and play a vital role in successful social media communications. In fact, in large part due to its consumer-friendly and entertaining characteristics, the well-liked mascot, Aflac Duck, is followed on Twitter by numerous consumers (Washenko, 2014).

Subjective norms are also important elements to predict consumer behavior (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Subjective norms refer to, "... the person's perceptions of perceived social pressure to engage in the behavior" (Ajzen & Driver, 1992, p. 208). Behaviors driven by subjective norms are strongly associated with rules and beliefs in a social environment (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Specifically, consumers are more likely to engage in a certain behavior if the behavior is socially desirable. Previous literature has validated the effect of attitude and subjective norms on various behaviors such as pro-environmental behavior (Bamberg & Möser, 2007), sport event participation (Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2010), and social media interaction (Kim, Lee, & Yoon, 2015). Based on the aforementioned arguments, in order to increase the number of sport mascot Twitter accounts, two underlying conditions were identified: (1) sport mascot Twitter accounts are perceived favorable by consumers (i.e., attitude), and (2) consumers feel following sport mascot Twitter accounts is a desirable behavior (i.e., subjective norms).

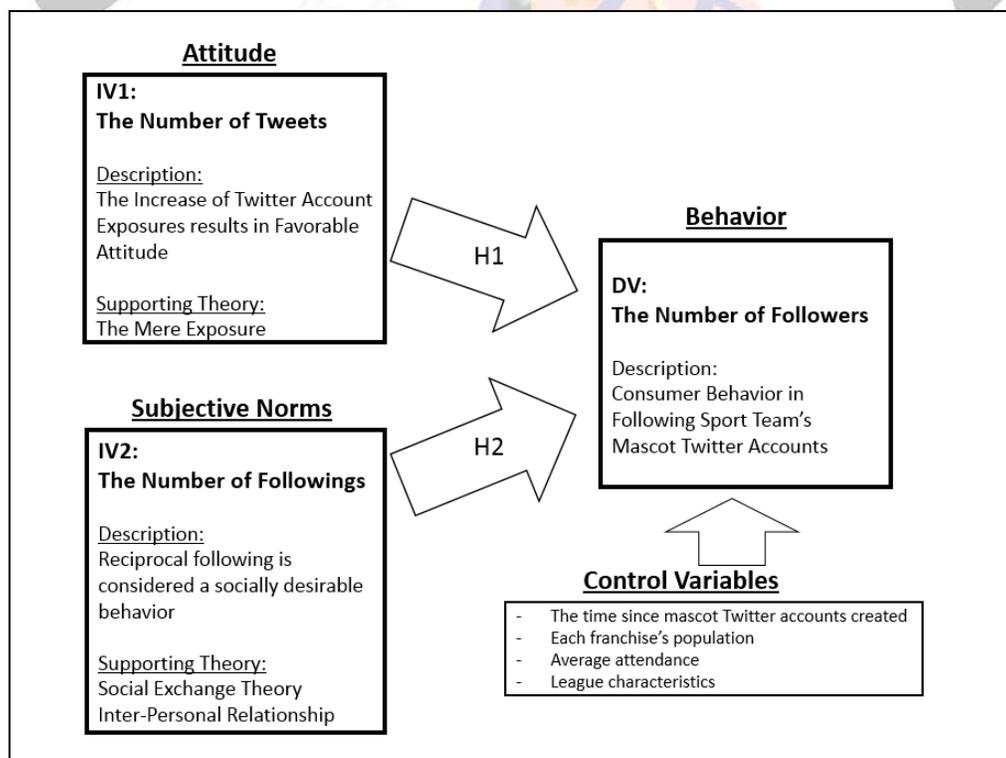
To increase favorable attitude toward a mascot Twitter account, consumers should be exposed to the focal mascot Twitter account as much as possible. This condition was based on the mere exposure effect (Monahan, Murphy, & Zajonc, 2000; Zajonc, 2001). Zajonc (2001) argued that consumers develop favorable attitudes toward focal stimuli if they are repeatedly exposed to them. Interestingly, the mere exposure effect manifests even if consumers are not consciously exposed to the stimuli (Janiszewski, 1993). As such, the repeated exposures play an important role in nurturing favorable attitudes toward the mascot Twitter accounts, which can result in following the mascot Twitter accounts based on TRA. Further, Logan (2014) argued that consumers who are familiar with a focal Twitter account are more likely to follow the account. The authors argue that one practically manageable way of increasing the amount of exposure is to increase the number of tweets after the initial account is made. Smith (2015) found that only 2% of users opt-out of their enhanced timeline features, an algorithm used to assess users' likes, tweets, retweets, and replies for those accounts they follow. Also, with 63% of Twitter users claiming that the platform is their main source of obtaining news, teams can use mascot's accounts to reinforce the organization's message (Smith, 2015). Additionally, 21% of users have live-tweeted during events or shows (Smith, 2015). It is then reasonable to surmise that if organizations and mascots are able to live-tweet during the broadcast it can reinforce user engagement while also enhancing the game experience. The WWE often utilizes this strategy with their performers and talent. For example, numerous people follow famous figures' Twitter accounts immediately after the account is created. Caitlyn Jenner reached roughly 1 million followers within roughly four hours of creating her account, which is the account to reach that number quickest (Smith, 2015). Statistics show that 24% of users retweet a celebrity that they follow (Smith, 2015). By the same token, it could be reasoned that sports fans would consider the mascots, in addition to players, as a form of celebrity. If users are able to find sport teams' mascots Twitter accounts once the accounts are created (and promoted by the teams they follow) the far-reaching impact of tweets could prove to be invaluable. However, if the mascot Twitter accounts do not tweet, they will not be visible to initial followers nor do their tweets get retweeted or favorited. Hence, it can be crucial to keep tweeting so that the mascot accounts are visible to consumers in the social media world. Based on the aforementioned arguments, the following hypothesis was developed:

H1: The number of tweets a mascot's Twitter account disseminates positively influences the number of mascot's Twitter account followers.

Subjective norms, the second underlying concept in TRA, should be strengthened when consumers perceive a focal behavior socially desirable (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Nevertheless, socially desirable behaviors can vary depending on a social environment. Ramsay (2010)

mentioned that the reciprocal following behavior is an etiquette that consumers commonly acknowledged in the social media world. In other words, following back can be a socially desirable behavior when consumers use social media such as Twitter. If individuals do not follow back on Twitter, it can be considered a violation. Moreover, based on the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), individuals should reciprocally engage in certain behaviors to others to maintain inter-personal relationships. Although consumers may actively interact with famous figures such as athletes even if the relationship is one-sided (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2012), individuals in general feel that the reciprocal responsiveness is socially desirable (Zhao & Yu, 2012). Nevertheless, the question remains, do consumers feel the need for performing reciprocal behaviors when the relationship between consumers and mascots is the concern? According to Aaker, et al. (2004), non-human objects such as mascots can also be treated as close friends or loyal partners by consumers. Hence, reciprocal followings between consumers and mascots on Twitter should be considered a desired behavior. It could be reasoned that consumers are more likely to follow mascot Twitter accounts if they are followed by the mascots:

H2: The number of accounts that a mascot's Twitter account follows positively influences the number of mascot's Twitter account followers.



Method

Data Collection

This study focused on sport teams from four professional sport leagues based in the United States (i.e., NFL, NBA, MLB, and NHL). We focused on American professional sport leagues as mascots are particularly prevalent in the American sports culture. Data were collected from

mascot Twitter accounts, ESPN, and franchise city webpages. The first stage of data collection took place on December 10, 2015. Sport mascot Twitter accounts were identified by a Google News search (Weaver & Bimber, 2008). The key words, “sport,” “mascot,” and “Twitter” were utilized to search official mascot Twitter accounts. This process found 93 official mascots’ Twitter accounts (i.e., 20 NFL, 26 NBA, 24 MLB, and 23 NHL) from 89 distinct professional teams. Seven mascot accounts were excluded since they were just created at the time of data collection and consisted of too little information regarding followers and tweets (i.e., San Francisco Giants ‘Crazy Crab’, Pittsburgh Steelers ‘Steely McBeam’, Milwaukee Brewers ‘Barrelman’, Cincinnati Bengals ‘Who Dey’, Dallas Mavericks ‘Mavs Man’, Calgary Flames ‘Harvey the Hound’, and Buffalo Bills ‘Billy Buffalo’). A box-plot was then performed to detect for outliers for each variable that the authors explain in the later section. 11 observations were excluded for further analysis as these observations contained variables that were far from the mean (Bargh & Chartrand, 2000). As a result, the authors focused on 76 mascot Twitter accounts in this study (i.e., 17 NFL, 25 NBA, 18 MLB, and 16 NHL).

Operationalization and Measures

The current study was conducted based on the TRA, whose central tenets rely on attitude and subjective norm, to predict an actual behavior (i.e., following sport mascots on Twitter). However, operationalization of study variables is a limitation when already procured data such as secondary data are utilized as scholars often cannot ideally operationalize the variables (Cooper & Schindler, 2006). The authors utilized theories which are in line with the underlying concepts of TRA to operationalize the current study variables. In this study, based on the mere exposure effect, attitude was operationalized as the exposure of mascot accounts as many researchers in social psychology confirmed that people would develop favorable attitude toward stimuli along with the amount of exposures (Janiszewski, 1993; Monahan et al., 2000; Zajonc, 2001). Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) was used as a supporting theory to operationalize subjective norms. The authors posit that the reciprocal following is socially desirable behavior in the social media world. Therefore, the authors obtained the following independent variables from each mascot Twitter account: (1) the number of tweets that mascot Twitter accounts disseminate and (2) the number of Twitter accounts that mascot Twitter accounts follow. In accordance with the behavioral element of the TRA (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), the authors obtained the number of Twitter followers for each mascot account as the dependent variable for this study.

Controlling Variables

Along with the aforementioned independent and dependent variables, the following controlling variables were also included in the regression model: (1) the time since the mascot Twitter accounts created (i.e., months), (2) each franchise’s population, (3) attendance, and (4) league characteristics. First, the number of Twitter followers, especially for famous figures, increases on a daily basis. Hence, the authors deduce that the duration of Twitter accounts’ active status may be associated with the number of Twitter followers. Second, each franchise’s population is an important element to determine team’s market size (Fort, 2002). Logically, it was assumed that a large fan base can be built in a city with large population. Sport mascots are affiliated to not only teams, but also franchise cities (e.g., the Phillie Phanatic is as synonymous with Philadelphia as a cheesesteak). Hence, population may influence the number of mascot Twitter followers. The population data were obtained from each franchise’s city webpage, and this operationalization has been commonly applied in the previous literature (McDonald & Rascher, 2000). Attendance is the third controlling variable and is closely related to population data. The

attendance data were obtained from *ESPN.com*. If more fans root for the team, the affiliated mascot should also receive more attention, which ultimately leads to the increase of mascot Twitter followers. Finally, the authors argue that league characteristics may also influence the dependent variable of this study. For example, the difference regarding the size of fan base between NFL and NHL is notable. Also due to the facility capacity, attendance should also differ by league characteristics. Therefore, the authors included three different dummy variables to control the effects of league characteristics, which may influence the results of the study. In sum, the regression model can be depicted as follows:

$$DV (\text{the number of followers}) = b_0 + b_1(\text{the number of tweets}) + b_2(\text{the number of followings}) + b_3(\text{time since accounts created}) + b_4(\text{franchise population}) + b_5(\text{average attendance}) + b_6(\text{MLB dummy}) + b_7(\text{NBA dummy}) + b_8(\text{NHL dummy}) + e.$$

Prior to the assessment of our regression model, normality was evaluated for variables because a normal distribution is required to perform the linear regression analyses. All variables that were skewed in their distributions were identified. Therefore, the authors performed the logarithm 10 transformation to correct their skewed distributions (West, Finch, & Curran, 1995). This process successfully confirmed the improvement of normality of the variables, and both skewness and kurtosis values were within the suggested threshold (i.e., ± 3.0 ; Chou & Bentler, 1995).

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Multi-Collinearity Testing

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Number of Tweets	-								
Number of Followings	.67**	-							
Months Since Created	.27**	-.01	-						
Franchise Population	-.08	.07	-.10	-					
Attendance	.01	.21	-.11	.11	-				
MLB	.15	.17	-.10	-.11	-.07	-			
NBA	-.21	-.30*	.23*	.06	-.53**	-.39**	-		
NHL	.10	.01	-.13	-.02	-.37**	-.29*	-.36**	-	
Number of Followers	.65**	.30**	.31**	.07	-.05	-.01	-.01	.06	-
N	76	76	76	76	76	76	76	76	76
Mean	2217.09	402.91	56.43	870168	31438	.24	.33	.21	6678.62
SD	2021.87	435.78	20.56	709403	20193	.43	.47	.41	6373.06

Note: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

The authors first ran the descriptive statistics and the correlation analyses. Descriptive statistics of each variable are presented in Table 1. Along with correlations, means and standard deviations were also calculated. The results demonstrated that the number of followings and months since the account created were significantly associated with NBA dummy variable. Specifically, mascot accounts from NBA are less likely to follow others on Twitter ($r = -.30$, $p < .05$). The data can also demonstrate that NBA teams started to utilize mascot Twitter accounts earlier than other professional sport leagues as shown in the positive relationship between NBA dummy and months since created ($r = .23$, $p < .05$).

Before testing the hypotheses, the authors assessed the probability of multicollinearity based on the correlation coefficients among each variable. As a result, the authors found that the

correlation coefficients ranged from $-.53$ to $.67$, which is below the threshold of $\pm .70$ (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2006). Therefore, the probability of multicollinearity was minimal.

Hypotheses Testing

A regression analysis was employed to test the proposed hypotheses (i.e., the effects of the number of tweets and followings on the number of followers). The results from the regression analysis showed that the model explained a considerable proportion of the dependent variable (i.e., the number of followers; Adjusted $R^2 = .42$). The number of tweets was positively associated with the number of mascot Twitter followers ($\beta = .80$, $t = 6.36$, $p < .01$). However, the number of followings showed a marginally significant negative coefficient for the number of followings ($\beta = -.24$, $t = -1.89$, $p = .06$). None of the controlling variables were significantly associated with the number of mascot Twitter followers: months since created ($\beta = .12$, $t = 1.24$, $p = .17$), franchise population ($\beta = .15$, $t = 1.66$, $p = .11$), average attendance ($\beta = .01$, $t = .02$, $p = .98$), MLB dummy ($\beta = -.05$, $t = -.22$, $p = .91$), NBA dummy ($\beta = .03$, $t = .09$, $p = .93$), and NHL dummy ($\beta = -.01$, $t = -.21$, $p = .99$). The results provided support for H1, but H2 was not upheld.

Table 2. Regression Analysis for the Number of Followers

	Dependent Variable: The Number of Followers				
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
(Constant)	-.99	3.45		-.29	.77
Number of Tweets	.89	.14	.80**	6.36	< .01
Number of Followings	-.29	.15	-.24 ⁺	-1.89	.06
Control variables:					
Months Since Created	.34	.28	.12	1.24	.22
Franchise Population	.31	.15	.15	1.63	.11
Attendance	.02	.72	.01	.02	.98
MLB dummy	-.07	.30	-.05	-.22	.83
NBA dummy	.04	.44	.03	.09	.93
NHL dummy	-.01	.44	-.01	-.01	.99
R^2	.49				
Adjusted R^2	.42				

Note: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, + $p < .10$

Discussion and Implication

Sport organizations regularly utilize a social media platform, as it has become the most ideal tool for communication between sport organizations and fans in sport industry (Sanderson, 2011). Mascots can be an important component of the social media communication because they are seen as friendly figures and reflect the teams' spirit and regional characteristic. If mascots attract numerous potential consumers in the social media world, organizations will be able to effectively distribute information such as promotional messages to their customers. Hence, drawing on the TRA (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), the current study was conducted to

explore factors that predict the number of mascot followers on Twitter in order to further enlarge the communication platform.

Twitter posts and user feeds can be quickly disseminated to users (Clavio & Kian, 2010). Sports fans also use the hashtag related to a topic from a sports organization to express their fandom. For example, Lance Armstrong posted on his Twitter feed an invitation for his Twitter followers to ride with him at 5:30 p.m. in Dublin, Ireland, and more than 1,000 people showed up there to support him (Cromwell, 2009). Simply, this is an example of how to highlight the possibility that promoting products and services through a Twitter account can potentially reach eight million unique consumers at a time. It is noteworthy that the effect of Twitter dissemination is pivotal regarding to communication channels between sports figures and fans. Further, since Twitter account feeds immediately interact with followers, a tweet's impact also may lead to millions of retweets.

The results of regression analysis revealed that the number of tweets positively influenced the number of followers. This finding is consistent with H1 developed on TRA (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Nurturing favorable attitudes is crucial to encourage consumers to engage in a certain behavior. From marketing managers' point of view, the increase of tweets is a practically manageable way to increase the exposure of mascot accounts on Twitter as it may also be "retweeted" or "favorited" by existing followers. Many researchers in social psychology proposed the concept of mere exposure, which explains that people would develop a liking toward objects along with the amount of exposures (Monahan, Murphy, & Zajonc, 2000). Janiszewski (1993) also found that consumers develop a liking toward advertisements when they are exposed to the advertisements, even subconsciously. Considering the Twitter platform, consumers likely spend their free time on Twitter to participate in online activities for enjoyment and relaxation (Go, You, Jung, & Shim, 2016). This study revealed that MLB mascots follow fans more than other leagues, while NBA mascots follow less, even though the NBA started to use Twitter for mascots earlier than other leagues. This means that team mascot account is closely related to the number of tweets. Significantly, the most important predictor of the number of followers is the number of tweets. People have more favorable attitudes toward objects by facing the amount of exposures (Zajonc, 2001). The result implies that fans are more likely to be positive toward the mascots' Twitter account as increasing the amount of tweets, regardless of the number of following, average attendance, and mascots Twitter history.

The results also revealed the marginally significant influence from the number of followings to the number of mascot followers. Consistent with our prediction, this influence emerged significantly negative, rejecting H2. Based on TRA, subjective norms are an important predictor of one's behavior (Ajzen & Driver, 1992). Engaging in a reciprocal communication can be etiquette in most societies. Hence, even in a social media world, people should feel pressure to engage in the "follow-back behavior" when they are followed by others (Ramsay, 2010). However, scholars also contended that Twitter is a unique social media platform that does not require reciprocal ties between users (Stephens & Poorthuis, 2015). Notwithstanding, these arguments may not be convincing for the marginal negative impact of the following number on the number of followers. One possible interpretation could be related to consumers' perception regarding the status of Twitter accounts. The relationship among Twitter users is dependent on the status of users (Lou, Tang, Hopcroft, Fang, & Ding, 2013). Specifically, the probability that reputable Twitter accounts (i.e., mascots in this study) follow ordinary accounts (i.e., general fans in this study) is 30 times less than that of reputable users following other reputable users. It can imply that a Twitter account that has numerous following records may be perceived as a low

status account, which could inhibit consumers to follow the account. Although this alternative explanation was not examined in the current study, it is worth investigating in future research.

Using social media to communicate with fans is a very important venue that helps fans interact with and engage in the professional sport teams even though they might not attend games. Mascots' Twitter accounts are irreplaceable agents to enrich communications between the team and its fans. Sports organizations strive to build fan-centric Twitter content to increase Twitter followers. They are also able to do this with their mascot Twitter accounts. Amusing and humorous content about the team players, happenings around the stadium, or special events on game day geared toward young fans help foster emotional feelings, commitment, and love of the team within the fan. Sports teams are also expected to focus on attention-garnering content and themes where fans can easily obtain information that the teams want to convey to strengthen their sense of support, involvement, promotions, special events, or appreciation. These activities absolutely drive fan engagement, involvement, and fandom, while also furthering satisfaction with their favorite sports teams. Thus, sport organizations necessarily strive to build an online communication platform by utilizing mascots and enlarge the effectiveness of marketing communications.

Limitation and Future Research Opportunities

Several limitations should be noted. One possible limitation is the inflexibility regarding the operationalization of focal variables. In the current study, the authors developed the data set by aggregating data from several information sources (i.e., Twitter accounts, each franchise's webpage, and *ESPN.com*). Unlike traditional data collection method (e.g., survey), researchers are not always able to use ideally operationalized variables (Cooper & Schindler, 2006). Therefore, the operationalization of the variables may have room for improvement to better reflect the aim of this study.

Related to this concern, the variables the authors focused on this study are not exclusive. For example, the winning percentage and the overall team operating budget are considered important variables in predicting revenue and competitiveness of sports teams (Fort, 2002). They may also influence the result of this study as each mascot represents each sports team. The current study also did not take the contents of tweets into consideration. The contents of tweets can provide rich information about tweeted messages and distinguish whether the twitter account owners are socially interactive (Frederick et al., 2012). As such, the tweet contents may influence Twitter user behavior. Also, consumers enjoy "retweeting" and "favoriting" mascots' tweets. Retweets may be an exceptionally important component of increasing the amount of mascot account exposures due to the potential multiplier effects. In fact, the importance of retweets has been documented in previous literature (Frederick et al., 2012). Future research should include these aforementioned variables to further improve the model to explain the number of mascot followers.

Mascot characteristics should also receive keen attention in the future research. As consumers assign personality traits to brands (Aaker, 1997), team mascots should also be perceived as cute, energetic, colorful, or athletic. Based on this idea, mascot-team relevancy in terms of brand personality may influence the number of mascot Twitter followers and, in a broader sense, the appropriateness of team mascots. Furthermore, the future research should also be conducted to understand how mascots can improve fan experience in the stadium as well as social media world. Finally, demographic information on the followers of the mascots could provide additional information of the types of content that mascots disseminate. Answering

these questions may require a more rigorous research design (e.g., combining primary and secondary data). These queries await future investigations.

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