The Influence of Social Media on College Athletes

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Ryan Wells

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received
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Signature _____ Date _____

Ryan Wells

Approved _____ Date _____

Tsai-Hsuan Ku, Department of Engineering and Society

Fable of Tomorrow

Mike had always been the star athlete of his hometown. Whether it was baseball, basketball, or football, to other athletes his age it seemed unfair. By the time he was a freshman in high school, Mike was the starting quarterback and best player on the team. The first college recruitment letter came the spring of his sophomore year, and by the spring of his junior year he had already committed to a full athletic scholarship at a NCAA D1 university.

Once Mike arrived at the university to which he had been recruited, he continued to thrive. He was playing great, his teammates liked him, and he was treated as a celebrity on campus. In Mike's mind he was living the dream he'd imagined since he was a kid and was invincible. This all changed one morning when he began his routine of checking social media, but this time he only saw pictures and stories of himself. A story had gotten loose of previously deleted tweets Mike had made when he was a sophomore in high school. The tweets were derogatory towards a group of people and many of his followers began to think negatively of Mike. He began receiving hateful messages on twitter from people who were fans of his team, as well as from people he didn't even know. When Mike tried to respond and defend himself saying that he was young and that wasn't who he really was, the tweets back only got worse. The situation went from bad to worse when Mike was called into the head coaches office and where he was met by all of the team's coaches and the university's head of human resources. After discussing the incident, the coaches and university personnel informed Mike that he would be losing his scholarship and his place on the team. The university had never seen an incident like this, and as they had no set course of action for an event such as this, they felt that protecting the university's public image was most important.

The year after Mike left the team, he transferred universities and began to work on fixing his public image. At this university there were policies regarding social media use among players, as well as programs implemented to inform athletes of the potential dangers of social media, and how to use it to their benefit by creating a good public image.

Introduction

Sports and social media are two of the largest consumers of peoples' attentions around the world. Millions of people around the world are sports fans, with some having incredibly deep connections to teams and players. With the rapid advancement of technology, most of these people now have the ability to communicate with each other at the push of a button through different social media platforms. In late January 2020, retired NBA player Kobe Bryant and his daughter Gianna tragically passed away in a helicopter crash (Nuñez, 2020). This news was shocking for people across the globe, and this was made apparent by the large amount of social media posts that followed the untimely death. The number of social media posts made mourning the loss of Bryant was greater than the number of posts made about the House impeachment decision against Trump in December 2019. What began as just platforms for people to see what their friends and others are doing; social media has become a major hub for sharing and accessing information. One of the largest platforms that has seen immense growth over the past decade is Twitter. There are two major aspects of Twitter that make it unique and important when it comes to the sharing and accessing of information. The first is that anyone, anywhere can tweet what is on their mind. This means that politicians, athletes, and everyday people can share their opinions and information, whether or not it is true or false. This leads into the second important aspect of Twitter, which is how easy it is to share and access any tweet. Retweet and like features allow people to share tweets that they enjoy or think are important, which can then

be seen by all of their followers. This in turn leads to others retweeting and liking, resulting in an exponential effect allowing the possibility for millions of people to receive the information. All of this information floating around, being retweeted and liked and/or disliked allows people to access new ideas and thoughts all from the scrolling of an app. The ease of using Twitter and its ability to reach users worldwide provides a digital medium with significant influential potential of target populations.

Rationale

Twitter is a prime example of a digital media app that has changed the way people share and access information, and there are many different demographics that utilize it. A demographic that has seen an increase in Twitter usage since its creation is college athletes. College athletes use Twitter for a plethora of reasons, including as a social medium, a tool for activism, and a way to communicate with fans and players. Athletes are a unique group of people in the sense that they have many different groups of people looking at them with different interests. Fans want players to be interactive and contactable, while coaches and universities want all of their athletes to perform at a high level while maintaining a positive image as they are representatives of the university. The Twitter activity for the majority of athletes is likely appropriate. However, in some cases athletes have written and shared inappropriate tweets that create public relations issues for the athletic programs and the university (Browning & Sanders, 2013). As a result, athletic programs have begun to create and change policies regarding twitter and social media use among athletes in order to reduce and prevent negative consequences from arising. These precautions include researching the Twitter activity of potential players, creating posting policies, and enforcing punishments for inappropriate social media behavior. Twitter not only has the potential of negative consequences for players, it also offers them a platform through

which they can express ideas and promote activism. It is in this context that Twitter has the potential to help shape an athlete's presentation and communication skills. For example, college athletes can use tweets to draw attention to whatever cause they are adamant about, increasing access to their ideas and informing their audience about their cause. This activism can take many forms, such as promoting a petition (Hull, 2014), or standing up for racial equality (Yan, Pegoraro, & Watanabe, 2018).

Problem Statement and Guiding Questions

With many different social groups having different interests regarding college athletes, Twitter can be used as a technical medium for athletes to positively present themselves and communicate with these groups. The influential potential of Twitter is the focus of this research proposal. In this thesis, I aim to study the role Twitter plays in cultivating fan-player interaction for college athletes. My research investigation will focus on two dimensions: 1) Player-Twitter-Fans relationships; 2) Self-image building and public relations strategy.

This investigation will be guided by the following research questions. First, how are college athletes using Twitter as a platform to interact with fans and what social interactions does Twitter bring into the cultivation of the fan-player relationship? Finally, how does Twitter shape college athletes' self-image, public image, and the team's public relations strategy?

Review of Literature

A significant amount of research has already been completed on the relationship between social media and sports, as well as the use of Twitter among college athletes. When first examining the prior research, it is important to begin by looking at the overarching relationship between social media and sports. Social media platforms are still a relatively new concept used by sports teams and players, and one important aspect of it is how it enables fan engagement. A

recent study done by Vale and Fernandes (2018) sought to gain insight into the motivations that fuel engagement between fans and European football clubs on Facebook. Their research involved giving participants surveys with questions regarding "demographics, motivations, and dimensions of social media engagement behavior". Within this research they broke up fan engagement into six categories: the need for information, entertainment, personal identity, integration and social interaction, empowerment, remuneration, and brand love. Their research showed that the need for information, empowerment, and brand love were the most influential factors of fan engagement. Although this research was conducted using Facebook rather than Twitter, these results are still important for their relevance to the research questions being investigated in this thesis in that it shows why fans are using social media. By understanding why fans are using social media, we can begin to look into how these different forms of engagement are used between college athletes and fans, and how this shapes the content of the Tweets and relationships between the two groups.

To better understand the potential impacts of this form of social media, it is important to review the research literature that examines Twitter use among college athletes, specifically the player-fan relationships. Sanderson & Truax (2014) looked into what is referred to as "maladaptive parasocial interaction expressions" made to college athletes on Twitter. These expressions are "hateful and vitriolic messages directed at athletes". Their research involved collecting tweets made to a former Alabama football player and examining the content. Through their investigation they found that they were able to place the tweets into five different categories based on their content. The categories included belittling, mocking, sarcasm, threats, and support. They found that while the majority of tweets were in support of the player, roughly 25% were placed in one of the first four negative categories. This indicated that while social media

can have positive impacts on athletes, it also highlights the potential dangers. These negative tweets can put immense stress on the athletes and potentially impact their well-being. Sanderson & Truax recognize this and believe that it is important for athletic departments to be cognizant of their athlete's social media use and psyche. The authors offer a few potential practices for athletic departments to implement to ensure this occurs including offering social media education seminars and being proactive in aiding the players who have been negatively affected. The importance of this research to the proposed thesis research is that it highlights the potential dangers of player-fan interactions and the necessary steps for athletic departments and coaches to reduce the risks.

While the main focus of this thesis regards the use of Twitter by college athletes and the player-fan interactions that are created through the app, it is also relevant to look at how athletic department public relations are impacted by Twitter. An analysis by Eric Bentley in 2012 focuses on college athletes' social media use and the approaches athletic departments might use to deal with potential public relations issues that can arise (Bentley, 2012). The purpose of this analysis was an attempt to find best practices athletic departments might follow in guiding regarding athletes' positive usage of social media. Through his research Bentley recommended three practices: do not ban athletes' use of social media, place reasonable restrictions on the use of social media and then educate the athletes on the dangers, and evaluate the content of social media postings on a case by case basis and with extreme caution. These recommendations arise from keeping the athletes' best interests in mind while not enforcing complete control over them. Bentley's analysis provided helpful insight for this thesis by demonstrating how social media has the ability to shape athletes' public image as well as the overall public image of the organization. This substantive review of prior research conducted on college athletes and social media offers

an adequate starting place for this thesis, and further substantiates that the research questions

being investigated will contribute to the advancement of research on this topic.

STS framework

This research uses actor-network theory (ANT) to address how multiple social groups

utilize a powerful communication technology to redefine their participation in college sport.

ANT is a social theory that views everything in a system of interconnected networks (Latour,

1996). These networks consist of both human actors and non-human actants such as technology.

ANT focuses on the idea that all of the human actors and non-human actants in a network are

constantly shaping and influencing one another. These interactions can be between humans and

other humans, humans and non-humans, and also between humans through the use of non-human

actants. This idea of bringing in new actors and changing or aligning their ideas or interests is

known as "translation".

The research questions examined through this thesis target two main groups of people:

college athletes and sports fans. Within the actor-network theory these two groups will serve as

the human actors. Twitter, which is the communication technology the research questions are

addressing, serves as the non-human actor. Actor-network theory compliments the first research

question concerning athlete and fan interactions by looking at whether Twitter is a translator for

the interests of the athletes and those of the fans. This aligns directly with the research goal of

this thesis which looks to examine the human to human interaction through a non-human

technology in an effort to determine the extent to which this digital medium has an impact on the

interaction. The research question focusing on the content of the tweets made by and between

college athletes and fans also can be framed through ANT as it examines if the non-human actant

Twitter has translated players and fans. Through the use of ANT, this thesis will be more adept to finding answers to the research questions.

Method

A qualitative research method will be utilized in answering the previously mentioned research questions as data will be participant responses collected through conducting interviews with a variety of different college athletes who use Twitter. These interviews will begin with UVA athletes who currently use or have used Twitter in the past. To narrow the scope of the interviews, athletes from only two sports will be considered for interviews. The two sports include men's basketball and football. The majority of the survey questions posed to the athletes will focus on their experience using Twitter. However, additional questions will be used to explore their knowledge on how influential the app can be, as well as their overall views on how impactful social media can be. A full list of interview questions can be found in the appendix. In addition to the player interviews, there will be one other method used in collecting the data needed for research. This will be through interviewing fans about their interactions with college athletes through Twitter. These interactions will include direct conversation, as well as indirect contact through likes and retweets. This data will give insight into how fans view the athletes and the image they are portraying. Additionally, if specific tweets or Twitter users are mentioned during the interviews, these tweets and users will also be analyzed. Once all of the data is collected, a qualitative analysis will be completed to answer the proposed research questions.

Data analysis

The first data collected was through interviews of college athletes on the UVA football and basketball teams. The interview questions in the appendix were asked to multiple different athletes and their qualitative answers were recorded. Fans were also asked similar interview

questions and their qualitative answers were recorded as well. Through these responses, multiple

general common trends occurred. The first trend was with respect to the motivation to download

Twitter and create an account. Nearly all of the athletes interviewed stated that the main reason

they created an account was in order to stay connected to other players and their friends, as well

as a platform used for recruitment. This was consistent during the fan interviews, with the

majority wanting to stay informed about the sports and players they like, as well as stay

connected with their friends. The athletes also stated that while they do not post many original

tweets, they consistently like and retweet teammates tweets, as well as tweets from professional

athletes. The main content of these tweets regarded personal and team success, as well as tweets

providing advice. Fans seemed to create tweets around the same amount, yet it seemed as though

they retweeted and liked more tweets, and a wider variety of content. These were some of the

common themes that were found from the interviews.

While there were multiple themes discovered in the interviews, this investigation focused

on two dimensions. The first aimed to study Player-Twitter-Fans relationships. While the

majority of the athletes interviewed had never personally had a negative experience with a fan on

the app, many had seen teammates and people they follow receive negative tweets attempting to

diminish their success and attempt to have an impact on the players. A fourth year on the UVA

basketball team stated that "there is a large spotlight on UVA athletes, especially after having

won the national championship. There are a lot of times people will tweet things to try and take

away from our success." However, it was also found that when athletes received these negative

tweets, they ignored them and did not respond in an attempt to not provoke the situation.

Although it was apparent that the athletes interviewed had seen negative tweets from fans and

other Twitter users, multiple athletes described how they have also seen many positive tweets

receiving praise from fans. A second year on the UVA football team described a tweet he had seen after losing a football game that discussed how even though they lost, they gave it their all and the fan was excited for future games. The interviewee said this was big for his morale as it gave him a drive to improve and try to win the next game. When interviewing fans, it became apparent that the majority of fans follow a wide variety of different college and professional athletes. While none of the interviewees created their own tweets, nearly all of them were very active on Twitter, retweeting and liking many tweets from their favorite athletes. The fans also mentioned that they have seen much more positive content on twitter than negative content, and they also appreciated when an athlete would interact with their fans.

This leads into the next finding regarding athletic organization's social media and public image strategies. Nearly all of the players interviewed stated that on multiple occasions social media coaches have been brought in to talk to the athletes. These coaches instructed the athletes on how to smartly use Twitter. This included only posting, liking, and retweeting tweets that are positive in nature and nothing that could be taken out of context and spun in a negative way. The coaches also provided instruction to the athletes on what to do if they receive negative or attacking tweets, telling them that it is best not to get involved and further instigate the situation. During the interviews, none of the athletes felt as though their organizations were telling them what they can or can't post on social media, rather they were completely understanding of the policies and procedures set in place and agreed that they were important. One of the fans interviewed strengthened the importance of athletes knowing how to present themselves on social media with a story from the spring of 2020. At UVA there was an incident that had to do with some racial bias going on at the university and a video was posted on Twitter. One of the UVA football players used their Twitter platform to voice their opinion on the matter. The fan

interviewed thought very highly of the way the football player handled the situation and was able to get their opinion out, and the fan was now more interested in the player.

Overall, from the interviews conducted with college athletes and with fans, some conclusions can be made regarding the proposed research questions. The first question dealt with the Player-Fan relationship, and how that is influenced by Twitter. The interviews showed that both players and fans react positively to tweets that contain positive content such as praise or gratitude. It also became apparent that the more an athlete tweets, the more followers they would gain and the more interaction with fans they would have, showing that Twitter is an effective medium for harnessing positive relationships between players and fans. This leads into the second research question regarding public image and the relationship between players and their organization. The interviews showed how organizations are taking measures such as bringing in social media professionals and creating policies regarding social media in order to protect both the organization's image and the players' images. These policies and procedures not only keep the players and organizations out of trouble, but they also can ensure that the fans are happy with the content that is being put out by the athletes and teams. This shows how Twitter has begun shaping organizations by ensuring their players know how to properly and effectively use social media, as well as how to protect both the organization's and players' image.

Discussion

The sports industry has had an enormous impact all across the world. There are millions of fans, teams, and players, as well as countless businesses who rely on sports to make money. Each of these different groups make up an entire sports economy that runs on one another. As technology and social media grow and advance across the world, there are changes every day to the way that people interact and access new information, including information about sports.

This rapid influx of social media presence has redefined the sports economy. Players and organizations no longer only have to focus on performing well at their sport, but also how they are going to be represented and impacted by social media use. For players in particular, there is a new question of what is a good player? Does a player have more value if they have a greater social media following even if they are fundamentally a worse player? Does a player have less value if they have negative interactions with fans on Twitter? Not only can players now potentially be impacted differently by social media, but teams must now be aware of their players' presence on social media, and might make decisions based on that. These are questions that further research on the topics of this thesis would lend itself to, and it highlights the importance and potential of the work.

Conclusion

With such an incredible amount of information available to the world, it is a major obstacle to take ideas and concepts and attempt to have people see them. Within the past few decades this task has gotten easier through the creation of digital media. Digital media platforms such as modules and social media offer interactive alternatives for presenting important information to a wide audience, gripping the attention of users and ultimately educating them on most any topic. Through research on the most effective and efficient ways of using digital media to educate others, future work can use techniques such as gap analysis and conducting further research to find the ideal methods for digital education. One method of digital education is through social media apps, which have had an impact on the accessing and sharing of information. These apps have shaped the way that people portray themselves and their ideas online, as well as how they communicate with others. Future work building on the research into the use of Twitter by college athletes can provide a better framework for athletes and coaches on

how to best utilize the app. By informing coaches and players, they can use the digital media app

as a resource to better their programs and image. Digital media is constantly being innovated and

invented, information is being created at an increasing rate. When digital media is used correctly

it has the potential to effectively optimize the way that information is shared, accessed, and

communicated.

Appendix

1. Interview Questions:
   a. Name:
   b. Interviewer:
   c. Date:
   d. Time:
   e. Length:
   f. Year:
   g. Sport/Position:
   h. Do you currently have a Twitter account, and if so when did you first create the account?
   i. How did you hear about the app and what made you want to create an account?
   j. How much do you create tweets, like/retweet tweets, and reply to tweets?
      i. If so, what do you usually tweet about or like/retweet?
   k. Do you currently follow any college athletes on Twitter? Professional athletes?
      i. If so, has there ever been a time when an athlete tweeted about something that had an impact on you? Did it influence your opinions or possibly actions in any way?
   l. Have you ever had an interaction with a fan through Twitter?
      i. If so, was it a positive or negative experience?
      ii. Did they tweet at you first or respond to one of your tweets?
   m. Have you ever had a negative experience when using Twitter or know of someone who has?
      i. If so, please describe the experience.
   n. Have you ever been talked to by a coach or someone similar about using Twitter?
      i. If so, what was the conversation about?
   o. Has anyone ever talked to you or have you ever worried about the potential impacts of Twitter and other social media apps on you and your team's image?
   p. Interviewer's Reflection of the Interview:

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