

Examining the Use of Social Media in The Process of Recruiting by National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I Golf Coaches

Miles, Kathleen Brophy^{1,2}; Burch, Lauren M.³ and Pedersen, Paul M.¹

1: Indiana University, United States of America; 2: Golf Globally, United States of America;

3: Indiana University-Purdue University Columbus, United States of America

katie.brophy@gmail.com

Aim and Research Question

Facebook serves a source of promotion for sports programs, in addition to increasing brand awareness and positive brand images (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hull, Lee, Zapalac, & Stilwell, 2017; Pegoraro, Scott, & Burch, 2018). Many recent studies have examined social media within professional sport; however, no known studies have researched how National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sports teams utilize social media for recruiting purposes. The study answers the questions:

RQ1: How are coaches in the collegiate sport context using Facebook to communicate with recruits and interact with fans?

RQ2: What types of posts and post themes warrant the greatest engagement (e.g., likes, reactions, comments, shares)?

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Previous research has employed agenda setting on Facebook to examine message salience by sport media gatekeepers (Zimmerman, 2014). Agenda setting theory posits that consumers have access to what media gatekeepers make available to the public, and college coaches are defined as the gatekeepers for content on teams' Facebook pages. Within the confines of this framework, the media is successful in telling their audiences what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). With its theoretical origination pertaining to mass media, agenda setting has transitioned to a popular framework for sport studies on social media. Amateurs now create the content of the internet and set their agenda through social media platforms. Facebook serves as an invaluable source of promotion for sports programs, in addition to providing brand awareness and building positive brand images about athletes and teams (Hull et al., 2017; Pegoraro et al., 2018).

Research Design and Data Analysis

The content analysis examined the social networking practices of Division I women's golf teams in the United States. This investigation of Facebook usage patterns was conducted by collecting data from 40 programs. The study examined the most recent 50 posts, resulting in a dataset of $n = 2,000$. Following the coding format as designed by Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016), the researcher explored 21 variables per post. The study examined independent variables such as post type (e.g., text, photos, videos, hyperlinks) and post themes (e.g., team information, team promotion, alumni promotion, call to action) of Facebook posts through descriptive statistics to measure how coaches utilized social media to promote their programs and interact with recruits and stakeholders. The study analyzed usage patterns based on coaching staff demographics (e.g., gender, age) and investigated whether the use of ancillary components (e.g., multimedia, hashtags) led to greater engagement, as evidenced by the dependent variables of likes, reactions, shares, and comments. Several one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted using SPSS 24.0 to examine statistical differences in audience engagement.

Results and Discussion

Significant differences were found in engagement (dependent variables) based on independent variables post type and post theme [F(7, 1,992) = 5.47, $p < 0.001$]. Tukey's post hoc test found significance at the $p < .05$ level across all 14 categories of the variable when examining type of post and post likes. Hashtags only explained a small proportion of variance in number of comments ($R^2 = 0.002$, F(1, 1,998) = 4.28, $p < 0.05$). Chi-square analyses yielded significant findings between ranking and post theme ($X^2 = 1053$, $df = 266$, $p < .00$). The findings provide insight into how amateur teams use social media. Teams predominantly posted hyperlinks sharing articles and positive content to promote brand affinity, supporting the findings of Hull et al. (2017) and Pegoraro et al. (2018). Linking to McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda setting theory, this strategic utilization of Facebook by collegiate coaches, acting as content gatekeepers, conveyed an image of successful, positive programs that would appeal to high-level recruits. Linked accounts across myriad platforms drove further engagement and brand promotion.

Conclusion and Implications

In line with previous research (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Zimmerman, 2014) findings suggest social media provides a low-cost, high reach marketing platform to reach recruits or potential participants with targeted content, benefitting teams or leagues with potentially limited funds for marketing initiatives. This study demonstrated that hashtag usage was uncommon for most program pages; however, coaches could employ more effective or trending hashtags to increase their team's visibility on the platform. Agenda setting occurred within the context of women's golf Facebook pages in that coaches shared information about their team, and a majority of that information included team promotion. This study uncovered how ineffectively some programs are using this social media tool, and it showed that many teams failed to capitalize on the many promotional opportunities endemic to Facebook. Conclusions will expand the body of knowledge while assisting practitioners (e.g., public relations experts, strategists) in creating pathways to increase their reach within their community and across the world.

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