PERCIEVED AND ACTUAL ECOMMUNITY USAGE: AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF IRONMAN ARIZONA

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Synopsis:
This research project examines the perceived and actual use of e-communities in a triathlon context using exploratory design.

Abstract:
AIM OF ABSTRACT
Researchers found social support to be an important factor leading toward the adoption of new physical activities (e.g., Courneya & McAuley, 1995; Petosa, Suminski & Hortz, 2003). E-communities--virtual spaces where individuals share information, find support, and socialize--typically within social media platforms (Preece, 2001), may provide an ideal context for individuals to gain a sense of community and social support to assist them in meeting their sport participation goals. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of e-communities in a sport context, and the influence sense of community may have on individuals' online and offline behaviors. The following research questions address that purpose:
RQ1: What are e-communities within a sport context?
RQ2: What influence does sense of community have on online and offline behaviors?
RQ3: What are the differences between perceived and actual e-community usage?

LITERATURE REVIEW
E-communities are defined as "any virtual social space where people come together to get and give information or support, to learn, or to find company" (Preece, 2001, p. 3). Researchers found that e-communities facilitate socialization and social support while others have found e-communities provide users the opportunity to develop learning, personal development, and collective action as well (e.g., Scott & Johnson, 2005). Warner, Kerwin and Walker (2013) created the Sense of Community in Sport theoretical framework, and subsequent measurement scale, identifying six major components to achieve

sense of community (i.e., Administrative Consideration, Common Interest, Competition, Equity in Administrative Decisions, Leadership, and Social Spaces). The current study will use this theory as a guiding framework within an e-community context.

Due to the multisport nature of triathlon, individuals feel intimidated by intensity of the activity and may choose not to participate despite the physical and mental benefits they may experience from participation. E-communities may provide an ideal context for individuals to gain a sense of community and social support to assist them in meeting their sport participation goals. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of e-communities in a sport context, while also exploring how the various elements of sense of community influence individuals' online and offline behaviors.

METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS

The current study will use exploratory design employing phenomenological research techniques. Potential study participants will be solicited through announcements on an event-based e-community, the Ironman Arizona Facebook group. The researcher will conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants until the data reaches the saturation. The researcher will analyze the data using inductive coding techniques to identify emergent themes used to explain the phenomenon in question.

In addition, the research will use content and thematic analysis to analyze the content created on the e-community. The research will use NCapture, a subset of the qualitative NVivo program, to collect the content posted on the Ironman Arizona event-based Facebook group. This information will be organized and coded using similar inductive techniques as the qualitative portion of this study. A combination of qualitative analysis of participant interviews and thematic analysis of the content in the Facebook group will provide a holistic view of participant motivations of perceived and actual e-community usage.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE REVIEW

The researchers conducted interviews with fourteen participants in the Ironman Arizona Facebook group. Preliminary qualitative analysis of interviews revealed three main themes from the data: (1) social support, (2) knowledge sharing, and (3) leadership. Facebook content for the Ironman Arizona group has been collected, but not yet coded for the thematic and content analysis portion of this manuscript. This additional data will be used as a comparison between participant's perceived use of e-communities and actual use. The second portion of the data will be analyzed and interpreted over the next month and will be fully prepared to present at EASM.

The results of this study will benefit sport and event managers aiming to recruit and retain participants in a highly saturated and potentially intimidating sport participation market. In a broader context, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared physical inactivity the fourth leading risk factor for death, causing approximately 3.2 million deaths worldwide. There are countless health benefits to physical activity yet many individuals avoid physical activity due to exercise intimidation, lack of knowledge, and lack of support (e.g., Petosa et al., 2003). The emergence of technology in society has led to many e-communities, which may help mitigate some of the intimidating aspects of physical activity and sport participation.

References:

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