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AN ANALYSIS OF COLLEGIATE ATHLETIC DEPARTMENTS' SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICES, STRATEGIES, AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Similar to professional sport organizations, intercollegiate athletic programs frequently use social media to reach consumers. However, athletic departments face unique challenges, such as simultaneously managing multiple teams' social accounts and strategies, while monitoring and advising the social activity of student-athletes and coaches. The tactics used to interact with consumers and challenges of using social media have yet to be studied from an athletic department point of view. The purpose of this study was to explore intercollegiate athletic departments' social media usage patterns, strategies, and challenges. Seven college athletic departments were studied via personal interviews with staff members. The results suggested that while schools are primarily utilizing two forms of social media (Facebook and Twitter), they lack a clear communication strategy for use. They typically used Facebook and Twitter differently to interact with consumers, but regardless of medium, they highlighted the value of consistency through controlling the message, account names, hashtags, and direct communication. Their biggest concerns were staying abreast of the changing landscape of social media and staffing to meet these needs. The importance of being in the digital space is critical for sport marketers, yet the athletic departments interviewed for this study failed to incorporate their social media as part of a greater communication, branding, or marketing plan.

Keywords: sport communication, intercollegiate athletics, sport information, sport marketing, Facebook, Twitter

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INTRODUCTION

The popularity of social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram has made them an essential part of business management, communication, and marketing plans (Clavio & Kian, 2010). It has prompted the development of new social media platforms, staffing positions devoted to social media management, and ways to communicate and disseminate information. Within the sport industry, social media sites have increasingly created more opportunities for interaction between sport entities and consumers. For sport organizations, social media platforms have become one-stop shops to relay information to and from fans (Weinburg, 2009).

Specifically, college athletic departments rely on social media as a marketing or branding tool. Social media is commonly used in all NCAA divisions by college coaches for recruiting, sports information staff for disseminating statistical or game information, marketing staff for providing promotional or ticketing information, as well as sponsorship fulfillment, individual teams, players, or athletic directors for voicing thoughts regarding their respective programs (Stoldt & Vermillion, 2013). College athletic departments differ from professional franchises in that there are multiple sports, teams, student-athletes, and coaches to manage. In recognizing the wide use of social media, some athletic departments are implementing social media training procedures or policies for current staff or student-athletes, and/or developing social media plans to maximize their social media presence (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). Recently, college athletic departments' use of social media has received mainstream media attention as Clemson University is often cited as the social media leader with respect to content, strategy, and engagement with fans and recruits (Thamel, 2017). Clemson has invested $160,000 in salaries dedicated to their social content (Thamel, 2017), which has afforded it the opportunity to lead the pack. The social media discussion in collegiate sport also centers heavily on the football programs. While the funding seen at Clemson is rare, the expectation for social media output by collegiate athletic departments is the norm. Despite the efforts, social media sometimes creates challenges for sport managers in determining which social media platforms to use, how to engage with the social media users, and how to optimally manage an organization's message within the college athletic department environment.

In an effort to understand the climate of social media use in college athletic departments, there is a need to describe how intercollegiate athletic staff members are using social media, strategies employed, and challenges associated with using social media. While social media usage is prevalent, foundational research about the intercollegiate athletic departments' usage, strategies employed, and the challenges faced with using social media is lacking. Previous research has focused on social media usage by utilizing content analyses of athletes, sport organizations/events, and the types of messages that are being disseminated to fans and consumers (e.g., Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2010). This study examines social media usage from the organization's perspective (in this case an athletic department) to explore their communication strategy and challenge. This information could provide athletic directors with a better understanding of how other institutions are using social media, their strategies, as well as challenges that their staff faces with implementing the social media strategy. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore intercollegiate athletic departments' social media practices, strategies, and challenges they face in implementing social media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A fundamental feature of social media is its ability to allow for two-way communication among participants (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hambrick et al., 2010). When examining social media usage in the sports environment, research has focused on the sender/individual athletes (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hull, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014; Sauder & Blaszka, 2016), the receiver (sport consumer/fan, e.g., Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly, 2014), interaction between the senders and receivers (e.g., Eagleman, 2013; Hambrick et al., 2010), and types of messages and content (Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, & Walsh, 2010; Hambrick et al., 2010; Hull, 2014; Pegoraro, 2010). This varied research relied on the uses and gratifications approach (e.g., Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Chen, 2011; Clavio, 2008; Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010), relationship marketing (Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011; Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2013), as well as a framing perspective (Burch et al., 2014; Hull, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014; Sauder & Blaszka, 2016). The perspective of the sport organization, with regards to their social media usage, social media strategy, and challenges, is of concern in our study.

Social Media Usage

Within athletic departments, social media may be directed and managed by a variety of staff members with different purposes. Social media is used by coaches as a recruiting tool, sports information directors (SID) as a means of providing statistical or game information, and the marketing staff as a promotional or advertising medium, which leads to the question of who controls the athletic departments' social media and how is it being used. The term college athletic communicators (CAC) was introduced by Stoldt and Vermillion (2013) to refer to any of the communication, sports information, or marketing staff in an athletic department, who are responsible for social media management. Managing social media platforms has become a primary responsibility of the CACs, which varies by institution (Stoldt & Vermillion, 2013). A college athletics department's social media presence and plan may depend on the number of staff they have devoted to social media. Some athletic departments have created social media specific staff positions, while others utilize associate athletic directors, sports information directors, marketing staff, graduate assistants, or interns (Stoldt & Vermillion, 2013). Given that these staff members have direct control of developing and implementing social media strategy for the university athletic department, they need to be studied to understand the current state of social media in college athletics.

Social Media Strategy

Regardless of who is managing the social media, brand management, fan engagement, and marketing are often areas of concern. Initially, research focused on determining how teams were using their websites and Facebook pages. For example, Waters et al., (2010) realized the strategies used most often by NFL team websites and Facebook pages was relationship fostering and reciprocity. Wallace et al., (2011) sought to determine types of Facebook posts

used by the NCAA and Big 12 Conference members. They found the NCAA primarily used Facebook communication to post links and statuses, while the Big 12 used Facebook to post links, statuses, and pictures. These findings were the first to highlight how college athletic departments disseminated information and provided a glance at the types of posts most frequently used.

Building on this, more recent research focuses on the social media goals of developing fan engagement and fostering relationships. Hambrick and Kang (2014) examined professional sports teams' Pinterest accounts, determining that teams use it to enhance the fan group experience, provide information regarding the team and their games, and sell team merchandise. Pronschinke et al., (2012) focused on the attributes of team Facebook pages to see how that impacts the number of fans that like the page. Fans responded favorably to authentic team pages, with various discussion posts on the Facebook wall because they were able to reach other fans within the organization (Pronschinske et al., 2012). Research suggests that building relationships on social media is critical to having them engaged. This seems like it is a basis for strategy, but not studied from the organization's perspective. As such, Williams and Chinn (2010) examined the potential relationship-marketing goals through social media. One challenge they identified was examining the various subgroups within a fan base to meet their needs. They noted that each fan has different needs when it comes to their marketing approach. Research has also examined the impact that Facebook use has on the brand of a major collegiate sport's event. Walsh, Clavio, Lovell and Blaszka (2013) found that consumers who followed the event's Facebook page rated the event's brand personality items at a significantly higher rate than those who did not follow the page. The authors suggested this occurred as those who follow the Facebook page had more opportunities to be exposed to the event's brand, and subsequently the event's marketing and communication messages, than others who were not exposed to the event's Facebook page.

Given the prevalence of college team Facebook pages, it would be beneficial to understand how college athletics departments are managing their social media presence and foster their relationships with their consumers. Furthermore, research has examined Twitter as a tool for engagement (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2010; Gibbs, O'Reilly, & Brunette, 2014). Twitter provides athletic departments the opportunity to send out quick burst of content and information and allows for instant communication.

Additionally, social media strategy often has a preventative or risk management component, with regards to protecting the brand of an organization. An often publicized strategy of athletic departments is their social media policies for student-athletes. Restrictions and prohibitions are the most common forms of policies within Division I college athletic departments (Sanderson, 2011). For example, student athletes at the University of Michigan had to sign a "Social Media User Agreement" (Woodhouse, 2012). The policy was developed to help streamline and formalize their social media efforts across all of their sports. College athletic departments also help student-athletes deal with negative feedback through proper social media training (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). The student-athlete represents the university, thus controlling and providing guidelines for these athletes is critical (Sanderson, 2011). Athletic departments have hired social media management agencies to help guide their staff and student-athletes and help protect the school's brand (Walfish, 2012). The social media strategy of college athletics departments appears to include policies to encourage specific social media behavior, but understanding how the departments actually use social media and their strategy need to be assessed. In sum, it appears social media is used with various

communication goals and outcomes; however, we aim to understand the strategy from those managing the social media product.

Challenges with Social Media

Because of the increased use of social media, there can be some challenges or drawbacks to managing social media. The growth of social media has created an unfiltered dialogue between athletes, coaches, and organizations with their fans, which has led to athletes getting into "Twitter Wars" (Yoder, 2012) or sport organizations attempting to relate to the public in a way that is unsuccessful. The college environment may also be unique due to the staffing structures and the management of possibly 18 or more different teams, coaches, and players. Social media has impacted organizational staff duties, with a shift in focus on social media for sport information directors, marketers, and public relations staff (Stoldt, 2012). In some instances it has led to staffing positions devoted solely to social media management (Stoldt & Vermillion, 2013). It is important to determine what challenges athletic departments are facing with regards to social media, to be able to properly manage staff, student-athletes, or the brand.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Social media communication could play a key role in developing the relationship between an athletic department and a consumer. This study hoped to illuminate the social media communication strategy of college athletic departments. As an exploratory study on collegiate athletic departments' social media, research questions were deemed appropriate.

This research aimed to understand the following:

RQ1: How are intercollegiate athletic departments developing their social media platforms?

RQ2: What are the intercollegiate athletic departments' social media strategies and how are they implemented into practice?

RQ3: How are intercollegiate athletic departments utilizing social media to interact with consumers?

RQ4: What are the biggest challenges facing intercollegiate athletic departments when using social media?

METHOD

Participants

A purposive sample was used to select intercollegiate athletic departments' staff (N = 7) for in-depth interviews. The recruited sample included individuals who had expertise and knowledge of the athletic departments' social media communication strategy. In addition, they were chosen in order to have a sample which represented different divisions, conferences, and

geographic locations. Participants, with varying job titles, represented seven different intercollegiate conferences from three different divisions and geographic regions (Table 1). Eisenhardt (1989) recommended using between 4 and 10 cases in order to allow an in-depth analysis of each case and increase the validity in the results; so the sample was deemed appropriate.

Table 1. Collegiate Athletic Communication Department Chart

Participant	College/University	Job Title	Twitter Followers*	Facebook Likes*
A	Division I FBS Midwest Institution	Assistant Sports Information Director	50,027	254,966
B	Division I FBS Southeast Institution	Director of Technology	22,247	34,343
C	Division I FCS Southeast Institution	Assistant Athletic Director for Marketing	2,412	3,068
D	Division I FBS Midwest Institution	Assistant Director of Athletic Communications and Social Media Coordinator	14,251	27,266
E	Division III Northeast Institution	Director of Athletic Communication	756	1002
F	Division III Mid-Atlantic Institution	Director of Athletic Communication	1,231	2719
G	Division III Northeast Institution	Assistant Director of Athletic Communication	977	1096

*At time of data collection.

Procedure

Data was collected by conducting one-on-one interviews; using an open-ended, semi-structured format by the lead researcher. The interview process lasted approximately an hour with each participant. Nine questions were asked regarding the athletic departments use of social media platforms. Adjustments were made after the first interview for questions that seemed out of sequence or that were repetitive. Four areas were covered during the interviews:

1. Social media platform development (What social media efforts does your sport organization use? Describe your usage of each social media site? How have they been successful?),
2. Social media strategy (What is your social media strategy? Have your social media efforts been successful?),
3. Interaction (How do you use social media to communicate with consumers? Do you use social media to run promotions with consumers? How does social media create awareness about your program?),
4. Challenges facing social media (What are your biggest challenges in social media usage?).

Table 2. Focused Coding Developed Themes in Interviews

Item/Question	Descriptive Codes	Thematic Category
Social media usage	Engagement Community History Videos/Photos Linked articles Positive news News source Interchangeable - Facebook/Twitter Too much information	Division I schools – Original content Facebook and Twitter accounts separate Oversaturation concern Division III schools – Facebook and Twitter are interchangeable
Social media strategy	Sell tickets Original content Create conversation Historical perspectives Website being different No strategy Personalities of coaches – freedom Form communities Compliments website Align with other schools Hashtags Presence Development of channels	Sell tickets Original content Hashtags Development of channels No strategy
Social media success	Mascots Trial and error Analytics Fan polls Hashtag usage Followers and fans	Community development with hashtags Number of likes/followers of pages
Contribution to success	Reach out to students Learn from mistakes Creation of individual team pages Keep things fresh	Individual team pages
Communication with consumers	Uniformity on social media sites Send personal messages Pictures to interact	Uniformed hashtags by sport or college Respond quickly to fans Self-police negative comments
Social media and promotions	Ticket deals Trivia "Facebook Fridays"	Division I – YES Division III - NO

(Table 2 continued on next page)

Item/Question	Descriptive Codes	Thematic Category
Social media creating awareness about product	Tweet final scores Control message Behind the scenes Info and news Promotion of student-athletes Interact with other schools Hit biggest market One-stop-shop	Controlling the message by the school Consistency
Biggest challenges in social media usage	Constant change Being consistent Proactive Awareness Social media control Center Brand protection Customer service Limited staff No one to keep up with social media	Division I – Keep up with the latest social media types and trends Division III – Keep up with conference schools

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed by coding interview responses to let reoccurring thematic patterns emerge from the data set (Creswell, 2007; Saldana, 2009). The interviews were recorded on two devices, the iPhone voice memo and the ASUS Eee Pad Tablet recording device. As suggested by Lofland and Lofland (1995), the interviews were transcribed verbatim 24-48 hours following completion. After transcribing the text, the researcher analyzed the text to create categories that were then placed into themes. To verify the information, a method known as triangulation was used (Creswell, 2007; Saldana, 2009). Triangulation is used to involve multiple perspectives from a single data set (Meadows & Morse, 2001). Investigator triangulation was accomplished with three additional investigators with backgrounds in communication and social media. The text was examined from the transcribed interviews. The three investigators' examinations of the text were then sent separately to the researcher. After receiving the interpretation of each response from investigators, the interpretations were compared. Subsequently, the researchers and investigators came to agreement based on the interpretation of the text (Andrew, Pedersen, & McEvoy, 2011).

In order to analyze the interview responses, two coding steps were conducted. First cycle coding, also known as structural coding, resulted in identifying overarching fragments of text from the interview responses (Saldana, 2009). First cycle coding happens during the initial coding to develop descriptive codes. Descriptive coding helped discover topics within the interviews resulting in categories of content and gave an overview of what was found. The structural coding allowed for original categories to emerge for further analysis.

As suggested by Saldana (2009), two different analytical approaches were utilized--classifying and conceptualizing. This first step led to the development of in-depth categories across a variety of topics and has been deemed as an appropriate method to use for qualitative

analysis and the coding of interview transcripts (Saldana, 2009). Following the structural coding, second cycle coding provided a deeper, more analytical view of the interview responses. This focused coding identified the most frequently used or most significant initial codes to transpire the most salient terms (Saldana, 2009). After analyzing the salient terms, decisions were made of the initial codes based on what makes the most analytical sense. The in-depth categories and themes can be found in Table 2.

RESULTS

The results provide in-depth descriptions of various social media practices that could be implemented into a college athletics communication strategy. Data analysis uncovered thematic categories that were consistent throughout the interviews. Each highlighted an aspect of current and future practices used in each athletic department.

Social Media Platform Development

Research question one sought to understand college athletics departments' social media development across platforms. All seven schools expressed that Facebook and Twitter were their two main platforms and each had a main athletics Facebook and Twitter page. Five of the seven schools stated that they encourage individual teams to have their own pages to promote themselves. All of the schools encourage their coaches to use social media, but do not require their coaches to have accounts. In an effort to encourage coaches or athletes to participate in social media, Participant A acknowledged that they do not have a Social Media Policy in fear that it would inhibit usage. They instead included a set of suggested guidelines in the locker room and for coaches.

Social Media Strategy

Research question two investigated social media strategy and practice. There were two strategies that were used to develop their fan base and to disseminate content.

Engagement was seen as an important way to develop and improve the online community. Participant D stated, "Our main goal this year is to create more of a community for everyone for the specific school page." Participant F explained that, "We have 700 Twitter followers, and I think we just passed the 2500 Likes on Facebook. Our alumni and students are pushing these modes to get information. Our job…is to make our social media presence more prevalent." However, the Division III athletic departments lacked communication with followers, with no dialogue between the fan-base and the department. For example, participant E stated, "We do not communicate with really anyone on Twitter. No one is…ever tweeting at us to create a conversation". Participant F agreed saying, "We have limited contact with consumers because we are on such a small scale."

For strategy related to content dissemination, two main themes emerged for Division I schools: (1.) Keeping each social media site separate with unique content, and (2.) developing a social media plan.

Participant A described their usage, stating:

> Instead of posting the same thing 3-4 times, we try to post different content to each medium. On Twitter, I may say, "Great first day of spring practice." On Facebook we may have a picture of the day and on YouTube we may have a short video…they are all discussing the same thing but in three different forms.

Likewise, participant B agreed:

> We show different content on our social media channels. (We) try to create interesting content…. Original content and photos are excellent. Stuff from say 1942 can and WILL draw more attention than a game story. Originality is key to developing a base. If you want that go to our website, go there for sport content. Our social media space is different and interactive.

The second theme that was uncovered was developing a social plan for each social media site. Five of the seven schools were concerned with what should be on each social media channel and how much. Similarly, participant D stated:

> There is no set post. We keep track on how much we put on Facebook because we don't want to overwhelm people each day. Twitter, I can go a day without posting and the next day I can post 50 things on there. It really just depends on what is going on.

On the other hand, one particular theme emerged when examining Division III communication departments: they were mostly using Facebook and Twitter, and they were used interchangeably. Facebook and Twitter are used to link stories to their athletic website. Participant F illuminated this assertion, stating:

> Many times we will link articles to both of the sites (Facebook and Twitter), and that is part of our strategy. The other thing is that I will try to do one to three posts a day on each. That is our goal…We use social media as a complement to our website.

Similarly, participant G agreed, stating, "Twitter and Facebook are mostly interchangeable. We use them together to post stories. We mostly link them to our RSS feed."

Social Media Consumer Interaction

Research question three sought to understand how intercollegiate athletic departments are interacting with their consumers on social media. Five of the seven schools said it was imperative to use Twitter hashtags to interact with customers. As Participant C acknowledged, "We tried to uniform both hashtags and handles. Hashtags are most important. People can search for a hashtag and know what's going on, and follow the conversation." Although this is not a direct communication, athletic departments are able to follow the dialogue created by the hashtag. For the Division I schools who mentioned hashtag usage, they agreed that uniformity

throughout each sport or game was critical. As participant A stated, "We implement hashtags with almost everything we do, #Weare<team> #Go<team>, and we also have uniformed hashtags, such as #<teamsport> for our football team."

At the Division III level, one hashtag relates directly to all of their sports. Participant E explained, "We are limited because we are on such a small scale…Other social media things we use….like hashtags #<team>nation –has been mildly successful." Participant F similarly noted, "There have been fan generated hashtags (ex. #<school>soccer). We have also generated our own hashtag #LetsgoTeam. It is simple, and is for all our sports."

Division I athletic departments are also using social media to conduct marketing promotions. Many of the promotions consist of ticket promotions, giveaways, trivia, and events such as "Facebook Friday". As participant D stated:

> We have done (giveaways) in the past. We have done trivia questions where we give away a fan pack…. promotional things with tickets. We recently did a promotion with our marketing office- -if you give the names of five people who do not have season tickets than you get this keychain…Everyone wanted this little keychain.

Likewise, participant B stated, "We offer ticket deals. Our fan base hasn't jumped on full board yet. We are going to offer more as time goes on. We want people who are interested."

Social Media Challenges

Research question four sought to examine the biggest challenges facing athletic communication department's social media usage. The themes that emerged from the interviews were being able to stay at the forefront of change and constant staffing issues. While all interviewees agreed with this assessment, a key difference emerged between the divisions. The Division I schools are trying to keep up with their competitors nationwide, while Division III schools are trying to maintain pace with their conference foes. Participant B stated:

> The biggest challenge is that we are always changing, trying to do something new and keeping up. We want to be at the forefront of social media, but it is difficult to do so. Every day I am checking out new sites that we may or may not want to get involved in.

Consequently, participant C agreed and stated, "(Our) strategy is always changing. 10 minutes later things change… The ever changing social media landscape is our biggest challenge. We are just trying to keep up."

While participant E agreed with trying to maintain pace with the constant change, they were more likely focused on their peers (conference). They stated, "Our strategy is to figure out if what we are doing is aligning with our other conference schools…. Right now we are probably lagging behind some of our other conference members."

Three of the four Division I programs interviewed thought building communities and finding what platforms their consumers use was a big challenge. Another thought a social media control center will eventually become the norm for athletic communication departments. To this, Participant B stated:

> We are going to try it out, a social media control center. Where can I get tickets? There is a fight in parking lot. There is a lost kid in the stadium, where should we bring him? Our goal is to provide unparalleled fan experience for our fans. We put a lot of time and resources into it. Try to develop something from a social media standpoint.

Another descriptive code that emerged as a challenge on social media among the Division I schools was brand protection. Schools want their messages to align with the university, but also want it to be real and consistent. Three of the four Division I programs agreed that the message should be natural, not forced. Participant A stated:

> It is critical for us to be consistent and crafting of our message accordingly. Since we have different people who are the work horses, they create the content and send the message. Some of them write AP (Associated Press) style, some of them don't. Some of them use all CAPS, some use different formatting. We want to strive to make messages that sound like it is coming from the same person (Participant A).

The other big challenge noted by schools, was staffing concerns, especially at the Division III level. All three of the Division III schools interviewed did not have more than two people on their staff which included, but was not limited to, interns. Participant G highlighted this finding by stating, "It is me and mainly my assistant, who is an intern. We will have student workers who volunteer to get involved. Overall, I am in charge of all of our varsity sports." Similarly, participant E agreed by giving their exact staffing plan:

> (We have) one full-time staff that works under me. (I have) three student workers who work part-time at a variety of different hours. This is common for Division III athletics. With more of a demand with video and website…you are almost becoming your own news source. I would say our staff is average for a DIII level (Participant E).

DISCUSSION

This study provided an exploratory analysis of intercollegiate athletic departments' social media usage, strategy, and challenges. Results suggest collegiate athletic departments are using social media for interactivity, fan engagement, and information dissemination, but have varied strategies. College administrators may use this information to better understand how the sport communication staff implements social media to achieve their stated goals, as well as challenges they face. Finally, two main social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter, are being utilized, but there is a virtual arms race to learn about and implement new social media forums. It is clear that there is still room for improvement for athletic departments to include social media as a tool.

Social Media Strategy and Development

Our results indicate there are two different types of social media views that athletic departments utilize. The first is to have a specific strategy that everyone within the athletic department can follow (five of the seven schools). The second is a more organic approach,

which created a spontaneous flow with social media fans. Having a defined social media strategy seemed to be more effective in reaching their goals, than an unstructured approach.

From a branding perspective, maintaining consistency on hashtags while using Twitter was a common approach of the studied schools. This allows a tracking of information and discussion portals. Given that athletic departments manage multiple sports, men's and women's, sometimes up to 35 different teams, consistency is critical for the athletics brand. These findings are supported by Blaszka et al., (2012) where fans of many different fan bases were able to connect using #WorldSeries. The ability to promote a user-friendly hashtag and catalog the tweets is beneficial for the organization. Participant A noted that he "keeps track of all team and school related hashtags through…Tweetdeck." Tweetdeck allows an institution to follow as many hashtags as they need. Likewise, a few schools indicated similarly named social media handles made it easier to follow (e.g., all teams have the same major name "UniveristynameSoccer", "UniversitynameFootball", etc.). While this seemed commonplace, it was not evident with all of the universities studied. It was interesting to see that Division III schools used one hashtag for all programs.

In addition to consistency with hashtags or handles, maintaining a consistent overall message was important. When using social media to interact with fans, keeping a consistent message can sometimes be a challenge. Interaction with unpredictable users can sometimes cause more harm than good. Media relations departments still have the ability to maintain some control of the message by choosing to use parasocial, or one-way, interaction. The staff can choose what content to post and which fans to respond to, interact with or retweet (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2014). Fieldhouse Media and other social media specialists offer social media education and training for entire athletic departments (Ortiz, 2012; Vannini, 2013). Northwestern University has posted a 'Social Media Decision Tree' in the teams' locker room. It highlights good and bad topics before deciding to post something to social media (Fieldhouse Media, 2013). Educating and guiding coaches, staff, and student-athletes on their social media usage could be an essential component to an effective strategy.

It appears the universities are concerned with their social media presence. Keeping up with their peers or conference affiliates, as well as maintaining count of the number of fans they have on a platform seem to be a concern for all of the athletic departments. The use of sheer likes as a metric of effectiveness is noteworthy, as engagement may be more important than numbers. An interesting finding was differences between Division I and Division III communication, including staffing size, who the schools believe they should align with, consumer relations, social media platforms and promotions used. The Division I universities in this study were concerned with selling tickets, providing information, and developing community and fan engagement. On the other hand, Division III institutions in this study were not able to have as large of a social presence as their Division I counterparts, citing lack of staff and smaller fan bases. They did not tweet or use Facebook much, because they had no followers to interact with them. The focus of these schools may be on engaging fans in a different way, or focusing on obtaining more social media following through promotions at events or sponsorship deals tied to the social media pages. With regards to the limited number of staffing at a DIII school, using interns is a common, but concerning strategy. In this case, the SID could focus on one or two ideas to improve their social media platforms, and limit the number of platforms by putting effort into successfully managing Facebook and Twitter accounts and ignoring other social media platforms. This would

maximize the effectiveness of their limited resources. Creating a strong social media platform does not necessarily mean being diverse in everything. It simply requires creativity with the available resources.

Interaction with Fans

Interactivity has been a critical finding within social media research (Blaszka et al., 2012; Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Clavio, 2008; Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hambrick et al., 2010; Hull, 2014; Sauder & Blaszka, 2016). The college athletics staff interviewed supported this notion. Participant A noted that fans love being mentioned or retweeted. As Participant A stated, "On game days I try to retweet or respond quickly. Who doesn't like to share information? Fans love the feeling of a retweet." This finding is similar to past research which confirmed fans followed athletes because of the interactivity (Clavio & Kian, 2010).

Not surprising, all of the athletic departments studied used Facebook and/or Twitter to provide information in the forms of game results in an effort to reach fans interested in information gathering. This is consistent with Wallace et al., (2011) findings. In addition, some of the athletic departments tried capitalizing on fan engagement with marketing promotions or prompts for ticket sales, which yielded mixed results. However, the school's concern about new platforms and keeping up with their peers was interesting.

Challenges: Emergence of New Social Media Platforms

Sport organizations, coaches, and athletes need to constantly adapt to the ever-changing landscape of social media. The importance of having an online presence may pose a challenge to those who are new to social media or who have little training or guidance on how to use it. With the goal of controlling the message, sometimes the constant communication and access for new users is a hindrance and leads to public mistakes.

While our research indicates that most schools have put a majority of their efforts into two main social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter), the schools recognized there are other opportunities to grow with possibly Pinterest, Snapchat and Instagram. However, the inability to manage new platforms, in addition to multiple Facebook and Twitter accounts, created challenges for the athletic department staff in regards to keeping up with current social media trends. One Division I participant mentioned the use of Google+, but was unsure how to utilize it. The "Google Hangouts" that are part of Google+ allow multiple people to simultaneously video chat for free with a coach and/or player. For example, University of Arizona Director of Athletics, Greg Byrne, hosted a Google Hangout with Wilbur the Wildcat and 3-5 invited fans (Kelly, 2012). This gave fans an opportunity to connect with Byrne in a pseudo-informal setting. More schools could incorporate these opportunities into their social media strategy. However, with the recent addition of Facebook Live (allows anyone on Facebook to record live content), athletic departments are able to use Facebook in a new and dynamic way by hosting press conferences, games, and other events (Dreier, 2016).

Another Division I school discussed using Pinterest, specifically to reach the female consumer. Pinterest shares photos between users with similar interests, hobbies, and possibly

sport teams. The use of Pinterest to reach the female demographic is common among organizations (Engauge, 2013) and is a worthwhile effort for athletic departments to promote the team and sell merchandise. Pinterest is commonly used to promote the fan group experience. By relating to fans and their personal activities, such as wearing team merchandise or creating a team-related craft, fans feel as though they are part of the organization even when they cannot make it to a game or event (Hambrick & Kang, 2014). In an effort to stay current, the schools were attempting to use other forms of social media, but with little formal direction or strategy. It would seem that much of the social media management is trial and error. This suggests there is a need for more on-the job training opportunities for sport communication staff to learn the latest platforms. Having sport communication staff attend webinars or social media workshops outside of the sport industry may prove useful.

With the number of different types of social media, it can be a challenge keeping the content different on each platform. Participant B noted the future importance of having a "One-Stop Shop" for all social media. Some sport organizations have created a "Social Media Command Center", which organizes the social media platforms into one room or area. The New Jersey Devils are credited with creating the first command center (Mission Control Launched!, 2011). The Devils organized the space to connect the team with the fans in their arena. Social media command centers would keep all collegiate athletics online communication in one interactive location.

Based on our findings, two of the seven schools interviewed have recognized the importance of social media with their student body. Athletic departments use programs where students can win prizes and get free tickets for tweeting, liking, or participating in social media with their school (Kelly, 2012). For example, Crimson Guard Student Rewards Program, the Indiana University student rewards program, allows students to check into sporting events using their smart phone and allows students to gain points by tweeting, posting a Facebook message, or sharing something from Indiana Athletics. A user can sign up by downloading app on their smartphone. For example, if a user attends a volleyball match, they can post a picture to their social media account which then links them with the event, and the user is rewarded points for attending. They will also be sent push notifications from Indiana Athletics (Indiana Athletics, 2015) These programs can be outsourced, by companies such as Row 27's FanMaker, which may lessen the stress and workload of the current sport communication staff members, who may have multiple responsibilities in addition to managing social media. More schools could incorporate a rewards program to increase attendance at their events and improve their overall social media presence.

Based on all of the findings, a framework for the management of a college athletic department social media strategy was developed (Figure 1). The framework identifies the personnel, accounts/platform setup, content, and consumer focus. Having enough personnel to management the social content, as well as a congruent understanding by staff, coaches, and players on social media expectations and/or policies are important to control the message in a diverse athletic department. For setting up the social media accounts, the results suggested that consistency and uniformity helped create a professional and easily identifiable brand. The social media content was divided by platform, with different content type for each platform, and identifies the need for a central location to produce the content. Additionally, fan focus with rewards focused on students and promotions open to all have been successful based on those studied.

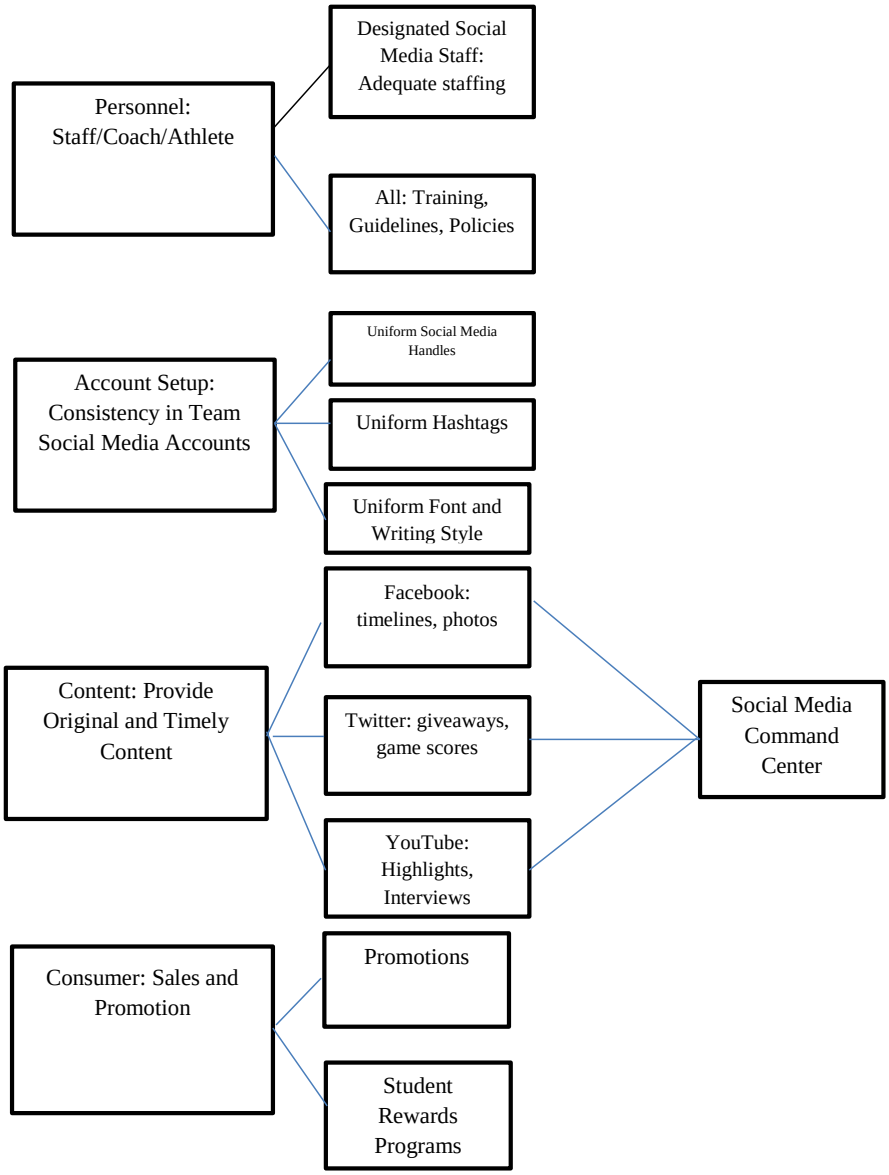

Figure 1. Framework for College Athletic Department Social Media Strategy- Communication Tactics to Control the Message.

CONCLUSION

This study provided a foundational assessment of how college athletic departments are using social media, challenges these staff face in implementing social media strategy, and divisional differences. While the research within social media and sport continues to grow, more needs to be conducted to link college athletics' social media platforms and the needs of their fans. Intercollegiate athletic departments have taken the first step by being active and navigating the landscape. Now, the communication departments need to focus on what the fans

ultimately want out of their social media platforms and find the best way to incorporate that into the school's athletic online community. The aforementioned "Rewards Clubs" could be a significant move to help bolster attendance and increase fan engagement. Ultimately, fans desire a unique online experience.

The findings suggest that intercollegiate athletic departments are having a difficult time developing social media strategies and/or implementing them when it comes to the ever changing landscape of the medium. A greater commitment and focus to specific platforms (i.e., Facebook and Twitter) may help improve their overall social presence, instead of spreading their resources thin. Additionally, more staffing would help athletic departments compete in the social media arms race. This information could provide athletic directors with a better understanding of how other institutions are using social media, their strategies, as well as challenges that their staff faces with implementing the social media strategy. In conclusion, the impact of social media will continue to become a critical avenue of engagement, communication, and marketing for intercollegiate athletic departments.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study provides an initial assessment of intercollegiate athletic departments' use of social media from the staff member's perspective; however, there were limitations to the study. While seven universities were acceptable for qualitative research, more participants might provide a future study more variety amongst divisions and locations. Based on the findings in this qualitative study, future research could entail quantitative assessments of collegiate athletic departments' social media constituencies to see if their thoughts on social media are consistent with their fans. Another possible study could investigate the consumers that are using the official school Twitter hashtag and/or that are participating in conversation, as well as developing quantitative research for a larger scope of how social media is used on a wide scale.

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