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Game-Changer: A Case Study of Social-Media Strategy in Big Ten Athletic Departments

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CASE STUDY

Game-Changer: A Case Study of Social-Media Strategy in Big Ten Athletic Departments

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Abstract

This study used a case study approach to develop an understanding of how social media strategy is developed and deployed in Big Ten Conference athletic departments and to explore the issues associated with it. Based on in-depth interviews with department officials, the following six themes emerged: connecting with target audiences; varied approaches in coordination of postings; athletic communications as content gatekeepers; desire to incorporate sponsors and generate revenue; focusing on building fan loyalty through engagement; and challenges of negativity and metrics. The social media strategy in Big Ten Conference athletic departments appears to be driven by athletic communications/sports information departments as opposed to marketing departments. The greatest benefit of social media has been the ease of engagement and instantaneous connection between fans and the teams they love, which can lead to building greater loyalty to a team. Some of the challenges departments face include having to deal with the reality of crises and negative attention around programs more quickly than with traditional media and to measure social media success accurately.

Keywords: social media, Big Ten Conference, crisis management, branding, measurement, college athletics

Once considered an unproven and risky medium in the world of marketing and communications, social media tools have enjoyed an intense rise in usage and popularity among both individuals and businesses. Marked by a profoundly interactive and community-based feel, consumer brands ranging from Starbucks to JP Morgan Chase have embraced social media strategies and tactics (Miloch, Wallace, & Wilson, 2011; Morrissey, 2007).

Athletic departments have long searched for new and innovative ways to generate revenue for their programs (Weaver, 2011). Although the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) distributed $527.4 million of its nearly $913 million in total revenue to Division I universities in fiscal year 2013 (Berkowitz, 2014), athletic programs across the nation generate additional funds from ticket sales, television contracts, institutional funds, students fees, and state appropriations to cover their costs (Knight Commission, 2014). Social media play an important role in this quest for more revenue, providing brand exposure, fan interaction, and increased awareness of events at a relatively low cost to departments (Stoldt, 2012). Many of the largest and most profitable athletic departments are members of the Big Ten Conference. This conference

reported $315 million in revenue for fiscal year 2012, which is $50 million more than the previous year and $42 million more than the Southeastern Conference. As noted by Berkowitz, part of the Big Ten Conference's increase in revenue comes from the annual profit share generated by the Big Ten Network. One of the most prestigious conferences in the nation, the Big Ten Conference includes 12 Division I-A universities – Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Michigan State, Minnesota, Nebraska, Northwestern, Ohio State, Penn State, Purdue, and Wisconsin – and will add Maryland and Rutgers in 2014 (Zinser, 2012). The sheer sizes of many Big Ten Conference institutions lends to massive fan and alumni bases that stretch around the world. According to the Big Ten Conference (2012), more than 10 million fans attended home conference games in 2011-12 for football, men's and women's basketball, and volleyball.

Scholars have started to investigate how social media are used in sport communication. Several studies have been conducted to analyze the content or numbers of posts from athletic departments, conferences or professional athletes, or have attempted to gauge fan interaction with such posts (Clavio, 2011; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell 2011; Miloch et al., 2011; Pegoraro, 2011). However, no studies currently exist that investigate the strategy behind athletic departments' social media efforts. Therefore, the researchers used a case study approach to develop an understanding of the essence of social media strategy developed and deployed in Big Ten athletic departments and to explore the issues associated with it. In particular, the researchers attempted to understand what the participants experienced with social media strategy in their respective programs and how they experienced it.

Literature Review

The "Back Stage" Sensation

One of the most alluring features of social media is that it can give sports fans an inside look at their favorite programs and access to behind-the-scenes information. However, Page (2012) notes that even behind-the-scenes posts are generally staged and thus controlled forms of communication for fans. This back stage sensation is capable of drawing fans in and enhancing the ties they feel to the teams and athletes they cheer for. The presumed transparency offered by social media is able to draw a personal connection that traditional media often lack (Pegoraro, 2011). The sense that an individual is the recipient of exclusive or never-before-seen information is often precisely what a hungry fan desires.

Professional athletes are some of the most avid providers of back stage information. Hambrick et al. (2011) found that tweets (posts made from the social media website Twitter) sent for interactivity or divertive purposes accounted for 62% of the total tweets examined in the research. Pegoraro (2011) found comparable results in the context of sporting leagues, which devoted at least 17% of their tweets to fan interaction. At the collegiate level, such back stage interaction can be limited due to rules set in place by individual athletic programs and coaching staffs. Therefore, nearly every major athletic department in the nation has an in-house monitoring system of some type set up to supervise the social activities of student-athletes. Many even resort to in-season social media bans for student-athletes (Fittipaldo, 2012). The high level of

social media monitoring at the collegiate level often leaves a great deal of the social communication to public relations and marketing professionals in athletic departments.

Engagement, Interactivity, and Two-Way Communication

According to Stoldt (2012), 92% of sports information directors agreed or strongly agreed that social media has shifted the way their organizations communicate, while 89% said social media has changed how programs communicate with external entities. Sports are inherently engaging, providing the kind of rapid-fire excitement that can only come with massive and entertaining athletic events. Social media gives organizations the opportunity to tell the interesting tales about the many personalities on a team (Weaver, 2011), satiating their fans' cravings for more information about their teams on and off the playing field.

This interactive element can be thought of as shifting the public relations role of an athletic department from a one-way to a two-way flow of communication. Traditional media often presented information to publics in a one-way flow that left little room for the creation of conversation or community (Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012). Through the advent of different forms of social media, fans are able to respond to organizations and engage with other fans on the topics at hand instantly. Increasingly, fans report that they choose to log into social media networks and interact with others while they watch a sporting event (Broughton, 2012). At the same time, journalists and news organizations have also adapted to the new technologies at their fingertips, using them both as a source of information-gathering as well as a way to transmit information to followers (Sanderson & Hambrick).

Athletic departments are communicating with internal and external stakeholders, including fans, recruits, ranking organizations, local and national media and more (Clavio, 2011). The amount of interactivity is also highly variable and can be affected by a team's record. Avid social media users state they are more likely to engage in the conversation when their team is winning or has won a contest (Broughton, 2012).

Community Building

While the old standard of connecting fans with their favorite teams was reporting scores and standings, the new standard is building communities (Weaver, 2011). Many types of social media have created the tools necessary to craft and share new and different information with other fans. These online resources provide a place for "niche" audiences with specific interests to gather and discuss the team or sport that unites them (Clavio, 2011; McCarthy, 2011). Fans are now able to not only consume content, but respond to it, discuss it with other fans and create content of their own (Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012), which is how online fan communities are built.

Relevance and Brand Building

Social media play an important role in brand building, including engagement, immediacy and community. Each element contributes to the brand in unique ways. For example, engagement

and two-way communication may assist in creating feelings of loyalty to an organization among fans (Miloch et al., 2011). Athletic departments are also able to leverage brand-building factors in creating a sense of exclusivity among fans, often by highlighting elements of the game day experience, such as stadiums, rivalries, etc.

It is important to recognize that the importance of a strong athletic brand is also important for the university as a whole. A solid brand identity can boost an institution's visibility and reputation on a national scale (Estler & Nelson, 2005), which can have an effect on the perceptions that outsiders and insiders hold about the level of prestige that a particular institution maintains (Clopton & Finch, 2012).

Immediacy

The idea of immediacy refers to the fast-paced environment created both in the world of social media (Page, 2012) and in the world of sports (Battenfield, 2013). The rapid-fire exchange and flow of information makes the social media world both very helpful to fans and often quite challenging for organizations. Many organizations were hesitant to adopt social media early on because of its inherent dangers related to the speed and unpredictability. One irresponsible tweet can ignite a firestorm of controversy across the national media. Because of such risks, some coaches and administrators have elected to levy in-season social media bans on athletes to minimize distractions (Fittipaldo, 2012). Battenfield noted that the increasing dependency on the Internet promoted a culture of immediacy as shown by the shift from paper to electronic message distribution in sports information offices. He found that sports communicators spend so much time producing artifacts for various stakeholders in an environment that requires immediacy that they tend to operate in virtual anonymity.

Immediacy also creates problems for organizations. Sanderson and Hambrick's (2012) study on journalists' use of Twitter during the breaking of the Jerry Sandusky scandal at Penn State indicated how social media has changed the way organizations respond to crisis situations. News broke first and fastest on Twitter from the beginning of the scandal, though sometimes without regard to accuracy. With the incredible speed at which information can now travel, organizations must be prepared to respond to situations faster than ever before. At the same time, athletic departments are able to use social media to their advantage as well. The vast majority of sports information directors indicate that social media has impacted their organization's transparency overall while also giving them a launching pad from which to respond to traditional media when necessary (Stoldt, 2012).

Method

Research Design

A qualitative research design was used for this study because not much was known about the essence of social media strategy from the perspective of Big Ten Conference athletic department officials (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A case study explores an issue through one or more cases

within a bounded system and reports a case description and case-based themes (Creswell, 2007).

The participants of this study were part of a bounded system in that each of them used social media for controlled communication purposes of their respective athletic departments in the Big Ten Conference. This case study used a phenomenological approach, in which the researcher seeks to discover the essence or the central underlying meaning of an experience (Creswell, 1998). Bracketing is an important component of the phenomenological research process, which requires the researcher to set aside his or her beliefs and perceptions in an effort to be more open to issues (Tufford & Newman, 2010). One of the researchers in this study had professional ties to one of the collegiate athletic programs included in this study but attempted to bracket those experiences. Bracketing can also facilitate "the researcher reaching deeper levels of reflection across all stages of qualitative research" (p. 81), including the selection of the topic and population as well as data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Sample

A purposive sample of four Big Ten Conference athletic department officials participated in this study, which is considered appropriate for a qualitative study (Creswell, 2007). After obtaining IRB approval for the study, the researchers compiled an initial list of Big Ten Conference athletic department officials from each program's public website to determine which officials from each school would be invited to participate. Potential participants were selected based on how closely their job related to the social media strategy of each individual athletic program, including individuals from athletic marketing and sports information departments. Ten were invited to the study and four of those agreed to participate. All four participants had significant experience in social media strategy at their respective institutions. Of those who did not participate in the study, one declined and the other five did not respond to initial invitations to participate.

Procedure

In-depth phone interviews were conducted with the participants over the period of two months. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim and each participant was assigned an alias to maintain confidentiality. Interviews lasted an average of 23 minutes and proceeded until no new themes emerged. Participants were asked to verbally respond to a set of 16 openended questions (Appendix), which were designed to elicit responses to two broad, general research questions (Moustakas, 1994):

RQ1: What did the participants experience in terms of social media strategy in the context of their specific collegiate athletic program?

RQ2: What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected their experiences of social media strategy in their specific athletic program?

Data Analysis

The researchers followed Moustakas' (1994) method to analyze the data, including horizontalization, clusters of meaning, textural and structural descriptions, and a narrative of the

essence of social media strategy at their institution. The first step involved horizontalization. During this phase, the researchers read the transcripts several times to obtain a general sense of what each respondent said and to identify significant statements and phrases that pertained directly to social media strategy in Big Ten Conference athletic programs. The goal of this first step was to give each element equal value, allowing the researcher to see things differently (Moustakas). Next, the researchers developed clusters of meaning from the significant statements and themes. The statements and themes were integrated into an in-depth, exhaustive, textural description of the concept under investigation. In addition, they were used to write a structural description of the context that influenced how the participants expressed their experiences with social media strategy. Finally, the researchers developed a composite description that represents the invariant structure (essence) of social media strategy at Big Ten Conference athletic departments, focusing on the common experiences of the participants (Moustakas).

Methods for Verification

Methodological rigor was obtained by applying Moustakas' (1994) procedures of data analysis, including a description of the overall essence of the experience of the participants as well as a description of the experiences and the contexts in which they occurred. In addition, the researchers included rich, thick descriptions in the narrative, which allow readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred to those settings (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

Results

Description of Respondents

Officials A and B identified as liaison between their athletic department's marketing and athletic communications departments. Officials C and D identified as sole members of athletic communications staffs. Officials gained their positions of prominence in social media strategy through different means: Official A moved internally to the newly created position, official B had the duty added to pre-existing duties, and officials C and D spearheaded their respective department's efforts in addition to pre-existing duties. All four participants indicated they use Facebook, Twitter, and Google+, with three of them also working with Pinterest, two with YouTube, one with Tumblr and another one with Foursquare.

Theme 1: Connecting with Target Audiences

Participants were asked to discuss the audiences they communicate with on social media. Officials' observations about target audiences varied. Official A noted, "the demographic changes depending on which social media you're talking about," meaning that each platform tends to draw different age groups and fans with differing interests. For example, Facebook is "very, very broad" and provides fans with "general fan information," focusing on major sports. Twitter users, however, comprise a smaller group that is "information hungry." Official A also noted that

the Twitter page is used to disseminate official statistics that are notable and useful to both fans and the media, providing information and communications to an audience beyond the average fan. Official B added that part of the difficulty of identifying a target audience lies within the sheer volume of posts that each athletic department generates across all platforms. Official B emphasized that the top focus is the average fan. "We want to get ticket-buyers, we want to get folks for promotions and products…my main focus is the fans. It's not for media purposes; it's not for donor purposes. It's for our everyday 'Joe or Jane' fan." Official C tied University C's social media strategy to part of a larger, department-wide strategy designed to sell tickets and increase attendance: "We are trying to capture fans in the […] area who might not necessarily be University C fans, University C alums, but they're college football fans, they're college basketball fans. We want them to come and realize there's Big Ten football here in their backyard." Official D identified the importance of reaching a younger demographic, which uses social media much more heavily than the department's website. Three of the four officials also said they use social media for social listening. As Official A stated, "It's a very unscientific way, but it is a way to get a pulse on your fan base, to know how they're feeling and know when something might be worth addressing and when something might be better just to ignore it."

Theme 2: Varied Approaches in Coordination of Postings

While some corporations may have an individual or small team designated to coordinate all their social media efforts, athletic departments may have multiple entities contributing to their social media across different platforms. Athletic communications, marketing, individual teams and coaching staffs all have a vested interest and demands to meet through their social media usage. University A and University B's strategies were most similar, with both pulling together committees on a weekly basis to coordinate efforts of social media communications.

> The purpose of the team is to [determine]…what the schedule is for posting, what [the] types of posting are, [and] who's responsible for what type of posting, particularly for events… We sit down and lay out which of our social media accounts we're going to actively use for an event and we assign duties for each person to perform (Official A).

University C also employs a weekly plan that is executed by multiple individuals but it is coordinated by one person. Because University C coordinates its strategy directly from athletic communications, this approach coordinates those different sports together under one director. University D executes a plan that combines both of the previous approaches, utilizing an annual strategy meeting combined with day-to-day execution that is left to individual sport contacts. "We meet in the fall and come up with a social media plan—primarily for Facebook. We let Twitter go to sport contacts."

Theme 3: Athletic Communications as Content Gatekeepers

The uniqueness of the many facets of an intercollegiate athletic department means that each program has multiple accounts, including main account pages, separate accounts for nearly every

varsity sport, personal coaching pages, and more. All four universities identified athletic communications staff members as the primary gatekeepers for these accounts, particularly with individual sport accounts. By creating these gatekeepers, information stays consistent and professional, and overlap between posts is eliminated.

> For the most part, the team pages are administered by the team contacts in the communications office for each sport, but works together with the marketing rep. [Marketing contacts] work through communications, just because our communications folks are the writers. I know social media language is a little looser, but I can assure you that grammatically, we're getting out stuff that is professional as well as fun (Official B).

It appears that most social media strategies and tactics are driven by sports communication offices instead of marketing offices. As Official C explained,

> Our [sports communication] programs […] are more active than the marketing department, and that's for recruiting purposes. Our coaches use different team accounts that they have for their purposes, so all of our varsity sports either have an account for that sport or for that coach.

Marketing departments tend to think of social media as channels for promotions but they integrate into the social media strategy that was developed by the sports communication offices. Official D stated that all content is developed by athletic communications. In contrast, accounts representing the entire department (ex. "University D Athletics") vary slightly in their approach. Official A described University A as running its "organizational" accounts primarily from a marketing standpoint: "I'd say it's probably primarily driven from the organizational account level by marketing. If I had to assign percentages, it'd probably be 60-40 [in favor of marketing]."

As the popularity of social media increases, officials noted that the sheer volume of content might create a burden. Official B noted, "It's amazing how it's catching fire, and you're getting more people involved. That's where I've seen the difference: it's just the approach, how much broader it is, how big it is now." At the same time, it is important to stay relevant and control the quality of the message. "As much as we want to get out and promote, we have to make sure that we're not killing ourselves with spam and becoming spam. We have to engage our audience, but also be courteous to them" (Official B).

Theme 4: Desire to Incorporate Sponsors and Generate Revenue

Driving revenue back into programs is a key part of any athletic department's goals. Social media in part presents a challenge because it is difficult to quantify any revenue a particular post may have contributed. A key component of revenue is the establishment of corporate sponsorships. As athletic departments draw sponsors into more parts of their promotional efforts, many

are still trying to find ways to connect social media postings with corporate sponsorships without interfering the conversation with fans. Contractual agreements sometimes force the hand of social media strategists, requiring them to draw in a sponsor in a way that they do not find beneficial.

> We're not going to partner with anyone, whether it's an official sponsor or anyone else, if we don't think it adds value to the conversation. There are a lot of sponsors that want to get involved in social media, but they don't necessarily know what that means and they're applying old paradigms of advertising to social media. We resist that pretty heavily (Official A).

Official B added, "They're running a campaign with stadium signage or maybe a website banner, and they'll get a throw-in with social media. That's something we want to get away from." Other athletic departments are still searching for the right ways to involve sponsors in their daily social media operations. Official D's department is currently not involving sponsors in its social media efforts, but believes it will be an important goal moving forward. "I think eventually we should probably have some sort of strategy of exactly what we are trying to get out of it. I think there is a way to bring your sponsors in without feeling that you are just throwing your ads at people."

Theme 5: Focusing on Building Loyalty through Engagement

Departments are working to build fan loyalty principally through engagement and interaction with fan bases with the hope that it will trickle down into other areas like merchandise sales. Participants speculated that their efforts in the virtual world might pan out into real-life results because of the value social media can add to the conversation. However, at the core of all social media efforts lies the fan experience:

> Our primary goal is to make sure fans are having a positive social media experience with University A athletics. We know there are plenty of places fans can go to talk about University A sports. We just want to make sure that we are there providing an official and positive voice and place for people to engage in those conversations (Official A).

At the same time, part of a positive fan experience is letting fans participate in and become part of the conversation:

> If you engage your fans and listen to them and let them participate, whether it be open-ended questions or polls, it gives people things to react to, and then they become part of it. That's where your fan loyalty builds organically, and that's where ticket sales come, and that's where merchandise sales come (Official B).

Official D recognized that the power of social media is about building meaningful relationships with fans. "Hopefully it'll provide some value and they [will] feel connected to that value." Alongside this idea of loyalty and building relationships came additional reflections on engagement and interaction. Official A particularly emphasized the way that the back stage effect of social media has changed the way University A communicates with its fan base, especially within the last few years. By revealing the behind-the-scenes aspects of sports to fans, social media has the ability to make fans feel more connected to a program while humanizing student-athletes.

> [Social media] has really allowed us to interact directly with our fans in a way we never would have been able to five years ago. I think that's a good thing, to be able to break that wall down and allow fans to interact with athletes and our broadcast personalities as people.

Official B emphasized the idea of engaging fans to create loyalty and instantaneous connections and communication:

> We're not able to keep up with everybody, but we interact with them as much as possible. That was my main thing to getting on Instagram. On Twitter, we need to interact more…we need to respond. It can't just be one-way. If it's two-way with a fan, I think that's where they become engaged and their fan loyalty builds because they know they're being heard. They're being respected.

Game-time interaction is a key component of social media strategy, and Official C discussed the importance of spreading their message through friend-to-friend engagement:

> We try to engage the fans that we have, especially during games, in monitoring what's going on with Twitter and responding or retweeting…and having a personality with it. [We hope] that we will be retweeted, our fans will talk about us and then their friends will then see that and engage as well.

Theme 6: Challenges of Negativity and Metrics

Official A wrapped up the challenges that social media presents most succinctly. "I would say that social media isn't good and it's not bad, it's just powerful." For all of its inherent advantages, social media presents a great deal of challenges that must be addressed by strategists. One of those challenges was dealing with negative comments and fan sentiment on social media platforms. "The one trouble thing I think all college and sports teams are dealing with is how to deal with negative news on social media. That's one that will probably continue…tweaking and working on ways to better manage negative publicity" (Official A). Official B recognized the need to be transparent even when responding to negative news.

> There's negativity and there's going to be negative comments, and it gives fans a voice on both ends. You have your positives and negatives. We need to respect our fans and when [we] make an announcement about something, that needs to go on our Facebook page.

There is also the obvious struggle of dealing with student-athletes with personal social media accounts. It is a concern that is dealt with on a regular basis in athletic departments, as noted by Official C. "From a branding standpoint, we see it all as opportunity and we're not too concerned about doing something social that's going to hurt our brand. We're worried about our studentathletes and how it's going to hurt their personal prospects."

One of the biggest challenges of social media is attempting to quantify its effectiveness as part of the communication process, especially as many methods are new and have yet to prove long-term effectiveness. The respondents in this study have attempted to measure the success of their efforts on a post-by-post basis and mostly based on reach. "Those benchmarks are always changing, but a few of them that I use pretty consistently are referral traffic to UniversityA.com [and] knowing how effectively we're able to push people back to UniversityA.com from some of that social stuff" (Official A). The respondents indicated that they still struggle trying to measure real engagement (two-way communication). As Official D stated,

> There's not really a way to track it, but I want to build up the audience to a certain extent. It is a matter of not only tracking our 'likes' and our followers, but also the engagement rate and making sure they stay loyal to us.

In the end, officials added that there's a great deal that can't be controlled with strategy. By keeping their sights focused on small-scale interaction, they believe their perspective stays intact. Official A explained:

> The important thing to remember about social media is [that] it's not all about what we're doing as a social media team. A lot of it is due to how the [sports] team is performing as well. It's easy to think you're doing everything right because you're getting huge follower counts. The problem is that when the team stumbles a little bit and you have a little bit of setback on social media, it can be disheartening. As long as fans are interacting with us, commenting on posts, retweeting, @ messaging us and having a conversation with us, then I know we are doing things well.

The Essence of Social Media Strategy in Big Ten Athletic Departments

The essence of social media strategy in Big Ten athletic departments describes what the participants experienced and how they experienced it (Creswell, 2007). The world of social media puts an array of ever-changing communication tools at the fingertips of strategists in collegiate athletic departments. In Big Ten athletic departments, social media strategy appears to be driven by athletic communications/sports information departments as opposed to marketing

departments. However, there is no set, tried-and-true, perfect strategy with social media. The greatest benefit has been the ease of engagement and instantaneous connection between fans and the teams they love. This engagement is a connecting point that organizations can use to build greater loyalty to a team or program. There are also challenges to social media strategy: organizations must deal with the reality of negative attention around programs and the necessity to deal with crises faster than with traditional media. In the future, organizations are likely to seek ways to measure the success rate of their communications with stronger metrics, as well as finding ways to monetize social media use through the involvement of official sponsors.

Discussion

With the rapid rise of social media as a whole, athletic departments across the nation are increasingly facing challenges and opportunities related to providing information to fans and the media, cultivating relationships with stakeholders, and building brands. The purpose of this case study was to develop an understanding of how social media strategy is developed and deployed in Big Ten athletic departments and to explore the issues associated with it.

Officials discussed the difficulty of identifying an audience in the realm of social media: platforms reach vast audiences and each audience has unique wants and needs. Similarly, each platform has individual strengths that lend themselves to the sharing of certain types of information. This finding is consistent with Clavio's (2011) and McCarthy's (2011) assertion that social media is a gathering place for niche audiences with common interests. These platforms give athletic departments a connecting point to reach out to specific audiences— particularly their own fan bases. Connecting audiences with common interests to build communities is a priority in the world of social media as stated by Weaver (2011). These athletic departments are doing just that by splitting their efforts down on a sport-by-sport basis through the creation and management of individual sport pages and accounts. Using individual pages and social media accounts creates smaller communities with similar interests to consume and create content. On larger, department-wide "organizational" pages officials must consider a wider audience. Despite the fact that athletic departments are frequently communicating with varied groups (Clavio), the findings of this study indicate that the focus is on the fan, perhaps skewed slightly toward a younger demographic. Officials also discussed the concept of using social media as a "thermometer" of sorts to gauge fan sentiment, which may be comparable to Stoldt's (2012) immediacy factor of social media. Because strategists can determine fan sentiment through social media immediately, they may be in a better position to respond to problems via different channels with different purposes.

The ideas behind the coordination of postings and the role of athletic communications staff members as gatekeepers are closely related. This is a problem that is especially prevalent in athletic departments with multiple contributors. The idea of coordinating postings and assigning gatekeepers to accounts fell under the managerial function of the officials who participated in this study. The principle that respondents in this study adhered to collectively was respecting fans and followers by keeping the number of posts low and the quality of posts high. This idea of not

inundating one's followers with too much information keeps followers from feeling like they are being spammed and creates a sense of trust instead. Most departments relegated many of the daily duties of management, particularly at the individual-sport level, to their athletic communications professionals. This relegation of duties appears to be designed in part to ensure that writing remains at a high level while also creating a final line of approval so that too many posts are not being sent on a daily basis from different accounts. The key to this concept moving forward will be ensuring a high level of collaboration between departments, so the best information and interaction is consistently finding its way into the hands of fans.

Officials revealed that they continue to search for effective methods to generate revenue. For example, they indicated that social media creates a gateway for interaction that allows such revenue to be generated in an indirect manner. This connects to the concept of brand building. A fan that is loyal to the brand is more likely to push money back into that brand (Pulley, 2003). As Estler and Nelson (2005) stated, a valuable brand in intercollegiate athletics is more likely to attract lucrative sponsorships and pull in additional revenue. Social media helps build those brands while increasing loyalty among fans. In the future, however, it will become more important for strategists to be able to map out their bottom line, which several officials in this study identified. The findings of this study also suggest that additional human resources are needed if athletic departments want to turn social media efforts into revenue generators.

Officials stated that social media allow them to be substantially more interactive with fans than they had been in the past, which was consistent with Stoldt's (2012) findings. No longer is social media limited to the one-way flow of information that typified communications for so many years. Sanderson and Hambrick (2012) emphasized the opportunity for creativity and twoway communication through social media, an idea that was confirmed by the participants in this study. Page's (2012) back stage sensation plays an important role here as well, giving fans a behind-the-scenes look at the way their favorite operations run. Event interaction was also noted as being important, which is consistent with Broughton's (2012) report that fans increasingly engage with social media sites during games to receive game time updates. As athletic departments move forward and look to sustain their activities, these engagement practices will be key. The findings of this study revealed that fans crave this behind-the-scenes glimpse and interaction. Athletic departments should embrace the unique perspectives and "insider information" that they can offer to their fans, which helps them maintain the positive relationship they crave with their favorite team.

Perhaps one of the most revealing aspects of this study came when discussing the inherent challenges and pitfalls encountered by social media professionals, specifically regarding the measurement of success and dealing with negativity. Officials pointed out smaller interactions (such as likes, retweets and @ replies) as being tools used to indicate success, but several indicated that they are looking for stronger return-of-investment in the future. More measurable proof of success could lead to a greater investment of time and other resources from athletic leadership at universities. Social media has also provided an outlet for negativity, which is a reality that nearly every official raised in the context of this study. The immediacy of today's media, specifically social media, means that organizations must be prepared to deal with negative news and problems quicker than ever. Athletic departments must ensure that a crisis communication plan is in place that provides for the unpredictable reality of social media.

Conclusions

Limitations

Although acceptable for a qualitative study (Creswell, 2007), the sample size was small and only included four of the programs that belong to the Big Ten Conference. However, the purpose of this case study was to develop an understanding of how social media strategy is developed and deployed in Big Ten athletic departments and to explore the issues associated with it. Therefore, maximum variation sampling was used to give a better array of opinions and experiences represented in an effort to explore social media strategy in Big Ten athletic departments. The fact that each of the participants worked with social media and held leadership positions at their respective institution allowed them to explore social media strategy in depth. At the same time, it is possible that they were biased toward the importance of social media as opposed to other forms of communication, which is acceptable in qualitative studies. As with all qualitative studies, the results of this research cannot be generalized due to the non-random sample and overall purpose of the approach (Creswell, 2007).

Future Studies

Future research might consider including additional participants from those Big Ten athletic programs that did not participate in this study. Another approach would be to examine a wider swath of social media professionals across different athletic conferences and university sizes for a greater array of opinions. Particular focus might be given to smaller universities that battle for a share of media attention and may have smaller audience sizes and budgets. Researchers may also consider examining the expanding field and idea of social media metrics and how organizations are attempting to quantify their efforts. Once the essence of social media strategy in athletic institutions is fully explored, theoretical propositions need to be developed and then tested, perhaps through a qualitative grounded theory approach followed by a quantitative study testing specific hypotheses (Creswell, 2007).

Case Questions

- One of the most alluring features social media provide to fans is the "back stage" sensation. What is the extent to which athletic departments should provide behind-the-scenes access to their sports?

- If athletic departments decide to provide more "behind-the-scenes" access to their programs, what implications in terms of privacy might arise?

- The results of this study indicate that social media strategies in major athletic departments are largely driven by athletic communication/sports information departments. With the proliferation of social media networks, users, and interactions in general, how might smaller athletic departments be able to handle the increase of two-way communication involving their sports?

● Fans tend to be the primary audience of Big Ten Conference athletic department social media strategies. With the increasing popularity of social media, which additional audiences should be considered in the near future and why?

● Big Ten Conference athletic departments appear to use different approaches when it comes to social media planning. Which of the approaches discussed in this case study is likely to emerge as a "best practice" and why?

● Sports communication offices in Big Ten Conference athletic departments seem to function as content gatekeepers more so than marketing offices. What are the main reasons for this phenomenon and under what circumstances might the gatekeeping function shift to other departments?

● How might Big Ten Conference athletic departments use social media to help generate revenue without "applying old paradigms of advertising to social media?"

● Social media seem to connect fans with Big Ten Conference athletic departments on a personal level, "humanizing" student-athletes, coaches, and broadcast personalities. Are there any downsides to creating these close connections? What are they and how can athletic departments deal with them?

● To what extent do student-athletes use social media to build their brand and what can athletic departments do to help them use social media tools without hurting their personal prospects?

● In addition to the many opportunities social media provides for athletic departments, it can also quickly disperse negative comments to a large audience. What kinds of issues should be addressed in a crisis communication plan and who should handle them?

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Appendix: Discussion Guide

1. Tell me about yourself: what is your current position, what department are you part of within your athletic department?

2. What is your daily involvement with social media as a part of your job?

3. What forms of social media does your school actively engage in? (i.e. Twitter, Facebook, blogs, videos, etc.)

4. Is your social media use primarily driven by your sports communication department or your marketing department?

5. Does the athletic department you work in have a team or committee that coordinates social media strategy?
   a. Tell me about the structure of that team. Who sits on it?
   b. What is the purpose of the team? What are you trying to accomplish?

6. The strategy behind social media changes depending on the perspective of the department using it. How does your athletic department manage multiple or competing interests regarding social media usage and strategy?

7. Who is the primary audience you are trying to reach? What are their demographics? What are their psychographics?

8. What is your school's primary goal that drives your social media strategy and usage? What are you trying to achieve?
   a. What are the primary areas that your social media usage hopes to impact? (donations, tickets sold/increased attendance, fan loyalty, merchandise sales, etc.)
   b. What is your strategy to target those areas?

9. How much do you involve your official sponsors in your social media usage?

10. What kind of information are you attempting to gather through social media?
    a. How are you using that information?
    b. What kind of real-world implementation does it apply to?

11. What kind of benchmarks or metrics do you use to measure the success of your social media strategy? How do you define success?

12. How has your strategy in social media shifted over the past 4-5 years as technology has changed? What have you learned?

13. What areas are you still working on becoming more effective at? What are the areas of social media strategy that you want to improve in?

14. How do you gauge the impact your social media strategy is having on personal fan relationships with your brand?

15. What are the advantages or pros that social media brings to the table?

16. What are the disadvantages or cons of the advent of social media?