2020 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2020)

Who Won the March Madness Bracket in Social Media?

Hyun-Woo Lee, Texas A&M University
Sanghoon Kim, Texas A&M University
Chanwook Do, Texas A&M University
Emily M. Newell, University of Southern Maine

Marketing - Other (College Sport) virtual asynchronous
Poster Session: Poster Session III
Abstract 2020-211

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Men’s basketball Tournament, also known and branded as NCAA March Madness, is a single-elimination tournament played each spring in the United States. This tournament is the most profitable postseason television deal across the sport leagues and events in the United States (Ozanian, 2019), and 90% of the NCAA budget comes from March Madness profits (Matheson & Baade, 2004). Moreover, March Madness attracts considerable attention not only in mainstream media, but also across social media platforms.

Social media has become an imperative set of platforms for sport organizations to utilize to engage, interact, and connect with their fan community. Hence, data analytics for social engagement has gained significant research attention (e.g., Watanabe, Yan, & Soebbing, 2016). In this study, changes in followers on Twitter for each team competing in the 2019 March Madness tournament were tracked. Based on existing literature, there were nine predictors for changes in followers identified: win/loss in each round; status as a favorite/underdog; ranking difference between competing teams; tournament round of the game; previous participation in the tournament; participation in the tournament the previous year; previous final four appearance; undergraduate student enrollment; and academic ranking of the school.

Following the tournament schedule, data was collected daily from March 20th through April 9th. For the dependent variable, the difference in followers—both positive and negative—was calculated for each team by subtracting the number of followers on the day previous to game day from the day after game day. Percent of follower change was calculated to account for differences in initial followership across schools. Other predictor information was retrieved from the official website of NCAA championships and 2019 Final Four Records Book.

Multiple regression was conducted. Durbin-Watson statistics showed independence of residuals, and VIF and tolerance scores indicated that there was no multicollinearity issue in data. The first two rounds were analyzed in Model 1, and teams that advanced to the NCAA Sweet 16 were analyzed in Model 2. There were no missing data for each model. The predictors in the models explained 46.2% and 84.9% of the variability in each team’s follower changes, respectively. In Model 1, win/loss, ranking difference, previous participation, previous year participation, previous final four appearance, and school ranking were statistically significant. In Model 2, win/loss, favorite/underdog, round of the game, and previous final four appearance were statistically significant. Effect sizes varied from small to moderate.

Social media such as Twitter or Facebook can be effective tools to anticipate and understand consumers’ perceptions and reactions before, during, and after events. For instance, sport fans discuss or express their opinions about sport teams, athletes, or sporting events on social media consistently. The results of this study highlight how game results, expectations based on previous performance, and expectations based on school characteristics can predict the change in followers on Twitter. As fan engagement varied based on different predictors for early and later rounds, implications for marketers and social media account managers will be discussed in the presentation.