Tweeting to Bridge the Gap: A Collaborative Netnography of the NASSM 2015 Social Media Correspondents

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Alongside the growth of sport management programs (cf. Jones, Brooks, & Mak, 2008; Weese, 2002) has been a continued interest in developing techniques to enhance learning. From innovative pedagogies (e.g., Dixon, 2008; Mallen, Bradish, & MacLean, 2008; Pierce & Middendorf, 2008) to analyzing curricula (e.g., Eagleman & McNary, 2010), the sport management academe has continually sought new strategies by which to manufacture successful student experiences. Yet, despite these internal examinations, the belief that students are academically disengaged and that more opportunities are required to better engage undergraduate students (cf. Behar-Horenstien, Roberts, & Dix, 2010; Pauline, 2013). While some have discussed outside-the-classroom activities as a means of increasing student engagement (e.g., Pate & Shonk, 2015; Pegoraro, Seguin, O’Reilly, & Harrington, 2008), sport management scholars have not yet understood the value of digital pedagogies in connecting with their students in a non-classroom setting. While Lebel, Danylchuk, and Millar (2015) did develop an initial discussion regarding social media use by sport management faculty as a means of enhancing the teaching environment, more research is required to assess the value of social media as a means of engaging sport management students outside of the classroom. Moreover, given that scholarship has identified repeated faculty-student interactions as a stimulant of increased academic engagement and academic success (Komarraju, Sergey, & Garagi, 2010), social media may serve as the catalyst to connect sport management students with faculty and the academe at large. As such, the purpose of this study is to assess the degree to which the sport management academe can build and foster connections with students, in a non-classroom setting, using digital tools (e.g., social media).

Within sport management pedagogy, there has been a push to advance student engagement towards active learning using practical experiences (cf. Dees & Hall, 2012). Whether through case studies (e.g., Dixon, 2008), client-based projects (e.g., Pegoraro et al., 2008), or service learning (e.g., Light & Dixon, 2007), these opportunities allow students to apply learned concepts to practical situations. However, these experiences also have a positive effect on student perceptions of scholarship and the sport management academe (cf. Sartore-Baldwin & Quatman-Yates, 2012). As such, innovative active learning exercises should be sought out to influence students’ understanding of sport management scholars and their research. With the advancement of digital communications, social media presents one avenue by which students may learn and connect with the sport management academe.

Today’s millennial student has been heavily exposed to technological advancements like social media which have impacted their preferences of learning and communication, particularly with respect to increased interactivity (cf. Wiliams & Chinn, 2009). Indeed, scholars have identified the power social media has to heighten sport management student education moving forward (e.g., Lebel et al., 2015). However, this sentiment exists within the confines of the classroom. There is the potential for sport management to harness social media beyond the classroom setting to increase engagement between scholars and students (cf. O’Boyle, 2014). Thus, given that sport management has increased its use of practical, active experiences for students, and the current understanding that many students are “digitally native” (Prensky, 2001), sport management educators should seek out opportunities beyond the classroom using social media to increase student engagement in the academe.

The present, collaborative netnographic study illuminates the way in social media can be utilized to create an active learning experience beyond the classroom, connecting students with the sport management academe. Simply put, netnographies are ethnographic methods applied to online communities (Kozinets, 2002). As such, netnographies have been considered to achieve the same standards of quality as an ethnographic study including immersive depth and persistent conversation (Kozinets, 2006). While netnographic research is scarce in sport management,
ethnographic studies are not. Most recently, Kerwin and Hoeber (2015) and Hoeber and Kerwin (2013) have offered insight into personal reflection vis-à-vis ethnographic research. In both cases, the authors identify a collaborative ethnographic approach as one that can extend ethnographic research in sport management as it incorporates “different contexts and personal worldviews” (Kerwin & Hoeber, 2015, p. 500). Thus, for this study, we utilize netnography as posited by Kozinets (2002, 2006) with a collaborative approach (cf. Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Kerwin & Hoeber, 2015).

Using this method, we inserted two undergraduate sport management students (also the lead researchers) into the digital communications portfolio of the NASSM 2015 conference. The students were tasked with engaging with the sport management academe using Twitter, a popularized social media platform. In addition to helping promote, develop awareness, and curate content for the @NASSM2015 Twitter account, the two students were fully immersed in the experience as they used their own personal Twitter accounts, thereby allowing them to connect, communicate, and become acknowledged members of the NASSM community online (cf. Kozinets, 2006). Both students kept weekly journals detailing their thoughts and reflections on their individual experiences, which followed by a debrief post-conference with each other and the graduate student advising them.

As a result of our methodological design, the students noted a positive engagement with the sport management academe. Both students explained that several delegates of the NASSM 2015 conference would “follow” their Twitter accounts prior to the conference, beginning with one-way engagement (e.g., favouriting, retweeting) eventually advancing into two-way engagement (e.g., replies). As one of the students indicated, Twitter provided an opportunity for naturalization into the academe as they were “introduced” to sport management faculty and students from various institutions on the social media platform. The results suggest that the Twitter activities helped to reduce the stigma of approaching faculty and even resulted in faculty members approaching the students to compliment them on their efforts. However, in the post-conference period, students noted that their engagement with the academe decreased significantly.

As this study demonstrates, social media can be utilized to initiate relationships between undergraduate students and the broader sport management academe, similar to Lebel et al.’s (2015) contention. Indeed, Twitter provided a level of comfort to students and assisted in their engagement with the academe in a non-classroom setting. Yet, the specific experiences of the students in this study illustrate the need to develop long-term opportunities for social media engagement to help sustain the relationships forged and continue to bridge the gap between students and the academe. Opportunities that have longer lifecycles such as department Twitter accounts or service learning in the community (cf. Light & Dixon, 2007) might allow for such engagement to persist over time. However, given the expectation of millennial students to engage using new technological tools (Williams & Chinn, 2009), there remains an expectation of the students that once social media connects them to the academe that they will maintain those interactions once the opportunity (i.e., NASSM 2015 in this case) has ceased.

The study bears limitations and offers future directions. The study was also confined to Twitter and there could have been diverging opinions of social media engagement elsewhere (e.g., Facebook). Future studies should consider a longitudinal approach to sport management conference experiences, school/department accounts, and multi-platform experiences.