The Effect of Viral Media Content on College Athletics

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Social media can be used as part of an effective relationship marketing strategy in college sport (Dixon, Martin, & Martinez, 2015). Specifically, social media has been associated with stronger connections with customers (Griffiths, 2008) improved image and larger fan base (Doran, Cooper, & Mihalik, 2015; Kuzma, Bell, & Logue, 2014). In the context of college athletics where marketing budgets are limited and “non-revenue” sports abound, social media is increasingly used to achieve important business goals through “marketing of products, revenue making capabilities and the branding of the institution” (Miller, 2016, p. 12).

The platforms used to distribute social media (e.g. YouTube, Twitter, Facebook) have created an opportunity for virality among social media content where virality is defined as “unpaid peer-to-peer communication of provocative content originating from an identified sponsor using the Internet to persuade or influence an audience to pass along the content to others” (Tsai & Hsiang-Ming, 2014, p. 294). Guadagno, Rempala, Murphy, & Okdie (2013) argue that a viral video consists of content comprised of strong affective response, whereas Mohr (2013) believes content that is easily memorable, shareable, and surrounded by word-of-mouth drama creates virality. Examples of viral content include videos of Sophina DeJesus’ Floor Routine, the Harlem Shake, Jack Hoffman’s 69-yard touchdown in the Nebraska Spring Game, and the Maryland Running Man Challenge, with the latter accumulating over 22 million views. Given the success of these videos, marketers increasingly position their account or video to “go viral” based on the assumption that virality is more positive and more effective than non-viral social content.

While we have presented research on both social media marketing's effectiveness in collegiate athletics and what leads to the spread of viral videos, there is a gap in the research on the effect of these viral videos on college athletic programs. While research has identified the many positive effects of social media engagement, there are also areas of concern (e.g. Abeza et al., 2013). Thus, the objective of this exploratory, qualitative investigation is to determine the impact of viral content of collegiate teams on their athletic program. In this way we answer the call of Dixon et al. (2015) for more research on the “effectiveness of social media as part of the overall marketing strategy and in accomplishing organizational objectives of sport organizations” (p. 99).

The population for this study was U.S. universities that experienced viral social media content created by, and involving, athletes or coaches. In line with our exploratory and qualitative objectives, we utilized purposive sampling to contact 16 Sport Information Directors (SIDs) as key informants and conducted a nine-question, semi-structured interview. Five interviews have been completed and more are in progress.

Questions included general solicitation of the impact of viral content on the athletic program in term of both positive and negative outcomes. Additional questions included the impact on various outcome variables identified in the literature review.

Five themes unfolded from the interviews: social media following, popularity, awareness, attendance, and negativity. Social media following was defined as the number of views, likes, and/or followers on any platform of social media, including but not limited to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. We defined popularity by the increase of any amount in positive affection or likeness of an athletic team or player. Attendance was defined by the amount of spectators at a given sporting event. Awareness was defined as increased knowledge of their athletic program by word of mouth or any other form of increased attention to the team. We classified negativity as any form of distraction, non-positive feedback, or detrimental actions affecting the team in any way.
Viral media content had the biggest impact on social media followers, awareness, and popularity. Of note, attendance was rarely impacted and negative effects did occur suggesting that viral content isn’t necessarily a guaranteed benefit for college athletic programs. Also of note were timing effects (in-season v. out-of-season) and the sport-specific nature of the impacts.

In a world where social media is less expensive, more interactive, improves relationships, builds larger fan base, and improves brand image (Doran et al., 2015) it is important to determine the outcomes of viral videos and whether it is worth it to continue investing in this growing form of relationship marketing. Indeed, while SIDs reported that viral content can be organic, there are now instances of universities copying other schools to develop their own viral content. Given this growth in purposeful virality as a part of the marketing mix, it is increasingly important that we understand the potential outcomes of such viral content. This research study attempts to fill that gap and will present complete results in May 2016.