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Perceived Utility of Official University Athletic Twitter Accounts: The Opinions of College Athletic Administrators

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The impact of Twitter on sport organizations has been examined from a number of perspectives and theoretical frameworks (Dittmore, Sanderson, Clavio & Pegoraro, 2013). Much of that research has focused on individual motives for using Twitter, such as interactivity and information seeking, but a yet unexplored area is why organizations use Twitter. The current study examines intercollegiate athletic administrators' views of the perceived utility of Twitter as a form of marketing or communication. One hundred eighty-eight usable responses from the population of athletic directors, sport information directors, and marketing directors from 340 NCAA Division I schools were used. Results show the majority of official athletic department Twitter accounts are run by Sports Information/Media Relations and the top three target publics are alumni, students, and existing ticket holders. Additionally, three factors were identified on the scale indicating communication purpose: Interpersonal, Informational, and Promotional. For the interpersonal factor, Athletic Directors and Marketers scores statistically significantly exceeded scores of Sports Information Directors, however, classification within Division I had no statistically significant effect.

As with all new forms of communication, doubt exists as to the utility and worth of the new tools. However, as organizational budgets and resources shrink, sport organizations and their communication departments have sought to better maximize their resources. Marketers constantly aim to find new and more productive ways to build the relationship with the customer. Strong customer relationships are paramount to retaining and strengthening a customer base. Berry (1983) coined the term relationship marketing as a theory to attract, maintain, and enhance customer relationships. He emphasized while “good service is necessary to retain the relationship, good selling is necessary to enhance it” (p. 25).

One way to improve selling is through service augmentation, the ability of an organization to provide extras that other organizations cannot (Berry, 1983). Sport organizations recognize that content is an asset which can generate value for the organization. The special nature of sport marketing enables organizations to capitalize on spectator demands and generate revenue in difficult economic times (Parkhouse & Turner, 2012).

A method for an organization to accomplish this is by cornering the market on internal information and allowing its biggest fans to be “in the know” by releasing relevant content and information. Today’s technological advances have made it particularly efficient for organizations to not only disseminate content in a targeted fashion, but to also tailor that content to specific publics, and, in many cases, receive instant feedback.

The ubiquity of mobile communication tools, in particular the rapid popularity of Twitter, presents challenges for sport organizations. First, organizations must have a plan for using communication tools. Is the organization using different means to communicate to different audiences, or is it focused on one communication tool for all content? Second, given the increasing overlap between marketing and public relations functions, what function within the organization is responsible for communicating to target publics? Dittmore, Clavio, and Miloch (2012) advocate a sport promotional mix in which there is “strategic utilization and integration of communications channels designed to achieving sport marketing objectives and reinforce brand image” (p. 174).

Given the varied purposes of Twitter as a communications tool and the rapid rate of its use by college athletic departments, it would be useful to study why athletic departments use Twitter. As Twitter is often seen as a microblog, this research can have implications and be potentially generalized to other forms of social media that are considered to be blogs or microblogs. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1a: What do NCAA Division I Athletic Administrators perceive as the primary purpose or utility for the university’s official athletic Twitter feed?

RQ1b: Do differences exist based on athletic administrative position?

RQ1c: Do differences exist based on NCAA Division I affiliation?

RQ2a: Who do NCAA Division I Athletic Administrators view as the primary target public for the university’s official athletic Twitter feed?

RQ2b: Do differences exist based on athletic administrative position?

RQ2c: Do differences exist based on NCAA Division I affiliation?

RQ3: What unit in the athletic department is responsible for maintaining the university's official athletic Twitter feed?

Review of Related Literature

The functions of marketing and public relations are often distinctly different yet complementary functions within sport organizations (Stoldt, Dittmore, & Branvold, 2012). The two areas possess several commonalities. Both deal with external publics, or stakeholders, essential for the organization's existence, and both value the development of exchanges or relationships with those publics.

Yet, organizations often communicate from one official source such as the university athletic Twitter account. Occasionally, this will generate mixed messages as it might not be clear to which public that message is directed. It is with that in mind that the present study evolved.

Marketing v. Public Relations

As Stoldt and his colleagues (2012) noted, "sport marketing is the organizational function that focuses on consumers, identifies how the sport organization may meet those consumers' desires, and structures marketing programs accordingly. As a result, certain exchanges take place" (p. 3).

Sport management scholars have repeatedly emphasized the importance of this exchange process in marketing (e.g., Milne & McDonald, 1999; Shilbury, 2009) whereby the organization provides its consumers something of value in exchange for something the organization values, typically money.

This focus differs from sport public relations in at least two fundamental ways, as Stoldt et al. (2012) point out. First, while marketing appropriately focuses its attention on consumers, public relations frequently emphasizes more diverse groups of publics. Second, while the documented emphasis in marketing is on exchanges, public relations focuses on the broader concept of relationships. Clark and Mills (1979) differentiated between exchange relationships, where one party provides a benefit and expects a benefit in return, and communal relationships, in which one party provides a benefit to another party without an expectation of anything tangible in return. The key difference between marketing and public relations, then, is the focus on tangible versus intangible interchange.

Using Clark and Mills' (1979) definitions, sport marketing appears to be more closely aligned with exchange relationships, while sport public relations appears to mirror communal relationships. Despite the possible differences, both organizational functions frequently use the same resources to achieve, potentially, different results. One prominent resource available to both marketing and public relations functions is new media tools such as organizational blogs or Twitter. Part of the focus of this study was to determine whether athletics administrators viewed the purpose of the departments' Twitter account to be marketing-oriented, therefore likely within the locus of control of marketing staff, or public relations-oriented and therefore overseen by the

media relations. Understanding the outcome focus for an organizational Twitter account is important to better understand the underlying motives of the organization.

Twitter

Twitter is “a real-time information network that connects [users] to the latest information about what [they] find interesting” (Twitter Inc., 2012). The network has grown by leaps and bounds since its inception in 2006 and currently boasts over 100 million users, tweeting 250 million times per day (Twitter Inc., 2012). Utilizing only 140 characters at a time, users are able to write short, concise, and timely posts that appear in reverse chronological order.

Twitter is similar in structure to blogs, where anyone can post their thoughts, ideas, and images for anyone with an internet connection. Research has shown that “blogs appear to be...effective tools for generating long-term relational commitment between an organization and its stakeholders” (Dittmore, Stoldt, & Greenwell, 2008). As Twitter is considered a microblog, it may have the potential to create positive relationships between organizations and stakeholders.

Gainor (as quoted in Tomko, 2011) sees college athletic use of Twitter as primarily an engagement tool, thereby making two-way communication an appropriate approach to studying Twitter. Social media allows users to connect with friends and celebrities alike, who can help fans feel closer to their team, cementing the two-way relationship between the organization and its fans.

Twitter in Sport

While Twitter is still relatively new, athletes and sports teams have begun adopting and utilizing Twitter regularly. Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, and Greenwell (2010) found professional athletes mostly used Twitter to interact with fans and for purposes of personal diversion. Less common uses of Twitter among athletes examined in this study included information sharing, content, fanship, and promotion.

Kassing and Sanderson (2010) evaluated Twitter usage by professional cyclists during a selected event. They found several emergent themes among the tweets sent by the riders, including sharing of opinions and commentary, interactivity encouragement, and the cultivation of insider perspectives. Although this study approached Twitter’s utility from a parasocial interaction perspective, the uses uncovered are similar to those found in Hambrick et al. (2010).

From a social network analysis perspective, the accounts of bicycle race organizers were examined and evaluated for their utility for attracting followers and spreading information (Hambrick, 2012). The study found that race organizers combined their usage of informational and promotional tweets to attract followers. In addition, the organizers observed attracting users who had more Twitter followers helped to spread information about the sporting events more efficiently. This differs slightly from previous research (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010).

Users of Twitter who are interested in sport have also been studied. Clavio and Kian (2010), in a survey of followers of a retired athlete’s Twitter feed, discovered that the most salient reasons for users to follow the athlete included perception that the athlete is an expert at their sport, enjoyment at reading the content generated by the athlete, and uniqueness of content. This study also indicated a split in users between those interested in personally-focused fandom and those interested in the interactive elements of the medium.

Sanderson (2011) evaluated the place of Twitter and social media in college athletics, evaluating Division I athletic department policies governing the use of social media among athletes. The study revealed that policies were generally negative and restrictive in nature, emphasizing risk and punishment in relation to social media usage among athletes. These results appeared to indicate an unwelcoming perspective on social media among college athletic departments.

Pegoraro (2010) suggested Twitter can be a valuable tool for athletes to “create positive exposure, engage fans, and increase their visibility” (p. 512). Professional athletes aim to build their brand, strengthen their reputation, and raise their value for advertisers and sponsors. Athletes are used for the personality and reputation, not just their athletic prowess, and connecting with fans via Twitter can help grow that value.

The use of Twitter during times of crises in college athletics has been increasingly studied as well. Sanderson and Hambrick (2012) explored how journalists used the medium to cover the allegations about former Penn State University assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky, noting the challenges between being first and being accurate when reporting breaking news. Browning and Sanderson (2012) more closely studied how college student-athletes utilize Twitter, particularly in times of crises. They noted athletes had varied responses to critical tweets, depending on their identity beliefs, and encouraged athletic departments to be proactive in educating student-athletes on how to use Twitter strategically.

While previous research has focused on why users are following social media accounts, research has neglected to focus on why organizations would engage in social media interaction to communicate with fans and those interested in their brand.

Two Way and Dialogic Communication

Twitter allows two interested parties to engage in two-way communication to gain a better understanding of the opposite party. The concept of engagement falls in line with two-way communication models, particularly the symmetrical model, which uses both research and dialogue to produce a dynamic relationship between an organization and its publics, resulting in public relations actions that are mutually acceptable (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Grunig and Grunig (1992) argued two-way symmetrical models should be “the normative model for public relations – that it describes how excellent public relations should be practiced” (p. 291). Grunig and Grunig stressed that dialogue is one of the most important elements of the symmetrical model of public relations. In their study of dialogic communication on the Internet, Kent and Taylor (1998) defined dialogic communication as a give and take tactic, calling it a “negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions” (p. 325). Seltzer and Mitrook (2007) conducted the first empirical study to investigate the presence of these features in environmental weblogs and concluded weblogs “demonstrate many of the dialogic features and principles that are necessary for achieving the goals and objectives of public relations practitioners.” Dittmore et al. (2008) noted similar utility for sport weblogs in demonstrating dialogue; however, they cautioned organizations which do not want to hear what is being said about their business should not engage in this form of communication. Participation in two-way dialogues assumes consent that both parties are looking for, and providing, responses and reactions.

Purpose of the Study

Until new media proves to be an effective engagement tool, organizations will be slow to adopt it as a central aspect of the media relations campaign. Marketing service Experian Hitwise identified Twitter as the number two social media site in the United States, with over 182 million users (Fitzgerald, 2012). According to the Pew Research Center (2012), daily Twitter usage for the coveted 18-24 age group has increased from 9% in May 2011 to 20% as of February 2012. Additionally, the 25-34 group doubled from 5% of daily internet users to 11% in that same time period. While older subsets of the population are not using Twitter as readily, this steady increase by these marketing-desirable age groups shows that organizations need to be aware of the power of this form of new media, particularly as this media savvy group ages. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding into the perceived utility of Twitter as a new form of media and communication from the perspective of college athletic administrators, specifically Athletic Directors, Sport Information Directors, and Marketing Directors by focusing solely on the university's official athletic department Twitter accounts. As discussed previously, the study will also explore the issue of whether Twitter is a marketing or public relations function of the athletic department.

As Twitter is still a relatively new communication tool that has experienced widespread adoption by university athletic departments, better understanding the underlying motives is essential to gaining insight into the expected consequences of the tool for the organization. As other organizations begin to adopt this medium in a more widespread manner, consumers will want to understand the rationale behind this method of engagement. While organizations might argue their communication aimed at one goal, they might find they are utilizing it for another purpose, as previous research on sports journalists has demonstrated (Scheffer and Schultz, 2010).

Method

Sample

The study targeted top athletic administrators at all NCAA Division I institutions (Football Bowl Subdivision, Football Championship Subdivision and Division I with no football) focusing specifically on Athletic Directors, defined as the individual identified on the athletic website as responsible for overseeing the university athletic department; Marketing Directors, defined as the individual identified on the athletic website as the senior employee in the athletic department responsible for overseeing marketing or promotions; and Sports Information Directors (SIDs), defined as the individual identified on the athletic website as the senior employee in the athletic department responsible for media relations or sports information.

The researchers obtained email contact information for each individual by visiting the institutional athletic website and identifying the athletic director, and senior individuals in sports information and marketing ($N= 1,308$ email addresses). Each potential participant was invited via email to complete an online survey, hosted at Formsite.com. Introductory emails were sent to potential participants in February 2012 explaining the purpose of the study inviting them to participate, along with a link to the survey. Two follow up emails were sent during the months of February and March 2012 to encourage an increase in the participation rate. A total of 188 usable responses were returned, for a response rate of 18.1%.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument was focused solely on the institution's official athletic department Twitter account and consisted of three major parts. The first section contained questions regarding who was responsible for communicating using the official account and who was the intended public for the official Twitter account.

The second section included two scales regarding perceived use of Twitter to communicate to publics, purpose of communication, and importance of media sources. Items for this section were generated by the authors, all of whom have specific knowledge of intercollegiate athletic marketing and communication, using Rawlins's (2006) approach to identifying organizational stakeholders. Rawlins suggested strategies for communicating with stakeholders differs based on the stakeholder public's level of support and engagement with the organization. Since Twitter can be viewed as an effective tool to communicate dialogically with groups, identifying why, and for what purpose, university athletic departments use Twitter to reach stakeholders became the focus of the present study.

The first scale asked participants to indicate how important they perceive the use of the Twitter account to communicate to each of several publics (media, alumni, sponsors, existing ticket holders, prospective ticket holders, donors and students) on a five-point Likert scale, from "not at all important" to "very important." The second scale asked participants to indicate how important they perceive the use of the Twitter account to communicate for each of the following purposes: communicating general athletic department news, facilitating fan-athlete/coach interaction, providing marketing and promotions information, updating ongoing athletic competitions, communicating information about upcoming athletic competitions, facilitating fan-to-fan interaction, communicating personal information about athletes and/or coaches, promoting upcoming events, facilitating fan-athletic department interaction, and promoting contests and giveaways. Again, a five-point Likert scale was used, from "not at all important" to "very important." The last section focused on demographics, asking participants to identify which position most closely resembles their own (Athletic Director, Marketing Director, or Sport Information Director), school affiliation (FBS, FCS, or Division I), and number of years they have held their position.

Data Analysis & Reporting

Results were analyzed using IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) 20. Factor analysis was used to identify common factors which explained the primary purpose of the university's athletic department Twitter account (RQ1a). MANOVAs were used to discover differences in perceptions based on administrative position (RQ1b) and NCAA affiliation (RQ1c). Descriptive statistics were employed to examine athletic administrators' primary target public (RQ2a, RQ2b, and RQ2c) and the function responsible for maintaining the official Twitter account (RQ3).

Results

Demographic Information

By affiliation, the responses were almost evenly split between FBS ($n= 61$), FCS ($n= 63$), and Division I without football ($n= 64$). The majority of participants were Sport Information Directors ($n= 94$), followed by Marketing Directors ($n= 59$), and Athletic Directors ($n=36$). The average years held by position was longest for Athletic Directors ($M= 8.97$), followed by Sports Information Directors ($M= 8.72$), and Marketing Directors ($M= 4.21$). Table 1 illustrates cell sizes for respondents based on position and affiliation.

Table 1 - Frequencies of respondents by position and affiliation ($n=188$)

Affiliation	Athletic Director	Marketing	Sports Information
FBS ($n=36$)	11	16	34
FCS ($n=58$)	16	18	29
Division I ($n=94$)	9	24	31

Approximately 51.9% of participants reported the SID/Media Relations person was primarily responsible for running the official athletic department Twitter account, followed by 30.7% responding it was a joint SID/Marketing effort. For the question, “who is primarily the intended target public for the Twitter account?” participants identified three primary target groups: alumni (33.0%), students (23.8%), and existing ticket holders (23.2%). Participants were statistically significantly less concerned with using Twitter to engage with prospective ticket holders (9.2%), media (8.1%), and donors (2.7%). Table 2 shows crosstabulation by Position held, Athletic Director, Marketing Director, or Sports Information Director, while Table 3 shows crosstabulation by Affiliation, FBS, FCS, or Division I without football.

Table 2 - Who is the primarily intended target public for the Twitter account (by position)?
(*n*=188)

Public (total %)	Athletic Director	Marketing	Sports Information
Alumni (33%)	41.2%	22.4%	36.6%
Students (23.8%)	26.5%	27.6%	20.4%
Existing Ticket Holders (23.2%)	11.8%	36.2%	19.4%
Prospective Ticket Holders (9.2%)	5.9%	6.9%	11.8%
Media (8.1%)	2.9%	6.9%	10.8%
Donors (2.7%)	11.8%	0.0%	1.1%
Sponsors (0.0%)	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Table 3 - Who is the primarily intended target public for the Twitter account (by affiliation)?
(*n*=188)

Public (total %)	FBS	FCS	Division I
Alumni (32.4%)	31.1%	46.0%	20.3%
Students (23.4%)	6.6%	23.8%	39.1%
Existing Ticket Holders (22.3%)	37.7%	12.7%	17.2%
Prospective Ticket Holders (9.0%)	11.5%	7.9%	7.8%
Media (8.0%)	8.2%	6.3%	9.4%
Donors (2.7%)	3.3%	3.2%	1.6%
Sponsors (0.0%)	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Communicate to Publics

For the scale asking participants to indicate how important they perceive the use of the Twitter account to communicate to publics, multivariate analysis of variance was used to examine the interaction between job position and intended publics. An overall MANOVA using a Bonferroni adjustment was significant (Wilks' $\Lambda = .833$, exact $F(14, 360) = 2.465$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .087$). Table 4 illustrates full MANOVA results. The overall MANOVA examining the

interaction between institution affiliation (FBS, FCS, or Division I without football) and intended publics was nonsignificant.

Table 4 - MANOVA summary table for Communicate to Publics

Source	MS	MSE	F	p	η^2	1- β
<i>Between Subjects</i>						
Media	.225	1.288	.174	.840	.002	.002
Alumni	2.150	.477	4.510	.012	.046	.046
Sponsors	6.184	1.263	4.897	.008	.050	.050
Existing Ticket Holders	.259	.589	.440	.645	.005	.005
Prospective Ticket Holders	.060	.708	.084	.919	.001	.001
Donors	.130	.800	.163	.850	.002	.002
Students	1.060	.537	1.972	.142	.021	.021

Note: Each variable has $df=2$, error $df= 186$ for all variables.

For *Alumni*, the overall mean rating of the SID ($M = 4.606$) significantly exceeded the mean rating of Marketing Directors ($M = 4.271$), $p = .012$. Sports Information Directors were significantly more interested in communicating with alumni than Marketing Directors.

For *Sponsors*, the overall mean rating of Athletic Directors ($M = 3.861$) significantly exceeded the mean rating of the SID ($M = 3.298$), $p = .034$. For *Sponsors*, the overall mean rating of Athletic Directors ($M = 3.861$) significantly exceeded the mean rating of Marketing Directors ($M = 3.136$), $p = .008$. Athletic Directors were significantly more concerned with using Twitter to communicate to sponsors than either Sports Information Directors or Marketing Directors. No other statistically significant interactions were observed. Table 5 details all mean scores for Communicate to Publics by Position.

Table 5 - Means for Communicate to Public by Position (n=189)

Public	Athletic Director	Marketing	Sports Information
Media	3.833	3.831	3.734
Alumni	4.389	4.271	4.606
Sponsors	3.861	3.136	3.298
Existing Ticket Holders	4.472	4.322	4.362
Prospective Ticket Holders	4.417	4.356	4.351
Donors	4.222	4.136	4.213
Students	4.500	4.780	4.585

Twitter Purpose

An exploratory factor analysis using Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization was used on the items in the scale measuring the purpose of using the Twitter account to communicate. The final analysis revealed three factors which explained 62.56% of the variance. The three factors were named *Interpersonal* (eigenvalue of 3.340), *Informational* (eigenvalue of 1.902), and *Promotional* (eigenvalue of 1.015). Each factor was accepted as Kaiser's eigenvalue rule asserts that factors with eigenvalues less than 1.0 should not be retained as the factor would contain less information than the average item (DeVellis, 2012). Individual item loadings were examined to ensure items loaded significantly on their factors and Cronbach's alpha scores were assessed for each factor. Table 6 illustrates factor loadings as well Cronbach's alpha scores for each of the factors.

Table 6 - Factor Loadings for Exploratory Factor Analysis with Varimax Rotation of Twitter Communication Purpose

Item	α	Factor Loading
Interpersonal	.754	
Facilitating fan-athlete/coach interaction		.789
Facilitating fan-to-fan interaction		.785
Communicating personal information about athletes and/or coaches		.738
Facilitating fan-athletic department interaction		.610
Informational	.670	
Communicating general athletic department news		.833
Updating ongoing athletic competitions		.807
Communicating information about upcoming athletic competitions		.593
Promotional	.638	
Providing marketing and promotions information		.799
Promoting upcoming events		.665
Promoting contests and giveaways		.640

Following the EFA, a multivariate analysis of variance was performed on the scale regarding the purpose of using the Twitter account to communicate to examine if job position affected a participants rating of the factors. The overall MANOVA using a Bonferroni adjustment for Position and the three Factors was statistically significant (Wilks' $\Lambda = .840$, exact $F(6, 368) = 5.583$, $p = .020$, $\eta^2 = .083$). For the *Interpersonal* factor, the overall mean rating of Athletic Directors ($M = 3.958$) significantly exceeded the mean rating of the SID ($M = 3.218$), $p = .000$. For the *Interpersonal* factor, the overall mean rating of Marketing Directors ($M = 3.610$) significantly exceeded the mean rating of the SID ($M = 3.218$), $p = .007$. No other statistically significant interactions were observed. Table 7 illustrates full MANOVA results. Additionally, the overall MANOVA examining the interaction between institutional affiliation (FBS, FCS, or Division I without football) and the three factors was not statistically significant. Table 8 shows the means for each of the factors by Position, while Table 8 shows the means for each institutional affiliation (FBS, FCS, and Division I without football).

Table 7 - MANOVA Summary Table for Position x Factors for Twitter Purpose

Source	MS	MSE	F	p	η^2	1- β
<i>Between Subjects</i>						
Interpersonal	7.842	.591	13.276	.000	.125	.125
Informational	.690	.433	1.595	.206	.017	.017
Promotional	.432	.731	.591	.555	.006	.006

Note: Each variable has $df= 2$. Error $df= 186$ for all variables

Table 8 - Means for Factors for Twitter Purpose by Position (n=189)

Public	Athletic Director	Marketing	Sports Information
Interpersonal	3.958	3.610	3.218
Informational	4.435	4.282	4.475
Promotional	4.361	4.384	4.241

Table 9 - Means for Factors for Twitter Purpose by Affiliation (n=189)

Public	FBS	FCS	Division I without football
Interpersonal	3.525	3.540	3.375
Informational	4.410	4.429	4.375
Promotional	4.279	4.302	4.333

Discussion

The present study sought to examine the perceived usage and utility of Twitter by NCAA Division I athletic administrators. As a newer form of communication, some debate exists as to whether Twitter is a public relations tool or marketing tool which organizations can exploit. This study sought to answer several research questions which would shed light on how Twitter is being used in NCAA Division I athletics.

RQ1a: What do NCAA Division I Athletic Administrators perceive as the primary purpose or utility for the university's official athletic Twitter feed?

Factor analysis revealed athletic administrators believed Twitter's usage falls into one of three primary purposes: *Interpersonal*, *Informational*, and *Promotional*. Further analysis showed statistically significant differences, however, in the perceived importance of those purposes by athletic administrative position and by NCAA divisional affiliation. As such, it is possible to draw several statistically significant conclusions from the present study.

First, the emergence of three primary purposes for Twitter's usage lends new knowledge to the growing body of literature on Twitter usage in sports. While elements of these factors have been uncovered in prior research on Twitter and sports (e.g., Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010), no prior investigation into the usage choices of college athletic departments has been undertaken. The *Interpersonal* factor contained four individual items focused mainly on Twitter's role in facilitating two-way dialogic communication, either between the organization and a targeted public, or between publics. This factor validates the perceived benefit of Twitter as a form of two-way symmetrical communication. The *Informational* factor contained three individual items focused primarily on Twitter's role in one-way communication, particularly information dissemination. In this sense, Twitter also functions in a traditional public relations capacity, by communicating information to targeted publics and generating publicity. The *Promotional* factor contained three items focused on Twitter's utility in promoting upcoming activities. While also a one-way communication tactic, the *Promotional* factor differs from the *Informational* factor in that promotions are typically housed within a marketing function.

RQ1b: Do differences exist based on athletic administrative position?

Next, Athletic Administrators differed statistically significantly on their perceptions of the primary purpose of the athletic department's official Twitter account. Athletic Directors ($M=3.958$; $p=.000$) and Marketing Directors ($M=3.610$; $p=.007$) were statistically significantly more concerned than SIDs ($M=3.218$) in communicating *Interpersonal* information via Twitter. Given that SIDs traditionally function in a tactical, *Informational* role, this finding is logical. Research by Stoldt (2000) and Stoldt, Miller, and Comfort (2001) indicated Sports Information Directors were largely viewed, both by themselves and by athletic directors, as playing the role of communication technician. A more recent study by Ruibley and Fall (2009) indicated Athletic Directors still placed a high degree of importance on tactical execution from SIDs, though it was no longer the dominant function.

Given the average number of years SIDs who participated in the study had held their position ($M=8.72$), and the fact that 66.7% of participants selecting *Media* as singular intended target public were SIDs, the present study would suggest that despite changing perceptions of Athletic Directors toward the role of Sports Information Directors, most SIDs still view their job as *Informational*. However, the disconnect between Athletic Directors' attitudes towards interpersonal Twitter use and those of SIDs indicates that Athletic Directors may not be fully aware of the methods being employed by SIDs in the utilization and maintenance of the Twitter feed. This finding falls in line with research by Pratt (2013) who observed a similar disconnect in understanding for the duties of the public relations function and the marketing function in her qualitative study of 12 NCAA Division I athletic directors.

The findings of this study also suggest that athletic departments at the Division I level may need to reevaluate the control and content mechanisms of their Twitter accounts. The emphasis on interpersonal communication from both athletic directors and marketers may

require a different personnel approach to social media staffing, since neither the marketing nor sports information functions specialize in interpersonal communication of the kind required by social media. Furthermore, data indicate that SIDs are either wholly or partly in charge of nearly 90% of athletic department Twitter feeds. While SIDs are obviously the best suited to provide informational elements, athletic directors should consider creating a hybrid approach to Twitter feed content creation and management. This approach would ideally blend the marketing and sports information departments' concepts and ideas, while also incorporating interpersonal communication specialists to ensure that target markets and stakeholders are being effectively and fully engaged via Twitter. It may behoove athletic directors to consider creating a separate social media department within their administrative tree, since the results of this study indicate that Twitter usage does not neatly or exclusively fall within the parameters of either marketing or sports information.

RQ1c: Do differences exist based on NCAA Division I affiliation?

No significant differences were found among Division I affiliations (FBS, FCS, Division I without football) regarding Athletic Administrators' perceptions of the primary purpose of the athletic department's official Twitter account. In fact, as Table 9 illustrates, the mean scores for each factor was nearly identical across Division I affiliation.

This observation was particularly interesting given similar cell sizes among the affiliations: FBS (n=61), FCS (n=63), and Division I without football (n=64). One possible explanation for this non-significance could be that Twitter's utility to athletic departments is not bounded by money. Given the assumption that FBS athletic departments have the largest annual budgets, it would make sense to assume FBS administrators might use Twitter for different purposes as they may have more resources to dedicate to managing their Twitter accounts. Since Twitter is a low-cost communications tool (it is free to register an account), financial resources are not relevant.

In addition, it would seem athletic departments across the United States use Twitter for the same purposes, suggesting a lack of innovation or creativity. Athletic departments are advised to evaluate best practices from other industries to see what sort of creative and branding efforts might be applied to college athletics. Oreo famously took advantage of a power outage during the 2013 Super Bowl to create a real-time image on Twitter which reinforced its brand, suggesting a person can "still dunk in the dark". These types of real-time Tweets which cross pop culture and industry may prove effective in brand development.

RQ2a: Who do NCAA Division I Athletic Administrators view as the primary target public for the university's official athletic Twitter feed?

Athletic Administrators in the study overwhelmingly selected *Alumni* (33.0%) as the primarily intended public. Only two other publics were identified by greater than 10% of respondents: *Students* (23.8%) and *Existing Ticket Holders* (23.2%). These results would indicate Athletic Administrators view Twitter as perhaps more useful as a marketing tool than as a public relations tool since *Alumni*, *Students*, and *Existing Ticket Holders* all represent audiences that may be receptive to marketing and promotions messages. The emphasis on the interpersonal elements of Twitter that was discovered in the factor analysis conducted on the data further supports this possibility. Of the possible target groups provided in the survey, it can be argued

that the three groups indicated above provide the greatest possibility for interpersonal interaction via Twitter, as well as the most beneficial return on such interaction. Alumni, in particular, provide a fertile ground for socially mediated interpersonal interaction, as these individuals are likely to purchase tickets and consume materials generated by the team. The connection that alumni have with their alma mater is arguably more accessible via social media to athletic administrators than the other groups identified.

RQ2b: Do differences exist based on athletic administrative position?

Sports Information Directors ($M = 4.606$; $p = .012$) were statistically significantly more concerned with using Twitter to communicate to *Alumni* than Marketing Directors ($M = 4.271$). 36.6% of SIDs identified *Alumni* as most important intended target public for Twitter while only 22.4% of Marketing Directors identified *Alumni*. Athletic Directors also chose *Alumni* as the primary intended target public (41.2%; $M = 4.389$), however no statistically significant difference between other positions was observed, possibly due to the response rate for Athletic Directors.

The emphasis placed on *Alumni* by SIDs is curious given the traditional role of information tactician and media relations expert. SIDs may view alumni as opinion leaders on social media. Since alumni are likely to enter into the team's social media sphere with already-existent positive feelings towards the team and the brand, SIDs may hope that alumni will retweet important school messages, encourage friends to attend games, and participate in contests and other interactive activities via social media --- and that those activities will be shared by alumni with their social media contacts and friends.

Additionally, Athletic Directors ($M = 3.861$; $p = .008$ & $p = .034$) are statistically significantly more concerned with using Twitter to communicate to *Sponsors* than Marketers ($M = 3.136$) or SIDs ($M = 3.298$). This finding suggests Athletic Directors may be out of touch with regard to primary audience for Twitter. Clearly, Athletic Directors have numerous responsibilities in their positions, and keeping *Sponsors*, since they represent a large revenue source, happy may be more important to Athletic Directors than other administrative positions. Interestingly, however, none of the participants identified *Sponsors* as the primary target public for the Twitter feed, suggesting that respondents uniformly believe Twitter not to be an effective way to engage in business-to-business communication.

Further, as shown in Table 2, none of the three groups of administrators viewed prospective ticket holders as one of the most important publics to reach through Twitter. It was expected that Marketing Directors in particular would have been highly concerned with promoting the sale of tickets in this regard through the department's Twitter account. Curiously, the data showed SIDs were more likely to view prospective ticket holders as the primary Twitter target than either Marketing Directors or Athletic Directors.

RQ2c: Do differences exist based on NCAA Division I affiliation?

No statistically significant differences in the perceived usage of Twitter were observed among the three NCAA Division I subdivisions (FBS, FCS, and Division I without football). However, Division I Athletic Administrators did differ in who they view as the most important target public for the official Twitter feed.

Division I without football administrators were far more likely (39.1%) to select *Students* as the singular most important target public as compared to FCS (23.8%) and FBS (6.6%) administrators. Division I without football schools typically are smaller than FBS and FCS institutions and may view engagement with the student body as far more critical to the success of the overall athletic enterprise than FBS, and possibly FCS, institutions which have access to more sponsorship and media rights revenues.

Further, because Division I without football institutions do not offer football, there may be less pressure to utilize ticket sales as a budgetary driver. Providing opportunities to connect with the student fan base and drive traffic to events is crucial. It may also be possible that Division I schools may lack alumni who live in close enough proximity to the school to make a difference in terms of ticket purchases or other fanship activities. Student bodies may represent a much closer and more stable group, and one which must be cultivated far more consistently than at larger institutions.

As illustrated in Table 3 earlier, FBS administrators were much more likely (37.7%) to view *Existing Ticket Holders* as the singular most important target public as compared to FCS (12.7%) and Division I (20.3%) administrators. Since FBS schools are largely driven by fans and donations, ensuring strong relationships with existing ticketholders, who are often donors, is imperative. Many FBS institutions are focused on filling 70,000-person stadiums for football in order to generate revenue. Maintaining positive relationships with existing customers is paramount, especially with the uncertainty of positive results college athletics and the need to cultivate a consistent attendance figure for budgetary purposes. Additionally, it is likely that FBS institutions' existing ticket holders consist of a sizeable amount of non-alumni or casual ticket buyers, who may be swayed by other entertainment opportunities, such as professional sport options.

As evidence of that, FBS administrators' top three targeted publics for Twitter were *Existing Ticket Holders*, *Alumni*, and *Prospective Ticket Holders*, reinforcing the importance of revenue generation in FBS schools. Comparatively, the top three observed targeted publics for FCS administrators were *Alumni*, *Students*, and *Existing Ticketholders*; while the top three targeted publics for Division I without football administrators were *Students*, *Alumni*, and *Existing Ticket Holders*.

RQ3: What function in the athletic department is responsible for maintaining the university's official athletic Twitter feed?

More than half of the study's participants (53.4%) identified Sports Information/Media Relations as the department responsible for maintaining the university's official athletic Twitter feed. An additional 30.7% indicated it was a shared responsibility between Sports Information and Marketing, while only 13.2% indicated Marketing primarily handled the account.

Interestingly, when looking at the differences by division affiliation, only 37.7% of FBS schools identified Sports Information/Media Relations as the responsible department, while 42.6% of FBS schools indicated it was a joint responsibility between Sports Information and Marketing. This finding contrasted greatly with observations from the other divisions where 66.1% of FCS administrators and 54.8% of Division I without football administrators identified Sports Information/Media Relations as solely responsible for maintaining the Twitter account.

As with other findings in this study, this observation suggests FBS schools devote more resources to revenue generation and view Twitter as a tool to help achieve marketing objectives.

FCS and Division I without football administrators, it would appear, may feel Twitter's utility lies more with information dissemination since Sports Information is the department primarily responsible for maintaining the official account. For these schools, the Twitter feed may be viewed as little more than an extension of the press release, where athletic departments provide a one-way channel of current happenings in athletics. While outside the scope of this study, it would be interesting to evaluate whether the content of the messages in hybrid SID/Marketing Twitter accounts varied statistically significantly from those Twitter accounts managed solely by sports information.

Limitations

Overall response rate was low (18.1%), with the Athletic Directors response rate lower than found in literature (e.g., Cooper & Weight, 2011). This may have been attributable to several factors. Not all athletic directors publish their email address publicly, so several surveys were sent to administrative assistants. As athletic directors are typically very time crunched, the survey may not have been a priority. Additionally, the time period for the survey overlapped with March Madness. Many initial emails came back with “out of office” replies, as many athletic directors travel during March Madness.

As some of the participants pointed out in emails back to the researchers, overlap may have occurred in the instrument, particularly in the area of targeted publics. Some participants rightly felt that *Alumni* may also be *Existing Ticket Holders*. Future studies should tease out the specific publics in more detail.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to NCAA Division I athletic directors, marketing managers, and sports information directors. Caution should be exhibited when attempting to generalize this study's results to other Divisions of intercollegiate sport. Future research should examine whether differences exist in the use of Twitter between NCAA Divisions.

Future Research

As a result of this research, several avenues of potential research have opened. One would be examining the perceptions athletic administrators have of how Twitter should be used against the ways in which athletic departments actually use Twitter. This could be accomplished by performing a content analysis on a sample of university athletic department tweets to identify how they are using Twitter, and comparing those results to this or subsequent studies examining the perceived utility of Twitter. A second research option would be to examine athletic departmental perceived usage of Twitter against the reasons why people follow the official athletic Twitter account. A survey of followers of the official Twitter account could be performed to identify why they are choosing to follow the Twitter account. Finally, while none of the respondents identified *Sponsors* as a target public, Athletic Directors rated *Sponsors* as more important than either Marketers or SIDs. Further research should explore how Twitter might be used to aid in Sponsor relations and fulfillment.

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