

Motivations, Preferences, and New Media Usage for Intramural Participation: A Case Study of a Small, Private Midwestern College

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Abstract

Intramural sport participation can positively impact college students' academic performance, social development, and physical well-being (Sturts & Ross, 2013). With that in mind, a small, private Midwestern four-year college that was experiencing significant growth in their traditional, on-campus housing population sought to understand more about the preferences, motivations, and new media usage of their intramural sports participants. Therefore, the purpose of this case study was to examine that motivations, preferences and employment of new media for participants in the college's intramural sports program. Findings from the study reveal enjoyment of competition and the desire to stay physically fit as the strongest motivating factors for intramural sport participation. Respondents preferred competition during the fall semester with competition start times between 7:01 pm and 9:00 pm. Competitors also preferred on-line registration methods and a championship t-shirt as an award. Findings also indicated that participants utilize new media methods very frequently in general but rarely use those methods to interact with the college's recreational sports program. Implications, recommendations, and future research direction are discussed.

Keywords: intramural sport, participation motivations, new media, case study

Introduction

Participation in collegiate recreational sports and intramurals programs can offer a wide range of benefits to college and university students. Iso-Ahola (1989) writes that participation in collegiate recreational sports provides opportunities for students to cope with the demands and stressors of college life. Intramural sport participation can positively impact college students' academic performance, social development, and physical well-being (Sturts & Ross, 2013). Intramural sport programs provide opportunities for student social interaction (Belch, Gebel, & Mass, 2001), student development (Sturts & Ross, 2013; Todaro, 1993), development and maintenance of self-esteem (Ward, 2015), and stress reduction (Kanters, 2000). The evolution of technology and communication methods has provided a myriad of methods by which colleges and their various departments can communicate with students and stakeholders. Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, and Zickuhr (2010) report that 72% of college students have at least one social media profile or handle and that 45% of college students interact with social media at least once per day. Urista, Dong, and Day (2009) write that new media outlets provide the opportunity for individuals to communicate and interact with others on their own terms and schedules.

Due to a lack of research in the area of intramural participation motivations, competition preferences, and new media usage, this case study sought to examine the phenomena in the context of a small, private Midwestern college. Working with professionals from the institution, which was experiencing historic growth in both enrollment as well as recreational sports participation, the study was executed in order to expand the literature based regarding intramural sports participation and also to allow practitioners to understand the interests and desires of the population they serve.

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The results from this study provide a foundation for further research into sports participant motives, competition preferences, and new media usage as it relates to intramural sport participation and competition.

Setting

The intramural program investigated in this study was part of the Department of Recreational Sports in the Division of Student Life at a small, private Midwestern college. In 2015, at the time of this study, the college was experiencing unprecedented growth in overall enrollment, traditional student enrollment, and residential student enrollment. In response to that growth and change, and in order to best serve their students, the Department of Recreational Sports and student life professionals sought to understand what motives and interests were with regard to intramural participation on campus.

From years 2009-2012, department records showed that an average of 46 students participated in intramurals each season. For years 2013-2015, that number more than doubled to an average of 95 students per semester. Participants competed in the co-ed sports of indoor soccer and volleyball in the fall term and basketball and softball during the spring term. Commemorative t-shirts were given to the first and second place teams for each league for both the regular season results as well as a post-season tournament. Teams which forfeited more than one competition for each season were not eligible to be crowned as regular season or post-season champions or runners-up.

The Department of Recreational Sports communicated with participants through a variety of new media methods including email, departmental websites, Facebook, Twitter, and IMLeagues, a third-party intramural program management software. Weekly email blasts advertised results, upcoming games, and special events. Departmental websites hosted links to departmental social media outlets and IMLeagues webpages, registration forms and opportunities for feedback on the intramural program. Social media sites were primarily used for promotion of competitions and to share pictures and videos of completed competitions. The department's IMLeagues pages hosted schedules, results, league standings, statistics and additional pertinent information.

Literature Review

Motivation for Sport Participation

Motivation is defined as “the reasons underlying behavior” (Guay et al., 2010, p. 712). Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (1999) write that “intrinsic motivation energizes and sustains activities through the spontaneous satisfactions inherent in volitional action. It is manifest in behaviors such as play, exploration, and challenge seeking that people often do for external rewards” (p. 658). Extrinsic motivation is spurred by the desire for attainment of awards, social approval, or to avoid punishment or negative consequences (Bhatnagar & Karageorghis, 2008).

The sport management and marketing literature is rife with work regarding motivations for participation in and consumption of sport; academicians have investigated the phenomenon through a variety of methods and lenses. The existing literature base includes work regarding motivation and sex and gender (Kilpatrick, Hebert, & Bartholomew, 2005), motivation and age (Nigg, 2003), motivation and fantasy sport (Ruibley & Billings, 2013), and motivation for sport consumption and fanaticism (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002; Trail & James, 2001; Wann, 1995).

McDonald, Milne, and Hong (2002) examined sport participation and consumption motivations as they related to a variety of sports, employing their developed list of 13 sport motivations, including affiliation, self-esteem, social facilitation, risk taking, stress reduction, physical fitness, aggression, value development, skill mastery, competition, achievement, aesthetics, and self-actualization. Their findings indicate that motivation varied greatly when looking at various sports. They posit sport management and marketing professionals should focus on targeting groups based on motivations for participation and consumption instead of relying too heavily on demographic information.

Smith (2008) investigated the motivations for participation in a collegiate recreational sports program. Findings from the study indicated that competency and skill mastery acted as the strongest motivating force for program participants. Additionally, the ability to create social relationships with others who enjoyed similar sports also scored very highly. The researcher notes that the act of competition itself scored surprisingly low in relation to other factors of motivation. The author suggests future research should be focused on one sub-group or specific sport in order to better understand the motivating factors for participants of each particular sport.

Intramural Sports

Intramural sport programs provide opportunities for students to engage in structured competition against other members of the campus population. In their most ideal form, intramural sport programs focus on promotion of healthy lifestyles and development, not wins and losses (Sturts & Ross, 2013). Sport and leisure researchers have engaged in a significant amount of work focused on intramural sport programming including investigation of social benefits (Artinger et al., 2006; Sturts & Ross, 2013), aggression and violence (Lance & Ross, 2000), outcomes (Haines & Fortman, 2008), and program organization and administration (Mull, Bayless, & Jamieson, 2005).

Kanters and Forrester (1997) conducted survey research of 203 participants of a collegiate intramural volleyball program in order to investigate motivations for participation. Findings indicate that respondents were motivated by a variety of factors including achievement, competition, skill mastery, development and maintenance of social connections, and gaining esteem from others. The authors note two particular points of interest from their study in that motivations were consistent regardless of skill level of the participant and regardless of gender, findings vastly different from much of the previous research on the topic.

Sturts and Ross (2013) conducted research at a large, four-year public institution in order to investigate outcomes of intramural sport participation. 243 respondents participated in a survey regarding the participants experiences related to intramural sport programming. Findings from the study indicate that creating healthy social networks is an extremely important part of the engagement in the intramural sport program. Additionally, there was a lack of significance associated with wins and losses, and instead the focus was on the ability of intramural programming to aid in the formulation of an overall positive student experience. The authors argue that understanding the experiences of students engaged in recreational sports programs can aid practitioners in developing quality programming which aid in student retention and persistence.

New Media and Sport Participation

Livingstone (1999) writes that new media represents the intersection point of traditional media and communication methods, such as print media, with technology that currently exists or prospective technologies that may exist in the future. New media includes methods of communication such as the Internet, email, texting, social media, video streaming, virtual reality, and more. Christ (2005) writes that the Internet has become the most accessed source for communication and information and implores professionals to maximize the usage of this relatively inexpensive and widespread method of information dissemination. Dart (2014) writes that the evolution of new media has significantly changed the way in which consumers interact with sport, as well as the way in which sport organizations connect and communicate with potential consumers. The present study sought to investigate the ways in which college students, a group known to be among the most prevalent users of new media, use various new media outlets to maintain connections and contact with the Department of Recreational Sports.

Research Approach

Research Questions

This study sought to answer four research questions:

RQ1: What motivates individuals to participate in intramurals at the college?

RQ2: What are participants' preferences regarding league scheduling, format, start times, awards, and registration costs and methods?

RQ3: What forms of new media do intramural participants use?

RQ4: How do intramural participants use new media to interact with the Department of Recreational Sports?

Participants

In consultation with the literature, peers, and recreational sport professionals at the college, a survey was designed to investigate participation motives, preferences, and new media usage related to the institution's intramural sport program. The survey was made available on-line through Survey Monkey; participants were recruited via direct email from the college's Department of Recreational Sports, through social media postings on the department's Facebook and Twitter feeds, and through handbills distributed at recreational sport and intercollegiate athletic events. 84 responses were collected over the course of the fall 2015 semester, from 2013-2015 the college averaged 95 registrants per competition session, so this was considered to be a fairly representative sample of the institution's intramural sport participants.

Measures

Demographic Information

Participants were asked six demographic questions covering age, gender, residence type, ethnicity, class rank, total semesters of intramural participation, and numbers of sports participated in each year.

Motivations for Participation

Participants responded to seven statements using a five-point scale in order to consider seven aspects of McDonald, Milne, and Hong's (2002) sport consumption motivation scale. Aspects considered in the measure were affiliation, self-esteem, social facilitation, physical fitness, self-actualization, competition, and achievement.

Competition Preferences

Participants were asked seven questions related to their preferences for intramural sport organization and competition. Questions concerned season of participation, award preferences, desired start-times, registration methods, cost of leagues, number of opponents, and recreational sports branded items available for purchase.

New Media Usage

Participants responded to a five-point scale in order to provide insight on their usage of new media methods such as email, the Internet, Twitter, Facebook, and IMLeagues. Respondents considered how often they used each of new media methods in their general lives. Respondents were then asked to consider how often they used each of the new media methods in order to further engage with the Department of Recreational Sports.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25.0. Statistical techniques used include frequencies, means, and bivariate correlations.

Findings

Demographic Information

Of the 84 survey respondents, 92.86% were between the ages of 18-24. The majority of respondents were male with 67.07% of respondents identifying as male and 32.93% identifying as female. This was particularly interesting as the institution boasts a two to one female to male ratio within the general student body. 58.75% of the participants were white, whereas more than 75% of the institution's enrollment is white. 18.75% were black or African American. 11.25% were of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin.

Juniors represented the largest class of participation with 30.95% at that rank. Sophomores accounted for 28.57% of respondents. Freshmen accounted for 17.86% of the responses. Seniors represented the smallest group of the undergraduate population at 15.48%. Graduate students accounted for 4.76%, while faculty and staff were 2.38% of the sample. 33.33% of respondents lived in an off-campus apartment or house with other students. 30.95% lived on-campus in a shared room. 14.29% lived off-campus in a private dwelling. 13.10% lived on-campus in a fraternity, sorority, or themed house. The average respondent had participated in recreational sport for 3.37 semesters and participated in 1.93 recreational sport leagues per academic year.

Research Question One

Research question one sought to explore what motivates students at the college to participate in the intramural sport program. "Because I enjoy the competition against other students" was the highest rated factor contributing to the motivation for participation with a mean score of 4.45. "Because they help me stay physically fit" also was rated very highly, scoring 4.28. "Because they make me feel good about myself" was rated 4.23. Analysis of bivariate correlations exposed several strong positive correlations between factors of motivation such as competition and achievement (.781**), affiliation and social facilitation (.670**), physical fitness and self-actualization (.514**), and physical fitness and self-esteem (.481**).

Table 1. Descriptive data for top five participant motivations. I participate in Rec Sports:

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Because I enjoy the competition against other students	4.4524	1.02269
Because they help me stay physically fit	4.2771	0.95398
Because they make me feel good about myself	4.2262	0.90980
Because I like to win awards	4.2143	1.09843
Because they are a way to socialize with my friends	4.1190	1.05744

Research Question Two

The second research question sought to elucidate league and event preferences of the college's intramural participants. With regard to season, fall was the preferred season of participation with 61.90% listing the fall semester as the season in which they were most likely to participate. In terms of awards, 42.68% preferred a championship t-shirt as the award while 24.39% selected a practical use item as their first choice in awards. The majority (54.22%) of respondents preferred an event start time between 7:01pm and 9pm and 20.48% preferred a start time prior to 7pm. In terms of registration methods, 53.66% preferred on-line registration while

25.61% preferred in-person registration, prior to the event. Respondents believed that an average price of \$25.08 was a fair registration price for a six week league which included a t-shirt with registration and that \$15.62 was a fair price for a six week league which did not include a t-shirt with registration. Participants preferred a league size that ranged between four and eight teams, with 63.10% of respondents indicating that as their preference.

Research Question Three

Research question three sought to identify the types and frequency of new media used by participants. Respondents indicated that 78.31% utilized email several times a day, with an additional 19.28% using email at least once per day. Every respondent indicated that they use the internet everyday with 85.54% using the internet several times a day and the other 14.46% indicating that they use the internet at least once per day. In terms of social media, Facebook was accessed multiple times per day by 77.11% of respondents while Twitter was used multiple times in a day by 71.08% of participants. Some respondents indicated that they did not use Facebook or Twitter with 2.41% never using Facebook and 10.84% never using Twitter.

Table 2. Descriptive data for general new media usage. How often do you employ the following forms of new-media in general?

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Email	4.7590	0.48364
Internet	4.8554	0.35381
Facebook	4.5904	0.91113
Twitter	4.2530	0.84937

Research Question Four

Research question four sought to investigate how intramural participants employed new media in order to communicate with and access information regarding the college's intramural and recreational sport program. In terms of email, 69.88% of respondents used email once a week or less to interact with the program. Even less made use of the department's website, with 21.69% indicating they never use the site and 50.60% stating that they used the site once a week or less. The department's IMLeagues site also went largely unused with 30.49% never using the site and 45.12% using the third-party site once a week or less. Social media interaction was similarly low with 31.33% never accessing the department's Facebook page and 34.94% accessing the page once a week or less. Twitter was used at an even lower rate with 47.56% never interacting with the Department's feed and 40.24% using it once a week or less.

Table 3. Descriptive data for Rec sports related new media usage. How often do you use the following forms of new-media for interaction with RecSports?

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Email	2.3614	0.84937
RecSports Website	2.1446	0.85729
RecSports Facebook Page	2.0964	0.93201
RecSports Twitter Feed	1.6585	0.72384
IMLeagues Website	1.9634	0.79264

Participants were asked to share their reasons for visiting the Department of Recreational Sports' new media outlets. The desire to find information on upcoming events was the most prevalent reason (74.70%) that respondents visited the RecSports or IMLeagues webpage. The desire to view photos from events and competitions was the most cited reason (37.35%) for visiting the program's Facebook page. The seeking of information on upcoming events was also the most noted reason (32.93%) for accessing the department's Twitter feed.

Discussion

This study sought to investigate the motivations, event preferences, and new media usage of intramural sport participants at a small, private Midwestern college. Findings from this study are applicable to the population under study and should not be generalized to other settings and populations unless they are deemed to be appropriate for use by practitioners in comparable settings. This study can act as a starting point for further research into motivations, preferences, and new media usage and can also serve as a guide map for program specific research.

Findings in response to research question one indicate that the opportunity to engage in a competitive environment, the opportunity to engage in activities which promote physical fitness, and the desire to increase one's self esteem as the most important motivating factors for participation. Program stakeholders can use these findings in order to engage in strategic marketing campaigns and ploys which reinforce the program's ability to provide these desired opportunities to current program participants as well as to encourage involvement from new participants.

Research question two sought to investigate the league and event preferences of those participating in the intramural sport program. While these results speak specifically to the preferences of the targeted population, they do provide a small window into the mindset and desires of individuals participating in intramural sport today. Programs across the country should engage in similar research on their own populations in order to maximize their ability to serve their constituents.

Research question three sought to investigate the general new media usage of the program's participants. Findings here indicate that new media usage, including email, internet, Facebook, and Twitter, is extremely high with an overwhelming majority of respondents stating at they use each one of these new media methods at least several times a day. This finding supports the existing literature base which posits that a significant majority of college students utilize new media for entertainment and communication several times each day (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Sheldon, 2008).

Research question four sought to ascertain the frequency with which program participants used new media in order to communicate and interact with the intramural sport program. In stark contrast to the population's general new media usage, the vast majority of respondents utilize the department's new media outlets once a week or less. While third party tools such as IMLeagues can aid in the organization and professionalization of intramural sport leagues, findings such as this indicate that perhaps they are not worth the significant investment for smaller recreational sport programs. Additionally, professional staff should engage in targeted campaigns and tactics designed to drive traffic and interest in the program's social media outlets; these platforms provide the opportunity for free and creative dissemination of program information. Results from RQ3 clearly indicate that the population is using these methods often in their general daily lives, therefore the recreational sport program should make every effort to provide further engagement opportunities for participants utilizing these methods.

Conclusion

Findings from this study can be used to inform and influence the actions of program professionals. Practitioners within the Department of Recreational Sports should use the information garnered in research question one to focus their marketing efforts on promoting the qualities of their program which match the motivations of participants.

They should focus on the ability of their program to provide opportunities for competition, physical fitness, and development and maintenance of participants' self-esteem. Additionally, practitioners can use the data garnered regarding participant preferences regarding league and event organization and administration in order to maintain and/or improve current programming. Finally, this data indicates that practitioners need to further investigate the current disconnect between participants' general usage of new media and usage of new media related to participation in the intramural sport program.

This study can provide valuable information to practitioners within the field of recreational sport by providing a map for research into each practitioner's own program. Additionally, the study provides further information to sport management and marketing scholars with regard to motivations, league and event preferences, and new media usage as they relate recreational and intramural sport. Future research should be conducted into these phenomena. One way in which this topic should be further researched is the deployment of this study on a larger scale incorporating multiple sites and programs. An additional study should also investigate the motivations and preferences of those within the campus community who do not engage in programming offered by the Department of Recreational Sports in order to understand how programming and marketing could be developed in order to gain the interest and participation of a larger percentage of the campus population, thus enabling them to experience the benefits of recreational sport participation.

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