

# An Examination of the Relationship between Sport Tourists' Involvement with a Sport Event Destination and their Twitter Usage

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**An Examination of the Relationship between Sport Tourists' Involvement  
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by

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## INTRODUCTION

Sport tourism as a field has grown rapidly over the past decade and, mirroring the growth and success of the sport industry, continues to grow in popularity (Brown et al., 2012). Sport events provide potential opportunities for enhancing image, improving economic impact, and attracting tourists to destinations (Huang, 2011). According to the World Sports Destination Expo (2010), sport events in 2008 generated an estimated \$600 billion in the United States and, also that year, approximately 35% of adults in the U.S. attended sport events as either spectators or participants (Funk, 2012). Such numbers speak to the amount of travel involved and one of the most informative topics in sport tourism studies continues to be involvement with sport destinations.

With the advent of Web 2.0, Twitter has grown dramatically since its inception in 2006, totaling more than 500 million users as of early 2013 (Gupta et al., 2013). Twitter is one of the most popular communication technologies used by both sport fans and sport organizations (Clavio, 2011), allowing individuals, organizations, and other social groups to connect with one another (Hambrick et al., 2010). Twitter is also platform easily adaptable as a marketing tool, enabling sport tourists to elevate their involvement with a destination.

Sport tourists generally choose a particular destination not for its scenic features but through its connection with a sport (Turco, Riley, & Swart, 2002). Ultimately, a comprehensive understanding of sport tourists' involvement with a destination could be a significant criterion for repeat visitation since sport tourists' revisit intentions is further increased, along with an increase of their involvement with the destination. Moreover, as tourists immediately support a host destination through economic and social means, thus heightening its profile, an event could help to improve the destination's long-term image and re-visits (Filo et al., 2013). Thus, destination marketers who better understand how sport tourists' involvement develops should be better equipped to satisfy and retain customers.

Twitter could be useful in the sport tourists' travel planning process (Leung et al., 2013). Indeed, 84% of sport and leisure travelers used the Internet as a planning source (Torres, 2010). In addition, Twitter users are able to decide on a specific venue, possibly leading to repeat visitation of a special place. By utilizing Twitter as a resource to find destinations of enjoyment and relaxation (Witkemper et al., 2012), sport tourists might generate interesting content and increase awareness while developing loyalty (Parise, Guinan, & Weinberg, 2008). This study then examines the moderating effects of Twitter on the formation of sport tourists' destination involvement (DI) in attending a sport event.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Involvement in Tourism Research*

Involvement has long been considered one of the most notable research topics in social psychology studies (Filo et al., 2013). Involvement has been defined as "an unobservable state of motivation, arousal, or interest, that is evoked by a particular stimulus or situation and has drive properties" (Havitz, Dimanche, & Bogel, 1994, p. 39). Within leisure and tourism literature, researchers of involvement focus on activity contexts (Dimanche & Havitz, 1995; Lee, Scott, & Kim, 2008) as well as tourists' decision-making regarding travelling (e.g., Cai, Feng, & Breiter, 2004). In sport contexts, involvement has been analyzed from an activity-based perspective (e.g.,

Beaton, Funk, & Alexander, 2009; Beaton et al., 2011) and used to examine motivation to attend sporting events (Funk & James, 2001, 2006). Accordingly, researchers consider involvement as more significant in the examination of destination involvement (DI) regarding analyses of tourists' attitudes and behavior in decision making regarding a destination. This study aims to shed light on whether sport behaviors (Filo et al, 2013) and leisure behaviors (Hwang, Lee, & Chen, 2005) can be better understood by looking at involvement as a psychological connection variable.

### ***Destination Involvement (DI)***

Tourism involvement can be adapted to leisure, recreation, or tourism products (Park et al., 2002). Hu (2003) looked at the impact of destination involvement (DI) on tourists' revisit intention with the mediating effect of satisfaction. Lehto, O'Leary, and Morrison (2004) approached two perspectives of DI: behavioral and psychological. Moreover, DI has been studied in several fields, as it concerns the relationship between involvement and action related to, in tourists' decision making, purchasing or taking vacations (Gursoy & Gavcar, 2003), decision making as to a specific destination (Carneiro & Crompton, 2010), and a conceptual and operational analysis of DI (Chen et al, 2011). This study intends, by contrast, to provide a new perspective on an individual's psychological connection with a specific travel destination toward a sport event.

In sport tourism, tourists consist of two types—those who travel to watch a sport event (Event Sport Tourism) and those who travel to participate in one (Active Sport Tourism; Gibson, 1998a, b; Hall, 1992; Standeven & De Knop, 1999). Similarly, DI can be divided into a two-dimensional construct including psychological and behavioral involvement. DI has been found to be useful in explaining tourists' destination-related attitudes and decision-making processes (Dimanche et al., 1993). In this study, then, DI could be used to examine an individual's psychological connection with a sport destination.

### ***Place Attachment***

Place attachment is the process by which humans bond themselves to a place in a physical or social setting. It was in the 1980s when researchers first used place attachment to look at tourism contexts. Virden and Schreyer (1988) first examined the selection of environmental preferences. McIntyre (1989) focused on the choice of camping destinations in terms of one of the influence variables of involvement. Mowen et al. (1997) first published a study evaluating the influence of tourist involvement and place attachment related to tourists' experiences. Bricker and Kerstetter (2000) discussed the similarity of place attachment and tourist's involvement with a destination. They established a measurement profile of place attachment including "place identity," "place dependence," and "lifestyle" constructs. This study follows the example of Bricker and Kerstetter's (2000) scale and Kyle et al.'s study (2003), including two-dimensional place attachment (place identity, place dependence) and six questions intended to measure sport tourists' involvement with a destination.

### ***Twitter as a New Trend***

Twitter, currently one of the most popular social network media services in the world, allows users to post messages or "tweets" of up to 140 characters (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Johnson & Yang, 2009). It provides two-way communication tools to reach users through images, videos, and messages (Zhang, Sung, & Lee, 2010). This real-time network allows users to share information through personal messages (Waters & Jamal, 2011) and offers a "place" for posting

instant, breaking (sport) news, and direct communication between individuals, organizations, and other social groups (Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012). Within the sport media landscape, Twitter plays a significant role as both strategic marketing and managerial tools, enabling sport fans or tourists to feed and nourish their allegiance (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hambrick et al, 2010; Hutchins, 2011). The current study attempts to determine whether observing people's interactions on Twitter is an effective way of studying the development of tourists' involvement with a destination hosting a sport event.

### ***Psychological Continuum Model (PCM)***

The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) (Beaton et al., 2009; Funk & James, 2001, 2006) was adopted as a theoretical framework for this study. Funk and James (2001) first constructed the PCM as a platform for understanding the development of sport fans' allegiance as a psychological process, and argued that it began with an awareness stage and proceeded through attraction, attachment, and loyalty stages. The revised PCM (Funk & James, 2006) explains how individuals form a psychological connection with a sport team or brand, and how each stage helps move an individual to the next stage. This model has been argued to be a logical next step in consumer behavior research because it explains the complexity of the human mind more accurately compared to previous models (Funk & James, 2006). Since individual processes are believed to be flexible in an ever-changing environment (Chelladurai, 2001), this model also provides integrated sociological and psychological factors, resulting in particular hierarchical outcomes (Funk & James, 2006). That is, the revised PCM can be applied to a destination object in sport tourism in terms of four hierarchical stages: destination awareness, destination attraction, destination attachment, and destination allegiance.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this study, all participant surveys ( $N = 846$ ) were collected, during the spring 2013 season, from sport tourists attending four men's baseball games at Clemson University, in South Carolina (U.S.). A total of 412 responses were returned, giving a response rate of 48.7%. Of the 412 participants, 212 reported using Twitter. The survey instrument was adapted and modified from the existing literature on sport tourists' involvement with destination (Beaton et al., 2011), place attachment (Kyle et al., 2003), and Twitter usage (Blaszka, 2011). The sport involvement instrument consisted of a nine-item measurement scale with three items (pleasure, centrality, sign). The place attachment instrument assessed the dimensions of both place identity and place dependence. All items concerned the respondents' involvement with the destination hosting the sport events and were measured on a five-point, Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

To examine the predictability of all measures of the two hypotheses, the data was analyzed using SPSS 18.0 and AMOS 18.0. Consistent with the literature (Filo et al., 2013), data analysis was conducted using the following seven steps. First, descriptive statistics were calculated for each item of DI, place attachment, and Twitter usage. Second, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to examine the quality of measures used. Third, the convergent and discriminant validity of DI was tested. Fourth, the three-step staging procedure was tested across the four stages of DI. The PCM three-step staging procedure was conducted by calculating the involvement facet mean scores and average, developing profiles, and employing an algorithm using theoretical profiles. Fifth, descriptive statistics for place attachment and three types of revisit intentions (short-term, medium-term, and long-term) were investigated for the

four stages. Next, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to analyze the relationships among the DI variables, place attachment, revisit intention, and Twitter usage. And finally, multiple linear regression (MLR) was conducted to examine the moderating effect of sport tourists' Twitter usage about a destination based on the recommendation of Barron and Kenny (1986).

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings from this study remain to be seen, however the survey data has already been collected. Therefore, results will be included in the conference presentation. The contribution of this study will likely lie in defining sport tourists' involvement with a destination that hosts a sport event. In addition, the study may help to better understand the procedure of sport tourists' involvement through tourists' Twitter usage. Due to the rapid popularity of Twitter, participants' usage of this social media technology could be better understood and improved by identifying their motives shown to be important in this study. This study will also attempt to specifically determine whether observing people's interactions on Twitter is an effective way to study the development of tourists' involvement toward a destination that hosts a sport event. Although this attempt to examine the involvement of sport tourists with a destination was not the first of its kind, a unique goal of this study will be to better understand the prospective of Twitter usage as a new communication trend. Accordingly, this study will aid sport tourist researchers or marketers to better understand sport tourists' attitudes and to formulate new strategies related to sport tourist behavior via Internet and social media marketing communication. Finally, this research may also help sport tourism experts or marketers outside of the U.S. to learn about sport tourists' behaviors, needs, and motivations, and what attracts them to events and destinations.

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