Understanding NCAA Division I Football Coaches’ Use of Twitter: A Content Analysis of Coach Tweets

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The online social network Twitter has grown exponentially since its launch in 2006. As of February 2012, 15% of online adults use Twitter, and 8% do so on a typical day. The proportion of online adults who use Twitter on a typical day has doubled since May 2011 and has quadrupled since late 2010. (Pew Research Center, 2012) Twitter is a social media platform that has become a recognized marketing tool in the sports industry with coaches, athletes, leagues, teams, and owners utilizing it to create an interactive online presence. Its exponential growth has led many sport communication scholars to examine how Twitter is used in the sports industry from the perspective of collegiate student-athletes, professional athletes, sport organizations, and sport consumers. (e.g., Hambrick, 2012; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010) However, there has been little research that has focused on coaches’ use of Twitter. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the content of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I head football coaches’ tweets and explore the communication exchanges between coaches, athletes and fans.

Previous Studies

Hambrick et al’s study (2010) focused on tweets of professional athletes. The study results found that Twitter is used as a platform for athletes to have direct interpersonal communication with friends and fans, and to engage in non-sport-related activities. Only 5% of the tweets were promotional in nature, implying that professional athletes are not taking advantage of the promotional opportunities Twitter may offer (Hambrick et al., 2010). Pegoraro’s study (2010) investigated tweets of athletes over a seven day period to see what they were saying. Similar to the previous study, the author found that athletes predominantly talk about their personal lives and responded to fans’ inquiries (Pegoraro, 2010). The results of these studies are clear indications that Twitter is a powerful tool for increasing the reciprocal interactions between fans and athletes.

College Football Coaches

Twitter is the front runner of social media platforms that sports stakeholders utilize in the sports market (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Athletes, coaches, leagues, and broadcasters from an array of sports maintain a Twitter presence with the power to immediately disseminate messages to fans. On October 28, 2013, University of Tennessee head coach Butch Jones became the third college football coach to exceed 100,000 followers on Twitter. There are 28 NCAA Division I head football coaches that have over 20,000 followers on Twitter (UTSports, 2013).

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory is described by Katz (1974) as “an attempt to explain something of the way in which individuals use communications, among other resources in the environment, to satisfy their needs and to achieve their goals, and to do so by simply asking them” (p. 21) Individuals with diverse social and psychological influences will form opinions about different types of media and the potential benefits as they will then choose to utilize a particular medium which will result in gratification and other occurrences (Clavio, 2008). The popularity of Uses and Gratifications theory stems from its ability to better illustrate motives for areas as varied as personal hobbies and political events (Ruggiero, 2000). Uses and Gratifications theory applied to online social networks like Twitter may help explain Twitter’s extensive growth in society as well as the sports industry. Therefore the following research questions will be employed:

RQ1: How do NCAA Division I football coaches use Twitter?

RQ2: Do NCAA Division I football coaches use Twitter differently than other previously examined groups?
Methodology

NCAA Division I college football coaches’ tweets will be examined. A sample of Twitter accounts will be drawn from cross-referencing current coaches listed on the NCAA database with Twitter accounts that are verified as belonging to the head coach. Head football coaches with Twitter accounts from the FBS and FCS divisions will be randomly selected for inclusion in the study.

The total number of head football coaches in Division I is 248, with 123 FCS coaches and 125 FBS coaches. After removing from consideration all coaches without a Twitter account, the total sample was reduced to 39 FCS and 90 FBS coaches. Stratified random sampling will be used to ensure that the selected tweets will be representative of Division I football. In each championship division, every fifth coach will be selected randomly for inclusion in the study. In all, Twitter accounts of 25 coaches will be analyzed (FBS = 18 and FCS = 7), representing a 20% sample of the population. Similar to the Hambrick et al. (2010) study, the 50 most recent tweets will be chosen from each coach’s Twitter account. In total, 1,250 tweets will be used.

Content analysis will be employed to categorize and analyze the tweets. The technique is defined as “any qualitative and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 453). Content analysis is commonly used to analyze various types of communications. Researchers have used the technique extensively in sport to study sports-related advertising in a variety of contexts, including celebrity athlete endorsements (Jones & Schumann, 2000; Stone, Joseph, & Jones, 2003), and advertising content of Super Bowl commercials (Kelley & Turley, 2004). To ensure intercoder reliability, coders will be provided with instructions, and will code the same five randomly selected accounts. Once intercoder reliability is established, the coder will be randomly assigned the remaining accounts for coding. Coder will code each tweet independently into one of six categories that were developed based on motives predictive of online sport consumption in two studies. Seo and Green (2008) examined the motives for using sports-related Web sites, and Clavio (2008) studied the use of intercollegiate athletics message boards. The categories derived from the two previous studies and used in the current study were interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content, fanship, and promotional. Other factors coded will include school division, location, number of Twitter account followers, length of time on Twitter, number of followers, number of accounts followed, and total number of tweets. Statistical analysis, including frequency analysis and ANOVA, will be applied to the data for further evaluation.