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Cover Page Footnote

We would like to thank Mrs. Karen Doran's assistance in editing the article.

Collegiate Athletic Fans Perception of the Use of Social Media in Marketing

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Abstract: *Social media has become the dominant tool for sports fans to receive news and messages. Many sports fans turn to the four main social media platforms, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, to receive marketing information, highlights, updates, and statistics while consuming sports content. Past studies indicated the greatest advantages for all levels of sports organizations using social media to promote the events and engage their fans. To fully understand the utilization of social media and its effectiveness for marketing intercollegiate athletic events, this study examined 203 athletic spectators' (62% males and 38% females) preferable methods for obtaining athletic information and promotional message at a regional institution in Appalachia. The results showed the respondents relied on social media and word-of-mouth far more than the official athletic website to obtain information and game content. It was found that students' preferable communication channels and pattern of use were different from the older community fans as compared to the past studies. Practical strategies for increasing certain types of video content and messages to enhance student event attendance and engagement were addressed based on the analyses of this data. The athletic department could also create additional employment or internship positions to mainly produce and monitor promotional and informational content in social media platforms.*

Keywords: *Collegiate Athletic, Fans Perception, Social Media, Marketing*

Over the last seven years, social media has become the dominant tool for people to receive news and communication messages (Holmes, 2015). Nowadays, sport fans also turn to the four main social media platforms, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat, to receive marketing information, highlights, updates, and statistics while consuming sport contents. Numerous studies identified the great advantages for all levels of sport organizations using social media to promote their events and engage their fans (Abeza, & O'Reilly, 2014; Lebel, & Danylchuk, 2014; Ourand & Fisher, 2013; Steinbach, 2010; William, & Chinn, 2010; Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012). The decreasing attendance of college football, particularly the loss of student fans, was an alarming sign that administrators could not ignore (Bachman, 2018; Cohen, 2014; McKnight, 2017; Popke, 2018).

Many suggestions and comments could be found on how to make collegiate athletic events more family-oriented, festival-like and offer all sorts of discounts, entertainment, and giveaways to attract various types of fans and spectators (Brokaw, Stone, & Jones, 2006; Christiansen, Greene & Jones, 2019; Krohn, Clarke, Preston, McDonald, & Preston, 1998). However, the central element for achieving marketing schemes and activities to boost game attendance heavily depends on the

use of proper communication channels to reach the targeted audience. It was vital to perform a gap analysis to evaluate what the audience and students knew about the game information and actual attendance to athletic events (Latta & Mitchell, 2009). There were only limited studies examining marketing effort and communicative strategies related to regional and small collegiate athletic programs, particularly in the use of social media in sports marketing (Zullo, 2018) and how event attendance was influenced by social media marketing (Chen, 2019).

To fully understand the utilization of social media and its effectiveness for marketing intercollegiate athletic events, this study examined event spectators' preferable methods for obtaining athletic information and promotional messages from a regional collegiate athletic program in Appalachia. By knowing how social media and online platforms (such as the official athletic website) were utilized by fans to obtain athletic information and game contents, practical strategies for developing certain types of contents and messages can be developed to entice students for game attendance and engagement.

Impact and Benefits of Social Media Marketing

Evidently, social media has become the most prevalent and dominant promotional and communicative means among various

sport industries. All business sectors, including professional franchises, non-profit governing agencies, and educational institutions, are eager to reach out to their consumers via online social networks in the Internet marketing environment (Reuben, 2008; Thompson, Martin, Gee, & Eagleman, 2014). Sports fans are huge users of social media (Haugh & Watkins, 2016). Indeed, it was estimated 95% of them use it in a typical day versus 86% of non-fans (Editorial, 2009; Haugh & Watkins, 2016). The Bowl Championship Series (BCS) received harsh criticism from football fans when it only created news and messages on its official websites without any other social media presence (Clapp, 2015). This clearly reflected the committee's slow pace and reluctance to embrace creative ideas and technology. Research has indicated that more collegiate athletics changed their communication strategies and shared information via internets and apps (Clavio, & Walsh, 2014; Mayo, 2017; Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012). More fans turn to their Twitter accounts every week to learn about the location and the opponents their favorite team is playing. College sport programs turn to social media quickly because most, if not all, the students have some sort of social media platforms. Even the older community fans have gradually adapted to the use of social media for retrieving information.

Social media became the favorable channel to reach all the fans due to its numerous advantages and benefits. It is economical and extremely fast in reaching a multitude of people (Fetchko, Roy, & Clow, 2019). Sports marketers understood the importance of sharing the complex dynamics and unique culture within the arena and various consumers among different geographic regions (Kwon & Trail, 2001). No other means can help spread the news, educate the fans, and cultivate the entertainment culture like social media does (Reuben, 2008). It also helps reach the massive international fans in a quick fashion and sports marketers would utilize social media to learn about what their fans crave and enjoy (Engleman, 2013). Major League Baseball teams, such as the Boston Red Sox, use social media to collect research data and fans' feedback to improve the event services or moving schedule due to rain delay (Clapp, 2015). Instant Twitter polls are a standard tactic to recognize the fans' thoughts during the rain delays. From the economic perspective, the athletic department can now save a significant amount of hassle and cost by not passing out or mailing out flyers and newsletters to people (Mullins, Hardy, & Sutton, 2014).

Social media also influences sports fans' decision in buying products or services from sports sponsors (Editorial, 2009). Contents such as discounts, product or service reviews, advertisements, and athlete endorsements frequently appear in social media to attract sport fans' attention. Some entities, such as collegiate athletic programs even aggressively sold event tickets on the social media platforms (Steinbach, 2010). Marketers of sports teams and organizations believe social media is an effective tool to build their brand. Star athletes are the greatest brand advocates available. Consumers and fans are interested in discussing the athletes' performance, fitness, and sport expertise, along with the athletes' personal stories (Kleps, 2017; Lebel & Danylichuk; 2014; Walsh, Clavio, Lovell, &

Blaszka, 2013). Based on these concepts, many of hashtags have been created to promote the brands, products, and athletes. Social media certainly helps maximize the social interaction between the sport leagues and their fans (Pardee, 2012). Therefore, administrators, and managers cannot overlook the value of training their players and must actively engage with the organizations' own social media presence and feed them back to central team pages (Clapp, 2015)

Social Media Trends in Collegiate Athletics

Studies revealed that collegiate sports spectators gradually learned about sporting events through the institution's social media pages, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat (Clapp, 2015; Mayo, 2017; Mullins, Hardy, & Sutton, 2014; Reuben, 2008). Traditionally, athletic administrators were concerned about the negative impact of student-athletes' inappropriate social media presence (Clavio, 2011). However, more sports teams now are encouraging their athletes to engage in social media for building the team's brand or advocating social changes through creation of hashtags (Kleps, 2017; Mickle, 2013; Thomas, 2016; William & Chinn, 2010). Social media is indeed a favorite strategic choice for managing and executing relationship-marketing (Abeza & O'Reilly, 2014; William & Chinn, 2010). When student-athletes shared their athletic-related performance, volunteer experiences, and personal stories with sports fans on social and locational media, this demonstrated their passion and caring for the community (Clavio & Frederick, 2014). In today's dynamic marketing environment, it is not merely enough to passively wait for the consumers to react to the information and messages displayed on the websites (Suh, Ahn, & Pedersen, 2014). Despite the popularity of social media as a marketing tool, Clavio and Walsh (2014) stated that there were still a lot of college fans who were relatively slow in adapting to this communication channel. Even at a Power-5 conference institution, fans of Indiana still used newspapers and official websites as the dominant sources for obtaining athletic information. Furthermore, there were still less than 30% of fans following the official athletic Twitter feeds and Facebook websites.

The researchers made an attempt to investigate the pattern of use of social media by the institution's athletic event spectators in 2019 (Chen, Gdovka, & Hall, 2019). In that particular study, there were 180 respondents in the surveyed sample with community fans ($n = 86$) and students ($n = 50$) as the two largest demographic groups. Most respondents found out about the athletic information through social media (83%) and the official athletic website (MSUEageles.com; 71%). The traditional methods for sharing game information such as word-of-mouth, radio, and newspaper/prints were less utilized (> 26%). The researchers suspected the more prevalent use of Facebook (72%) than Twitter (43%) was mainly due to a greater number of respondents (60%) in the age category of 45 or older.

Due to the scarcity of research investigating the utilization of social media among the fans of small collegiate athletic programs, the researchers intended to examine the preference and frequencies of the social media use by the event spectators of a regional collegiate athletic program in Appalachia. The

findings on utilization of social media and online platforms (such as the official athletic website) by existing spectators should guide marketers' development of effective promotional contents and messages to improve student game attendance and engagement.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study included 203 adults (108 males, 93 females, and 2 unmarked) who were either students at a regional university in Appalachia (70%) or the local residents who lived close to the campus region. The majority of them (89%) were in the age category of 18-24 years old. Individuals who were not categorized as students were either identified as community fans (24.1%) or members affiliated with the institution (alumni or employees; 5.5%). Because the focus of this study was to address the use of social media as a marketing and communicative tool for a regional collegiate athletic program and its impact on student attendance, the researchers purposefully targeted students as the primary participants.

Instrumentation and Procedure

The researcher created a 20-item survey based on the work of Clavio and Walsh (2014) in order to identify how participants had learned about the sporting events on campus, along with their consumption pattern of sports information. The content of this self-created questionnaire generally covered areas such as: (1) methods for receiving athletic information, (2) event attending preferences, (3) event viewing patterns, (4) behaviors on the use of digital platforms, and (5) demographics. This was the second time the survey had been administered at this specific institution. In the previous study, the researchers performed a test-retest analysis on the instrument and received a strong correlation on responses ($r > .850$) from a sample group of 35 sport management students (Chen, Gdovka, & Hall, 2019).

The participants were recruited and invited to participate in the survey by two methods. With the support of Greek life and Student Government Association, the researchers met with the students and adult fans who attended two basketball home games during the 2019-20 season. The researchers' original intention was to collect 120 copies of responses from a large convenient sample. Later, more surveys were distributed to individual students who were approached by the researchers in hallways, student union, cafeteria, and library. After agreeing to fill out the survey, participants either submitted their responses via online or paper-based version. The data collection period lasted from early February to early April of 2019. Before the participants filled out the survey, the researchers explained the purpose of our study to them. They could decide to respond voluntarily or refuse to respond. Although no prize (or incentive) and coercion were involved, they still agreed to help the researcher with the research by completing the survey.

Results

Based on the participants' responses, men's basketball (74%) and football (63%) were two most popular and attended sports sponsored by the institution. The next two popular sports were both female sports, volleyball and women's basketball, with 43% and 29% of participants attending the events, respectively. Nearly 45.3% of the participants had attended more than six games annually. In general, participants mainly relied on word-of-mouth (77.8%) and social media (77.3%) to receive game information. Only about 22% of participants would obtain the information through multiple platforms to remind themselves about the games. The official athletic website (MSUEagles.com) was utilized by 16.7% of participants. Traditional media such as newspaper (12.3%) and radio broadcasting (7.9%) were far less depended on.

Although participants were likely to browse the official website for game information and contents, only 33% of them were considered as frequent users. Nearly 67% of the users occasionally or rarely visited the site. On the contrary, they visited athletic-affiliated social media platforms more often than the official website. Instagram (43.3%) and Twitter (38.95) were two most prevalent platforms followed by the participants. About 24.1% of the respondents also visited YouTube to retrieve highlights and results. Approximately, 13.8% and 33% of participants would follow the athletic events through radiobroadcasting or live streaming (i.e., OVC Digital Network or ESPN 3).

Overall, 21% of respondents were truly satisfied with the content received from the social media. Regarding how social media contents should be improved, 37.9% of participants indicated no change was needed. About 48.3% of respondents expected to read more posts, and 16.7% of individuals would like to read more personal stories related to student-athletes.

The primary participants of this study were college-aged young adults in the 18-24 age category. The researcher found dramatic differences in results between this study and our previous study. In the previous sample, comprised of 72.2% community fans, alumni and university staff, older respondents indicated the official athletic website was relied on as a main tool to obtain information and game content as much as social media. Older community fans relied less on word-of-mouth for game information. Overall, newspaper and radio broadcasting were found to be less utilized for obtaining game information within both groups.

In this study, the researchers also discovered that Facebook was not as popularly followed when compared to the previous study sample (Chen, Gdovka, Hall, 2019). The young participants tended to utilize Instagram (43.3%) and Twitter (38.9%) to discuss and follow the athletic news and information far more often than Facebook (15.8%). This finding was completely opposite for the older fans in terms of preferable social media platform. A similar result was also found by Clavio and Walsh's (2014) in which the researchers concluded that when trying to communicate with students via social media, messages and approaches needed to be presented in different fashions, as well as the choice of platform.

Discussion

Many marketing textbooks indicate that traditional media such as newspapers and radio still play an important role in promoting collegiate athletics (Mullins et al, 2014). The reality is that demographics of college sports fan base is still dominated by individuals over 40 years old (Johnson, 2017; Notte, 2017). However, the results had guided us to use social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram as communication tools to reach out to students effectively. Among the Southeastern Conference schools, Twitter and Facebook had proven to be powerful and popular communication platforms particularly in prompting women's basketball teams' stories and game information (Chen, Duncan, Street, & Hesterburg, 2016). It is believed that the popularity and pervasiveness of Instagram use will also rise drastically in the near future.

The researchers observed a unique phenomenon based on the findings. As Gwinner and colleagues had stated (2003), word-of-mouth behaviors remained as a critical method for college students to learn/hear about the sporting events. The researchers recognized this phenomenon was a simple and direct reflection of human behavior. Students who lived in the campus community and conducted a lot of studies and social activities together would naturally share the news and invite each other to attend the sporting events. In fact, this is the essence of what social media is all about. Different forms of social media apps are literally just tools. The actual important function of social interaction and caring is about people physically sharing their desire and thoughts with others through their actions (i.e., talking, posting, and tweeting).

The researchers assumed the institutions' athletic program had come to the crossroad to face the new-and-old dilemma. Although displaying game information and promotions in newspapers, print-materials and on radio broadcasting were viewed as the standard ways to communicate, these methods had obvious limitations in terms of frequencies of showing and visibility. On the contrary, social media is a faster tool to reach a multitude of audiences with no time restriction for sharing the information and little amount of cost. More important, it is probably the most receptive way for the athletic program to communicate with the students. Traditionally, student fans had been neglected by the athletic departments because they were not the primary demographics who paid a lot of money for tickets, parking, and concession items. The financial-driven business practice probably made most athletic departments focus on the needs of alumni, donors, sponsors and community fans; thus, far less effort was done to promote the games to the students which led to the decrease of student attendance.

In addition to the use of Facebook and Twitter, many lucrative and prominent Division-I athletic programs incorporate streaming and video-highlights for their fans to access if they cannot physically attend the game. The streaming feature can be included in either a social media platform, such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram or through ESPN+ or the streaming network. At this moment, the researcher's institution had less than 33% of fans utilizing streaming feature at all. We hope more practical strategies for developing video contents and messages

to enhance student event attendance and engagement can be developed and implemented.

Implications and Recommendations

As the scholars stated, the future is online (Clavio, 2013). Indeed, the majority of individuals have a computer, smart phone, or tablet. Even older fans still may follow many different platforms of social media. The importance of engaging fans of all age groups in multiple platforms, improving interactive capabilities and improvising more video and streaming contents through apps are keys to successfully grow college sports fan bases. Now is a critical time for athletic departments to fully adapt to new communication technology and gradually shift marketing efforts from the traditional media to social media.

Based on the results of this study, it is this author's suggestion that athletic programs create employment or internship positions to further generate and monitor promotional and informational content in social media platforms. This suggestion does not necessarily mean athletic programs completely abandon any advertisement in newspapers or on radio broadcasting; it is more about shifting the focus and encouraging all different types of fans to follow the athletic information and messages through multiple forms of media. It is suggested that those hired individuals work on increasing the volume of shared messages and contents on the social media sites. It is also important to improve the interactive features of various sources of platforms related to athletic contents and information. The bottom line is to have an inclusive official website that connects to all different social media platforms. Additionally, It is also important to have a social media site for each individual sport team that is affiliated with the athletic program. All the individual sports team information might do well if it were linked back to the official website and central social media hub. If this demand is still a tall order to fulfill, then at least popular teams such as football, men's and women's basketball, and volleyball should have their own social media accounts. Fans may follow their favorite team by entering the individual team's social media site. The central athletic account can harbor key event information and advertisements (especially the discounts and game-day promotions) so that followers will not be bombarded with numerous similar messages or too much information that cause them to be overwhelmed.

In terms of future investigations, researchers should expand the use of line polling to gather valuable information for improving existing services and generating discussions. This study helped the athletic program to recognize the main channels for communicating with the students. It would be beneficial to conduct future studies on the analyses of posts and contents in social media platforms, which help the program track down the volume of shared information related to event promotions. Merely witnessing how the posted stories and messages have changed the program's image is not enough. It is vital to investigate how the shared promotional messages and advertisements directly correlated to the increase of attendance and sales.

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