Join our Team: How sports organizations satisfy the needs of sports fans on Twitter

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Abstract

The question of whether or not sports organizations can satisfy the needs of sports fans on social media sites such as Twitter has been discussed to some extent within previous literature. However, many works focus on the content sports organizations produce on Twitter, not the following they attempt to satisfy. This study addresses organizational communication techniques utilized by sports organizations, including dialogic communication methods such as responding directly to followers, organizing content via hashtags, and retweeting content from relevant community members, to satisfy the needs of sports fans interacting with their favorite sports teams on Twitter through posts, retweets, and favorites. More specifically, the study explores how a sports organization's use of organizational communication influences aspects of fan loyalty and interactivity on Twitter. While organizational communication, fan loyalty, and interactivity have been discussed in the literature separately, rarely have all three components been represented together in studies. By employing Uses and Gratifications Theory as the unifying framework, this study will attempt to measure need satisfaction by discovering gratifications sought and obtained by sports fans on Twitter. Participants are self-identified sports fans who follow their favorite sports team on Twitter. Participants are asked questions related to their Twitter usage, gratifications sought and obtained from their favorite sports team's Twitter page, the participant's attraction and attachment to their favorite team. In conclusion, this study sheds new light on how sports organizations on Twitter satisfy the needs of sports fans through the content the organization provides, how they reinforce and create fan loyalty, and how they engage their followers in conversation through the organization's Twitter page.

Keywords: Uses and Gratifications Theory, Sports, Twitter

1. Introduction

 While sports consumption is still tied to watching games in person or through traditional media like television, change is coming. As sports organizations reach out to sports fans, they must reach them on mobile devices and social media[1]. Sports organizations, no matter the size or sport, have a social media presence they must manage. Sports organizations use several social media accounts to not only to reach the majority of their fans, but also to take advantage of what motivates fans to use a particular medium over another. For example, Facebook is used to foster fanship, Instagram leans more toward entertainment, and Twitter is a hub for information[2]. So, what does this mean for sports organizations? It means finding what content fans desire from sports organizations.

As all social media are slightly different, this research focuses on Twitter and how sports organizations create content for it. Previous research has explored the content sports organizations and media entities produce on Twitter through content analysis[3,4,5]. However, few studies have surveyed sports fans themselves about the content they consume on Twitter and their satisfaction with said content[6]. The purpose of this study is to explore how content sports organizations produce satisfies gratifications sought and obtained by sports fans following their favorite sports teams

on Twitter. For sports organizations looking to provide their Twitter followers with the content they desire, these organizations must be aware of what draws sports fans to Twitter.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory

To focus this research, Uses and Gratifications theory (U&G) will be employed as the main basis of analysis. The theory's primary focus is on what draws audiences to a particular medium and what social or psychological needs that medium's content fulfills[7]. As the theory has evolved, subsets of the theory have emerged. One addition involves interactivity, a proposed factor in determining the needs of sports fans. Interactivity will be discussed in a later section but it can be briefly explained as the active exchange of communication roles during discourse[7].

U&G theory has been applied to several studies related to a sports fan's Twitter use. Gibbs, O'Reilly, & Brunette (2014) employed U&G to find what information Twitter followers of Canadian Football League teams wanted from the league's eight teams[6]. Through a content analysis of tweets from CFL teams, several personal interviews, and an online survey targeting the sample's Twitter usage and gratification information, the study found four major categories of CFL team tweets relevant for analysis. These categories included in-game (following the game as it happens), news gathering (learning about roster moves as they happen), promotional material (gaining access to special promotions), and interactive aspects (interacting with other followers)[6]. The gratifications CFL fans desired most (following the game as it happens, learning about roster moves as they happen) were the same gratifications obtained from interacting with CFL teams.

Haugh & Watkins (2016) used U&G to measure social media use, participation in online sports media, and team identification for several social media sites including Twitter[2]. Based on survey responses, participants were most likely to use Twitter for information, entertainment, fanship, and team support. This study offers insight into what niche Twitter serves in the social media landscape[2].

Smith, Pegoraro, & Cruikshank (2019) found U&G effective in explaining how using Twitter on a second device, like a mobile phone, could increase enjoyment with the sport viewing experience[8]. The study found significant differences between those who engage with Twitter on some level (posting their own content or retweeting content from others) and lurkers (those who do not post their own content or content from others). In addition, enjoyment seemed to rise with age among heavy users of Twitter and lurkers. Smith, Pegoraro, & Cruikshank (2019) concluded that as the level of Twitter use decreases, so too does enjoyment[8].

2.2 Fanship

Fanship is a multifaceted definition that helps to explain how fans interact when discussing topics related to their favorite team or players. Blaszka et al. (2012) attempted to define fanship during their empirical analysis of the 2011 World Series as "expressions of emotion and discussion regarding teams, athletes, and games,"[9]. In a study investigating suspense as a predictor of enjoyment in sports video games, Shafer (2014) argues that fanship can be seen as a disposition toward a particular team rather than just to the sport itself[10]. Fanship helps to explain why sports fans seek out avenues where sports are discussed, such as social media. Fanship may be related to interactivity and fan loyalty, both aspects discussed later in this literature review. By understanding fanship, the relationship between sports fans and their favorite sports teams can be explored.

2.3 Interactivity

To revisit a topic introduced earlier, interactivity is expected to play a role in addressing need satisfaction for sports fans. Ruggiero (2000) explains interactivity as the active exchange of communication roles during discourse[7]. This discourse can occur between humans or between humans and technology such as computers and mobile devices. Ruggiero (2000) also presents five dimensions of interactivity complied from previous U&G research including playfulness, choice, connectedness, information collection, and reciprocal communication[7]. Several organizations fit under these dimensions on Twitter as they interact with their followers through responding to their follower base through retweets and mentions, discussing relevant topics, and creating hashtags to organize conversation[3]. Not every organization on Twitter employs these strategies to interact with fans and some don't value developing fan

relationships as highly as their other relationships. In their analysis of official NBA Twitter accounts, Wang & Zhou (2015) found that 29 NBA teams used their Twitter accounts to build professional relationships where they provided information about the specific team, its players, and details of NBA games[4]. Only one team focused their efforts on personal relationships where the account was used primarily to interact with athletes, journalists, and fans[4].

2.4 Fan loyalty

The ways in which professional sports organizations interact with their fans ties into fan loyalty. Fan loyalty can be explained by four dimensions; team attraction, team trust, team involvement, and team attachment[11]. This study focuses on team attraction and team attachment. Team attraction comes from a sports fan's conscious ability to pick out their favorite teams from the other teams in that league or sport. Several factors can affect team attraction such as images, thoughts, and ideas about the team making each sports team an individual brand that must be managed[11]. Team attachment refers to the emotional connection a fan has to a sports team. Researchers have argued that sports fans can become more attached to a team if the team increases it's emotional meaning, functional knowledge, and symbolic value[11].

There are also two different types of fan loyalty; behavioral and attitudinal loyalty. Where attitudinal loyalty is more about preferring one brand or team over another, behavioral loyalty is the intention to re-engage with that brand or team[11]. Other research detaches fan loyalty from quantifiable measures like the number of favorites or retweets to individual posts[5]. This also refers to individual wins and losses not significantly affecting fan loyalty. While studying how attached Japanese soccer fans were to a local team, Yoshida, Heere, and Gordon (2015) discovered that fan community attachment, or how fans connect with other fans, is a strong predictor of future fan behavior[12]. While this connection to fan loyalty requires further research, the study points to how sports fans can become loyal to the organization and other fans as well.

2.5 Organizational communication

To reach their target demographic, organizations must employ organizational communication strategies depending on the platform. In the case of Twitter, organizations are opting to use dialogic communication. Dialogic communication is best described as a way to build relationships through the internet. Through Twitter specifically, dialogic communication is seen in an organization's ability to utilize hashtags, tweets, and favorites to facilitate conversations with followers on the platform[3]. In their 2017 study, Sundstrom & Levenshus found that among the top 25 media companies based on net income, most Twitter accounts utilized ways to interact with their followers[3]. In the case of Disney, the organization used hashtags to facilitate reoccurring campaigns such as guessing famous characters or participating in trivia where the correct answers would be retweeted by Disney's Twitter account[3].

Retweeting is a way to share a message with an even wider audience beyond what was intended by the original tweet's sender. The act of retweeting can be seen as a confirmation of ideals while acknowledging the original source[13]. Organizations that use retweets and dialogic communication are seen differently than organizations that use monologic tweets, which are best described as a bulletin board of information from the company. In their 2016 study, Lim & Lee-Won created a Twitter account for an organic food company and presented the fake company's tweets in two ways, either in a dialogic or monologic format[13]. The study shows that participants found the dialogic retweets to be more indicative of social presence than the monologic tweets. Here, social presence is best described as the feeling of interacting with the organization who made the tweets on a more personal level, as if they were in the room with the participants[13]. Seeing tweets from followers and not just the organization on the organization's timeline seemed to create more social presence than tweets solely from the organization.

2.6 Research Question

There is considerable overlap between interactivity, fan loyalty, and organizational communication[11,12,13]. These three elements will be used to explain how sports fans are satisfied through their interactions with sports organizations on Twitter. As sports organizations attempt to make their fans more loyal to their brand and image, they must understand how sports fans use Twitter and what they desire out of their experience. The pursuit of this understanding has led to the following research question:

RQ: Do sports organizations satisfy the needs of sports fans on Twitter through the use of effective organizational communication strategies?

Previous research has focused on no more than two of the proposed elements of need satisfaction at one time and rarely from the fan's perspective. This study attempts to link interactivity, fan loyalty, and organizational communication to explain how sports organizations can satisfy the gratifications sought and obtained by sports fans on Twitter.

3. Methodology

To understand the gratifications sought and obtained by sports fans on Twitter and the influence a sports organizations' organizational communication has on fan loyalty and interaction, a survey was created. The survey was created using Qualtrics and was open from February 14, 2019 to March 18, 2019. An anonymous link to the survey was posted on Twitter by the researcher where potential respondents were asked to retweet the original tweet. Some respondents were recruited informally through Reddit and the subreddit SampleSize along with personal references who were asked to forward the opportunity to their sports friends. Questions represented a synthesis of previous research on gratifications sought and obtained, fan loyalty, and interactivity questions unique to this survey[6,12]. Other questions included demographic information such as age, race, and gender. The survey began with the question "do you follow your favorite sports team on Twitter?" Respondents who answered "no" to this question were not included in the final analysis.

4. Results

Of the 173 respondents, only 48 were included in the final analysis as they reported using Twitter to follow their favorite sports team. 42% of respondents were female and 58% respondents were male.

Overall, respondents were satisfied with the sports content they consumed from their favorite sports team on Twitter (M=3.83, SD=.98). Several gratifications obtained from interacting with their favorite sports team were significantly related to this satisfaction. These factors included allowing the fan to respond to what the team has to say ($r(48)$=.33, p=.02), allowing the fan to give their input and opinion ($r(48)$=.41, p=.004), and informing the fan about upcoming games ($r(48)$=.30, p=.04). Other gratifications obtained that significantly correlated to satisfaction with a respondent's favorite team included receiving highlights after a game ($r(48)$=.41, p=.004), and learning about roster moves as they happened ($r(48)$= .40, p=.005). In addition to gratifications sought and obtained, another factor that predicted satisfaction with a respondent's favorite sports team was how often they consumed sports content on a mobile device ($r(48)$=-.31, p=.31).

However, the ability to interact with other followers ($r(48)$=.18, p=.21) was not significantly correlated with content satisfaction from the respondent's favorite sports team. Seeing retweeted content from fans ($r(48)$= .21, p=.15) and journalists ($r(48)$= .16, p=.28) was also not significantly correlated with favorite team satisfaction. Other organizational tactics such as responding directly to followers ($r(48)$= .28, p=.06) and using hashtags to organize conversation ($r(48)$= .10, p= .50) did not correlate with satisfaction with a respondent's favorite team.

In general, males and females had similar experiences with the sports content they consumed on Twitter. However, there was a significant difference between how often men and women wanted to receive highlights after a game. Women (M_{male}= 3.75, M_{female} = 4.40, $t(164)$=-2.09, p=.04) were more likely than men to seek out highlights after a game. There were no other significant differences for satisfaction of a respondent's favorite sports team or sports content in general based on gender.

5. Discussion

The data suggests that sports organizations are satisfying the needs of sports fans on Twitter. Findings on sport fan satisfaction fall in line with previous research in most cases (Gibbs, O'Reilly, & Brunette, 2014). As expected, learning about upcoming games (M=3.79, SD=1.24), and reading tweets if they couldn't watch the game on television (M=3.88, SD=1.32) were two gratifications sought by sports fans. These gratifications are news gathering

gratifications and suggest that sports fans look to Twitter to stay informed about their favorite team. In general, sports teams on Twitter seem to satisfy these gratifications.

Upon further examination, one gratification obtained had no significant correlation with sport fan satisfaction. Interacting with other followers ($r(48)=.18$, p=.21) was not significantly correlated with overall sport fan satisfaction. This finding goes against previous research on the role of interactivity in U&G research[2,7,8]. This finding suggests that sports fans don't want to interact with each other and would rather focus their attention to their favorite sports team. This also refutes the effectiveness of dialogic communication and suggests that sports fans would receive similar sport gratifications from a monologic, or bulletin board mode of communication. More research must be conducted on how this finding relates to previous research.

The survey featured a comparable number of male and female participants. In general, there were no significant differences between gender and how sports fans were satisfied by their Twitter experience. However, men and women differed in one gratification obtained. Women ($M_{female} = 4.40$) were more likely to receive highlights after a game than men ($M_{male} = 3.75$). This discrepancy may be caused by several factors. These factors may include women having less time to watch a game live, women using Twitter as their first contact with their favorite team, or other factors yet to be considered. Unfortunately, survey items do not address this question.

The findings of this study argue for more research on the role of mobile devices on sport fan satisfaction. While the study suggests that using a mobile device is correlated with satisfaction of one's favorite sports team ($r(48)=-.31$, p=.31), this area requires more research. Current research points to the role of the second screen experience and argues using a mobile device compliments traditional sport viewing on a television[8]. Recent research into the second screen experience was not represented in the final instrument as it was published after survey dissemination. The majority of respondents reported using Twitter's mobile application as their main way of interacting with their favorite sports team (M=2.00, SD=1.29). A follow-up study would include more items about how using Twitter on a mobile device affects a sports fan's satisfaction with their favorite team.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this research are limited by the small sample size. Only 48 respondents said they used Twitter to follow their favorite sports team. These findings cannot relate to sports fans on a grand scale. However, this research sheds light on questions future research can answer. First, is interacting with other fans not an important gratification sought by sports fans on Twitter? Based on previous research, this finding is unlikely[2,7,8]. However, most sports studies do not focus on fan behavior. Second, why did women and men differ in their desire to receive highlights after a game? The current survey is incapable of answering this question. With more items related to when and where sports fans engage with Twitter, perhaps this discrepancy can be identified. Finally, what is the role of mobile devices on sport fan satisfaction? Research has already found a positive correlation between sport content enjoyment and mobile device use but these are also recent findings[8].

Current literature places emphasis on sport organizations and the content they provide to sports fans. Research into how fans interact with this content is limited. This study's purpose was to fill this crucial gap in sport media research. Sports organizations are brands that must be managed and they work to build loyalty with their fanbase, especially on social media. Based on this study, sports organizations are managing their brands on Twitter in ways that sports fans are satisfied with. Still, research remains incomplete.

This study indiscriminately looked at satisfaction with a respondent's favorite sports team in general and didn't ask what sport or league their favorite team was in. This was intentional to make generalizations about sports content on Twitter. Making the distinction between a respondent's favorite team and the sport and league in which they compete in could show which leagues, sports, and teams are ahead or behind the curve in satisfying sports fans on Twitter. Future research should make these distinctions to provide sports organizations and leagues with a more complete and personalized look of their brand on Twitter.

Despite the limited sample size, the study provides sports research with more information on what sports fans desire from their favorite teams on Twitter. The study suggests that Twitter is best used as a news gathering hub where sports fans can gain access to their favorite sports team by interacting from their mobile devices. Viewing content satisfaction from the fan's perspective is difficult yet necessary. By doing so, the true effectiveness of a sport organization's Twitter campaign may be reached. The findings of this research may inspire more studies into sport fan satisfaction and how sports fans interact with sport organizations across all social media, not just Twitter.

7. References

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