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Content Analysis of a Collegiate Athletic Twitter Account: Practical Applications for Promotion and Attendance Increase

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ABSTRACT

Twitter global usage has increased as a source of information during the past decade. This study explores different types of Twitter messages sent by a collegiate athletic department and analyzes the impact of these messages on attendance at home athletic events during the NCAA football season. The data examines five message categories: interactivity, content, promotional, information sharing, and noise. Noise accounts for any message that is not related to the studied sport season. Results suggest that while noise is prevalent, messages pertaining to the studied sport are impactful. The types of messages sent by a college athletic department can impact attendance at the institution's home athletic events.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of internet technology in the late 1980's to the early 1990's gave way to the dot-com boom that took place from 1997 to 2001. Internet and electronic mails vastly changed the way individuals communicate with one another and obtain information. The ability to access the internet at home helps create a link between individuals with one another all over the world in split seconds. During the last 20 years, the internet has become the favorite promotional medium for sport marketers and a most valuable source of sports information (Shank and Lyberger, 2015). More modern technological devices put global communication at individuals' fingertips. Billions of

individuals can connect to the internet through their cellular phones with a WIFI network. Instant connection and networking with the world have also been made possible through the emergence and evolution of social media. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc., have made communication and sharing of information with thousands of followers possible with just a click of a button. Every second, on average, around 6,000 tweets are sent out on Twitter, which corresponds to over 200 billion tweets per year (Internet Live Stats, 2017). With this amazing capability of reaching multitudes in brief tweets in seconds, Twitter has been recognized by many marketing and advertising executives as a means to reach consumer subcultures in a “live” environment, since its initial public offering in 2013 (Delia and Armstrong, 2015). Individuals and organizations can use this tool to elicit and trigger certain consumption or purchasing behaviors from their targeted consumers. In sports settings, sports fans are a vital part of consumer subculture that can be targeted for consuming tickets or apparels, and television or live stream viewership. In general, internets and social media technology have many great advantages to achieve desired marketing goals and can quickly push the boundaries of media convergence across television, computer, and mobile devices (Shank and Lyberger, 2015). These media can reach focused target markets in a fast paced and cost-effective fashion (Mahan, 2011). They also exhibit an interactive nature that help generate responses and interaction from all forms of organizations and consumers (Eagleman, 2013; Shank and Lyberger, 2015). Therefore, there is no surprise that companies of all types and sizes are using social media as part of their marketing and public relations efforts (Newman, Peck, and Wilhide, 2013). Due to aforementioned advantages, social media are utilized to manage and foster relationship-marketing goals and brand loyalty (Abeza, O’Reilly, and Reid, 2013; William and Chinn, 2010). Social media can provide information and entertainment, engage consumers to get through time, and foster fanship (Witkemper, Lim, and Waldburger, 2012). Customers typically prefer to share music, technological-related contents, exciting sports highlights, and funny contents on social media platforms (Erdoğan and Cicek, 2012). The offering and consumption of “over the top” programs (i.e., short video highlights and promotional clips) through social media platforms can help

sports teams get the true figure of total viewership and learn more about audiences' consumption habits (Walmsley, 2018). More companies and agencies even provide services and intelligences to track and analyze fans' sport media consumption behaviors (i.e., FanTracker). No wonder social media are considered as the most effective medium that are utilized to help European soccer clubs (i.e., Premier League and Juventus) and Women's National Basketball Association to build global presence and grow international fan bases (Clarke, 2018; Dunne, 2018; Retting, 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

A common goal of today's sports organizations is to utilize social media to convey messages to their fans and to build advantageous business outcomes. The basic communication model involves a sender of a message, the message, the channel through which the message is sent, the noise, the receiver, and the feedback (Sawyer and Judge, 2012). In the instant communication landscape, promotional messages, game information, and interactive comments can be communicated through the use of social media as the channel. The intended message is received by hundreds to thousands of followers (receivers) as they decode the messages and information for their personal use and consumption. These followers also sift through the "noise," which refers to other contents that are tagging along (i.e., non-related advertisements, graphics, video, pictures, and tweets) with the main messages sent by other individuals or organizations. In many social media platforms, feedback message can be offered through the implementation of a "like" and "retweet/share", and "follow" system that allows senders and receivers to examine the effect and popularity of their messages in real time.

Most studies about the utilization of social media in sports examine how professional sports organizations and governing bodies use platforms to interact with fans. These studies assume that messages crafted by the team/franchise foster fan interest. For example, Watanabe, Yan, and

Soebbing (2015) analyzed the Twitter accounts of all 30 Major League Baseball teams to determine the factors that lead to the change in Twitter followers over the course of a year. They examined the organizational social media use, the number of tweets, favorites, and follows of each team per day. They also examined other factors that help explain daily changes in account followers. Those factors included team performance and importance of scheduled events (Watanabe et al., 2015). According to Watanabe et al. (2015), sports franchises foster fan interest through the means of developing media messages on the Twitter platform. Although Watanabe et al. (2016) did not find the same conclusion in their subsequent study while eliminating scheduled events as a variable, followers' tweets still revealed their heightened interest toward the season.

Scholars have used social media contents to examine fans' passion in predicting attendance, media consumption, and social media behavior (Wakefield, 2016). Social media contents also help marketers to identify the valence of sponsors of the French Open Tennis Tournament. Delia and Armstrong (2015) were able to analyze sponsorship effectiveness through buzz and sentiment that each sponsor generated on social media. Sports fans' involvement in social media can help marketers understand consumption behaviors. Wakefield (2016) defined two types of social media users: passive and active. Passive social media users involve only observing or reading the tweets, while active users co-create the contents through likes, posts, shares and/or interactions with others via exchanges of comments and posts. Sports fans' involvement in Twitter use, sports passion and fan identification were all found to be significant reasons for explaining their interaction with sports organizations' social media accounts (Wakefield, 2016).

Consumers' interest, accessibility to Wi-Fi, economics, skills for operating computer and mobile devices, and interest constraints (i.e., preference of following certain sports and athletes) all dictate their social media consumption behaviors (Witkemper, Lim, and Waldburger, 2012). As explained by Ko, Chang, Jang, Sagas, and Spengler (2017), sports spectatorship and need for affiliation are

important elements that get sports fans aroused. These important compound psychological traits can be found in the social media messages created by a sport organization. It is vital for a sport organization to foster these three specific needs of its fans when creating a Twitter message.

While examining the Twitter messages of the Women's National Basketball Association, Shreffler, Hancock, and Schmidt (2015) coded the messages into six different categories: interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content, fanship, and promotional. The study attempted to identify the ideal social media habits that would result in sales profits for the organization. The results concluded that during the season most teams focused on in-game information, while in the offseason focus shifted to interactivity.

Purpose of the Study

Although anecdotal evidence encourages the use of social media to market intercollegiate athletic events and programs, few studies have investigated the effects of social media on intercollegiate athletic activities. Past studies addressed the features and strengths that social media may offer from the relationship marketing aspect (Abeza et al., 2013; William and Chinn, 2010). Less financially abundant non-profit organizations and institutional athletics may count on social media to reach their clients and consumers in an affordable and relatively quick fashion. However, social media's actual impact and effect on attendance growth remain unexamined. The real-time application and impact of these shared messages are the focus of the current study. This study reports the results of a content analysis of official Twitter accounts of a collegiate athletic department to examine the relationship between the shared messages and home game attendance. The researchers examine the following questions: (1) what types of messages and information are primarily disseminated and communicated by a college athletic program and its fans (2) how did disseminated information affect attendance at home athletic events? The results of the study offer

the institution's athletic department a better understanding on how to shape future messages to cater to the needs of the fans and adjust the current exchanged information to achieve a greater efficiency in increasing home attendance. The researchers propose the following as the results of content analyses of shared tweets:

Proposition 1: The average number of weekly tweets will be greater for home games than road games.

Proposition 2: Information and promotion tweets will be greater for home game weeks than road game weeks.

Proposition 3: The presence of total tweets (including the noise tweets) will be less for home games than road games.

METHODS

The purpose of this study is to examine the messages that are communicated via Twitter by social media followers of a college athletic program. The researchers gauge how the exchanged message content affects athletic attendance of home events by analyzing the amount and types of categorized contents. Messages were extracted from the official Tweeter account of a mid-major regional university in eastern Kentucky. The university competes in the NCAA Division-I in 14 different male and female sports with its football team competing at the non-scholarship Football Championship Series (FCS). The university has a strong fan base which led its conference in Twitter followers and average football home game attendance for each of the last five years.

All Tweets (n = 1,438) from the 2017 college football season and 2018 basketball seasons were coded according to the module outlined by Shreffler et al. (2015, p. 47). Tweets were categorized into one of the five specific categories: (1) interactivity, (2) information, (3) content, and (4) promotions, and (5).

Notice that an additional fifth category, noise, was added in this study, which is different from the original categories proposed by Shreffler et al. (2015). “Interactivity” refers to any tweets directed at fans or were retweets of fans. “Information” refers to any posted statistical information, game-day information, or team or player updates and stories. (This means the research blend the concept of fanship into the information category.) “Content” refers to any tweeting of video clips, pictures, or links. “Promotions” refers to any tweets that promote the events, sponsors, sales (merchandise) items and ancillary products of the college athletic program. “Noise” refers to any tweets not directly related to the specific designated season sport (football in fall and basketball in winter) that a user must sift through to find tweets regarding the designated sport. Examples of noise include tweets regarding other university sports and many other non-sports related institutional news. In other words, the noise tweets are similar to diversion tweets that were proposed in Shreffler et al. (2015).

At the conclusion of the football and basketball regular seasons, tweets from the observed official Twitter account were coded on a weekly basis. During the football season, 12-week (11 playing week and one bye week) data points were created and analyzed. A week was defined starting on the Saturday evening after weekend game and running until the Saturday noon right before the game time. All the eleven games but one (except the season opener) played on Saturday. The season opener was played on Thursday.

To complete the coding process, tweets were retrieved using the online service AllMyTweets.com, a website that displayed all tweets of a particular Twitter host on a single page. To verify the accuracy of the tweets, the most recent five tweets from the university athletic department’s Twitter account were compared to the most recent five tweets on AllMyTweets.com. The researchers found all the tweets were identical. Tweets of each game week and the bye week were coded in categories according to the aforementioned instructions. Besides the coding across the 12 weeks, the researchers also added a few variables to enhance the analysis process. Those variables include: (1)

was it a rivalry game? (Rivalry Game), (2) was a promotion associated with the game designated by the athletic department? (Promotional Game), (3) was it a home game? (Home Game), (4) was the game a win or a loss? (Win or Loss?), (5) and the number in attendance.

RESULTS

Of all tweets (n = 670) coded during the football season, it was found that the most prevalent form of message tweeted by the athletic followers was noise (n = 489), which accounted for 73% of the seasonal tweets. The next most prevalent was content (n = 77), which accounted for 11 %. The same findings also occurred during the basketball season. As noise (n = 504; 66%) and content (116; 15%), the two most prevalent forms, dominated the total tweeted messages (n =768). However, the number of tweets of promotions and information between two different seasons seem to vary largely. Table 1 shows the number of tweets in each category in both seasons.

Table 1
Analyses of Tweets between Different Sport Seasons

Category	Fall/Football Season (n = 670)	Fall/Football Weekly (Avg. = 56 in 12 weeks)
Noise	489 (73%)	40.8
Content	77 (11%)	6.4
Promotions	42 (6%)	3.5
Interactivity	37 (6%)	3.1
Information	25 (4%)	2.1
	Winter/Basketball Season (n = 768)	Winter/Basketball Weekly (Avg. = 48 in 16 weeks)

Noise	504 (66%)	31.5
Content	116 (15%)	7.3
Promotions	22 (3%),	1.4
Interactivity	33 (4%)	2.1
Information	93 (12%)	5.8

On average, about 56 tweets were found on the university’s official athletic department Twitter account each week in fall (football season). Of those 56 tweets per week, they covered three interactivity tweets, six content tweets, four promotional tweets, and two informational tweets. The rest of the messages were considered noise tweets (n = 41). In the winter season, the number of average weekly tweets was less (n = 48). Among those 48 weekly tweets, they consisted of an average of two interactivity tweets, seven content tweets, one promotional tweet, six informational tweets, and 32 noise tweets. In general, more tweets were communicated in the fall football season than the winter basketball seasons. Proportion wise, there are far more promotional (3.5 vs. 1.4) but far less informational tweets (2.1 vs. 5.8) in the football season as compared to the basketball season within a week.

Table 2 illustrates the break downs of different types of tweets under different game conditions. During the observed two sport seasons (fall and winter), both the football team and the men’s basketball team played five (5) and fourteen (14) home games, respectively. During the football season, the athletic department offered special promotions in four of the five contests. Two specific games were viewed as the rivalry games. One of the rivalry games was also a designated promotional game. There were five games denoted as the marquee rivalry games in the basketball season. The athletic department designated four promotional games throughout the season. This resulted in three rivalry games also accommodating promotional activities.

As shown in Table 2, there was a clear contrast in number of tweets based on the location of the game. Overall, the average number of weekly tweets for away weeks (57 tweets) was slightly greater than the weekly average of home game weeks (55 tweets). This was clearly not the case in the basketball season. There were 9 more tweets when basketball teams played at home (39 tweets) than they did for the away weeks (30 tweets). In general, the home attendance for rivalry games and promotional nights were higher than the rest of other regular games. The researchers attempted to establish a relationship between the observed tweets and number in attendance. It was found that no significant meaningful relationship between the total number of tweets and home game attendances. However, the researcher discovered that the number of Informational tweets and ($r = .563, p < .05$) and Promotional tweets ($r = .618, p < .05$) were positively correlated to home game attendance. The number of Promotional Tweets did not vary significantly between games that were designated as a promotional game and those were not. When wins occurred, the tweet followers usually generated a greater number of Informational tweets (4 v. 1.5, $p < .05$) and Content tweets (8.3 vs. 6.3, $p < .05$) in the subsequent week. Moreover, a greater number of weekly Interactivity tweets could be seen, when the team played at home (3.8 vs. 1.4, $p < .05$) rather than away.

Table 2

Break Downs of Average Weekly Tweets Based on Different Categories and Condition

Categories	Attendance	INT	CON	PROM	INF	NOI	Total
5 Home Game (FB)	5887	6	7	4	3	35	55
14 Home Games (BKTB)	2745	2	6	1	5	25	39
6 Road Games (FB)	6392	2	7	3	2	44	57
16 Road Games (BKTB)	3018	1	5	0.5	4	21	30
2 Rivalry Games (FB)	7229	4	8	6	2	41	60
5 Rivalry Games (BKTB)	3807	3	8	2	5	41	58

4 Promotional Games (FB)	5897	4	6	4	3	37	52
4 Promotional Games (BKTB)	3909	4	8	2	6	33	52
4 Wins (FB)	6243	7	9	5	3	35	57
9 Wins (BKTB)	2625	2	7	1	6	27	44

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the study, Hypothesis 1 only holds true for the winter basketball season. This study found that during the football season, whether it be a home or road game, the number of tweets roughly stays at the same level (around 56 per week). More specifically, the average weekly tweets were slightly lower during the home game weeks than those of the away game weeks for football. The primary cause of that phenomenon could be the huge difference in the amount of noise tweets. Women's volleyball and women's soccer also overlaps with football in the fall season. Fans of those sports may be the cause of the creation of a greater noise tweets during the football's away weeks. There were average nine more tweets found in a typical home-game week compared to the away-game week in the basketball season. The researchers believed there might be two possible explanations for this phenomenon. First, despite being the most popular sport on most collegiate campuses, football is competing for media attention with women's volleyball and soccer. Since the football team had not performed very well for the away games, fans of the athletic program might likely post more news, highlights, and information about female volleyball and soccer to divert the discussions. These diversions, according the definition of this study, would be considered as noise tweets. While during the winter season, both men's and women's basketball teams often play at home or on the road on the same night, especially during conference play. Many avid fans were followers and supporters of men's and women's basketball simultaneously. So, no message about other sports would appear to compete for the media attention of basketball during the road-game weeks. Besides, when basketball teams played away, it was the time that the marketing staff got to

take a break during the busy season and media relations staff still traveled away for their work. It was likely less athletic staff would initiate tweets to generate discussions and responses. When there are no key members involved in the initiation of tweets, the exchanged messages certainly would drop down.

The results support Hypothesis 2 as the researchers found that information and promotions tweets were more during home game weeks than those of in the road game weeks. However, the actual differences of total tweets in those two categories during the different game situations was less than one tweet per week. It clearly reflects the minuscule number of exchanged tweets within a typical week. This study has found that the number of Informational tweets and ($r = .563$, $p < .05$) and Promotional tweets ($r = .618$, $p < .05$) were positively correlated to home game attendance. And the average number of Promotional tweets for the designated promotional games were less than one tweet more than those of non-promotional games. If the athletic department really thinks about using social media as an effective tool to market the program and reach the targeted audiences, there must be a better strategy to deliver marketing and promotional messages. There is huge room for improving the deliveries of video highlights, game information, statistics, and other featured stories. It is evident that on those special game days (either a rivalry or a promotional night), when Interactivity and Promotional tweets were communicated more, the home game attendance would increase. The increased number would go as high as 500 more for football and 200 more for basketball. Although it is really difficult to truly prove the attendance increase was mainly attributed to the delivery of tweets, the significant correlation between the attendance number and certain types of tweet contents make it hard to deny the possible impact of the communicated messages. When these messages can be prepared and delivered with relatively little or no financial costs and little effort in time, the marketing administrators must take advantage and generate more tweets or encourage others to retweet the messages.

The researchers logically assumed that the total number of tweets during home game weeks would surpass the number of the away game weeks. When a team is not performing well and losing a lot of away games, the fans might be less likely to engage in the tweets and try not to talk about the team. The concept of “Basking in Reflected Glory” of social identity theory (BIRGing) explains that people naturally desire to associate with a winner (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, and Sloan, 1976). In order to protect ones’ self-esteem, people will distance themselves as far as possible from the losing team. This action illustrates the concept of Cutting off Reflected Failure (CORFing) (Cialdini and Richardson 1980; Shank & Lyberger, 2015). A past study has shown fans are more likely to visit their team’s website after a victory and less likely to visit the site after a defeat (Boen, Vanbeselaere, and Feys, 2002). In addition, when teams travel away for games, only serious avid fans continue to follow the team’s activities and news consistently. Even the athletic department would ease the social media activities a little by sending less contents, highlights and information. Perhaps due to these aforementioned reasons, we witness the decrease in several categories of tweets in winter season. It is quite interesting to see the number of average weekly tweets of away games in fall (football) season was slightly higher than those of home game weeks. However, the primary increase was found in the Noise category. This means more diversions were communicated during the away game weeks. It makes the researchers wonder why this is a way that football fans attempt to uphold their self-esteem and yet remain faithful to the team.

In many cases, noise tweets may seem to be irrelevant and not-so-helpful to the organization. From the university’s perspective, anyone who tweets messages about another sports team of our institutions, commercials of local businesses, or stories of faculty, administrators, and community members, he/she is still doing free publicity for our institution and community. If the noise tweets were sent as a diversion to protect the fan’s self-esteem or a message to promote local business and university in general, they actually serve a meaningful purpose. Not to mention the noise tweets help drive the total number of tweets way up. They are indeed a good thing to be around. While noise

tweets are still necessary for a college athletic department during both in-season and off-season, sending content messages and highlights regarding football and men's basketball must become a year-round priority for the athletic department.

Based on the results, a correlation between twitter activity and attendance can be drawn.

Attendance exceeds the average when the average number of tweets per week is met, nearly met, or exceed, as shown in three of five football games and in five of seven weeks during men's basketball.

When the average number of tweets is not met, attendance does not meet the average attendance. In this particular study, promotional tweets refer to any tweets promoting the event (or game), a sponsor, or an ancillary product. Therefore, the promotional tweets coded in this study do not necessarily just relate to the specific games. Due to the low number of promotional games across the observed seasons and the strict definition of promotional tweets in the coding, it is difficult to set an ideal number of promotional tweets as a specific goal. Nevertheless, it is fair to conclude that the total number of tweets of the observed institution is far less than the number that were found in the twitter feeds of the Southeastern Conference (SEC) institutions (Author, Duncan, Street, and Hesterberg, 2016). Both men's and women's basketball team of each SEC institution could easily have a weekly average of 157 tweets in their Twitter account during the season. Apparently, there is a huge room for improvement in increasing the communication among the Tweet followers and the athletic department's effort in utilizing the twitter messages as a promotional tool. The researchers believe a large number of tweets is strongly correlated with a high number the athletic attendance. Although the observed sample of this study is small, it still shows that when individuals are exposed to promotional and game information via Twitter, they would be more likely to attend an athletic event. It is always nice to have a high volume of tweets in the Twitter platform regardless of the types of exchanged messages. Even if the messages are considered to be "noise" tweets, these followers are still engaged and do not cut off their affiliation from the organization.

This study did not come without its limitations. First, this study focused on a mid-major regional university in eastern Kentucky. While the university leads its league in attendance in football, the league is one of the lower leagues of the NCAA Division-I FCS level. Since it was the team's worst season of the last five years, the university's men's basketball game attendance decreased during the observed season. So, the pattern of attendance and its reflected relationship with the number of tweets could only be viewed as specific case. The Twitter account activity of the institution's athletic department certainly is not indicative of the Twitter use of all collegiate athletic programs across the country. The researcher sincerely encourages the future investigators to conduct similar types of content analyses on various social media platforms across all size of schools and athletic programs to establish benchmarks and behavioral patterns of users. Then the future findings will be able to draw and generalize more conclusions regarding social media messages and its promotional impact on college athletic programs. Lastly, there is a unique concern that the researchers would like to mention as related to our study. During our observation, the researchers did not identify tweets concerning the negative criticism of existing coaching staff or demand of any change of coaching positions. The researchers wonder what impact may be created regarding the home game attendance if these types of negative tweets are heavily exchanged on the Twitter site.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Content during road game weeks is important as it allows fans who could not travel to the game to feel connected and informed through the use of videos, photos, live stats and livestreaming links. Shreffler et al. (2015) also stressed the importance of communicating via social media year-round with different focused contents and messages in different stages of the year (i.e., pre-season, off-season, and in-season). Having a strong presence and controlled management in official athletic social media is an essential practice for fostering a better relationship marketing environment. For all college athletic departments, increasing fan attendance is also the most critical element to

increase revenue. All the aforementioned descriptions help us recognize the need to hire a full-time person to handle the athletic department's social media accounts. For many small athletic departments, they may not have the budget to hire a full-time member to manage official social media sites. Therefore, the institution may utilize student-interns or graduate assistants who are more tech-savvy in mobile and internet technology to diligently produce promotional and informational tweets. The researchers would love to see a career opportunity developed and dedicated to managing social media contents and enhancing fan interaction.

Occasionally, the athletic department has decided to do special game-day promotions during the designated rivalry games. This practice occurred in one football game and two basketball games. The game attendance of those special promotional games was 6,306 in football and 3,514 in basketball (two games). These two numbers were slightly greater than the average home attendance of football and basketball, 5,887 and 2,745, respectively. At this moment, all the designated promotional games came with the same type of ticket price discount and dollar hot dog sales. It seems quite standardized and not always necessary. When ticket discounts are offered to a game that may have a high demand (i.e., a rivalry game), this may actually hurt the potential ticket revenues. If social media platforms are going to be fully utilized for marketing purpose, it may be sensible and achievable to make every home game with different types of promotional activities to draw various groups of spectators. If a promotion will be given for a rivalry game, the offers can focus on discounts for concession items or athletic apparels, but not necessarily on the price of tickets. The researchers strongly believe that marketing through social media platforms can be neatly managed and crafted by the social media content manager with the assistance of the marketing director and the media relations staff.

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