Twitter and Fan Identification: Lessons Learned from Athletic Communication's Work Experience

Joseph Johns
Clemson University

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses

Recommended Citation
https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/2117

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.
TWITTER AND FAN IDENTIFICATION: LESSONS LEARNED FROM ATHLETIC COMMUNICATIONS WORK EXPERIENCE

A Project Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Communication, Technology & Society

by
Joseph Johns
May 2015

Accepted by:
Dr. Jimmy Sanderson, Committee Chair
Dr. John Spinda
Dr. Erin Ash
ABSTRACT

This project thesis reviewed extant literature pertaining to social media, social media in sport, social identity theory, self-categorization theory and sporting game attendance. Examples of previous industry work are included which demonstrate team-to-fan Twitter interaction in use and what was learned from engaging with fans. A survey was then conducted that explored how sport fans use Twitter and how Twitter engagement with sport organizations might effect their overall identification to a team. Finally, limitations and directions for future research are discussed.
DEDICATION

This thesis project is dedicated to my mom and sister. Even if they did not like a decision I made, they fully supported me, my dreams and showed me that I could achieve anything I set my mind to. To my mom, Michele, thanks for demonstrating strong-will, teaching me determination and to stick through the process even when it gets difficult. To my sister, Shawna, thanks for serving a multitude of roles in my life. From sister, to second mom, to friend, you have always been a person I could go to for help and life advice. Without a doubt, I would not be the person I am, nor would this whole process have been possible without the love and support I received from you two.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my committee members who have been extremely helpful and insightful in my time at Clemson as both an undergraduate and graduate student and in helping with this thesis project. I would like to give a special thanks to Dr. Jimmy Sanderson, my chair, for his continuous and generous work of aiding, directing and editing my thesis. When you first came to Clemson you immediately became a professor I wanted to take and learn from. You have been a mentor to me and in my interest in sport scholarship and have been extremely helpful in this whole process. Thank you also to Dr. John Spinda and Dr. Erin Ash for serving on my committee and your help on this project.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media in Sport</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Marketing and Sport</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Identity Theory</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Categorization Theory</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game Attendance</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. WORK EXPERIENCE</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. SURVEY</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampling Procedure</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measures</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. RESULTS OF SURVEY</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. DISCUSSION</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B: Survey</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

During the 2013 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) football season, a record 50,291,275 fans attended games, breaking the previous record that was set in 2011 (NCAA.org, 2014). In the highest level of collegiate football, the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), an average of 45,671 fans per attended games, while three schools—Alabama, Michigan and Ohio State—averaged over 100,000 fans per game with Michigan leading the way at 111,592 per game. For men’s basketball, arguably the second most popular collegiate sport, the total attendance for NCAA Division I teams during the 2013-14 season eclipsed 25 million while the 2014 Final Four set an attendance record with over 158,000 spectators (NCAA.org, 2014; Phillips, 2014). Moreover, these numbers only encompass two sports and do not include figures from Division II, III or the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), which only add to the popularity of collegiate athletics. As these numbers indicate, it is clear that collegiate sports play a large role in American culture. Accordingly, it is important for communication researchers to investigate this area of the sports landscape.

In addition to the statistics mentioned above, many people view college football as a ritual that consumes their Saturdays during the Fall. Indeed, millions of people across the United States wake up, don the apparel of their favorite university, paint their faces, sing the team’s fight song and head to campus to begin a day of tailgating, cheering, yelling and football. “It’s pretty exciting,” stated current college student and avid sports fan Daniel Froelich. He continued, “I just cannot wait to get to the game” (personal
communication, May 24, 2014). Recent college graduate Michael Gable agrees. With respect to tailgating he commented, “you feel excited, nervous and there is great excitement in the city and around the stadium on gamedays” (personal communication, May 24, 2014). But what is it exactly that makes people have these feelings?

A social identity approach, encompassing both social identity theory (SIT) and self-categorization theory (SCT) is a rich lens through which to explore the answer to that question. These theories seek to predict in-group behaviors and actions by various individuals (Hogg, 2006). In a more sport-oriented context, social identity theory suggests “people are motivated to behave in ways that maintain and boost their self esteem” while “sports can work to increase self-esteem for a person by association and affiliation” (Posten, 1998). These claims are very relevant to college sports fans, as many of them attended the institution for which they cheer, and as a result, they have a high investment and affiliation with collegiate athletic teams.

However, despite record attendance at football games and passionate fan bases seemingly stronger than ever, one striking conundrum has arisen. Many colleges and universities are actually struggling with football attendance numbers and ticket sales. For example, although the University of Michigan has a strong fan base and the largest attendance figures in the nation, they only sold around 13,000 student tickets for the 2014 season, down from 19,000 in 2013 (Baumgardner, 2014a, Baumgardner, 2014b). Other schools face the same issue. Oklahoma, Georgia and Penn State, traditionally strong teams with high attendance figures, have seen a slight decline in attendance in the past couple of years (Rovell, 2014). To combat this rising issue, many schools have taken to
social media in an attempt to manage this situation and ensure that fans not only attend games, but also to continue to show their support for the team and display their fandom.

Although, “most professional sport organizations and college athletic programs use social media platforms to keep fans abreast of news,” (Sanderson, 2011a, p. 494) emphasis has shifted to fostering relationships with stakeholders and fans (Williams & Chinn, 2010) in an attempt to steer their attitudes in a positive direction (Lagae, 2005; Thrassou, Vrontis, Kartakoullis & Kriemadis, 2012). Social media platforms have greatly impacted contemporary society, including sports. For instance, in 2011, during a NCAA investigation into the University of Miami football program, fans developed the hashtag #IStandWiththeU and it quickly became a trending topic on Twitter, hinting at the power that social media possesses to rally fans together for a common cause (Brown & Billings, 2012). In today’s fast-paced world, people want information instantly (Stephens & Malone, 2009) and for information gatekeepers, social media platforms are a prime vehicle to communicate information directly to their target audience (Ankeny, 2011; Forbes, 2011; Zauner, Koller, & Fink, 2012). Due to the convenience, power, and social importance that social media holds, it is imperative that sport communication scholars continue to explore the influence of these technologies on a variety of sport stakeholders.

Extant literature has provided valuable insight into various aspects of social media and sports. Specifically, Bruns, Weller, and Harrington (2014) explored how, from a marketing standpoint, Australian and European football (i.e. soccer) teams used Twitter to interact and engage with fans. Similarly, Jurisch, Krcmar, Scholl, Wang, Wang, Woods, and Yao (2014) found that social media enabled users to connect more efficiently
with one another while also providing information more quickly and concisely. However, there exists a gap in how Twitter specifically affects fan identification in collegiate sports. Filling this gap with more scholarship will provide college athletic departments with important data that can make their marketing and communication campaigns more effective.

Accordingly, this project discusses how Twitter can foster social identity, which may shed insights on how athletic department personnel can solve problems such as decreasing in-game attendance. Specifically, using a social identity approach, this project considers the degree to which a fan views him/herself as a member of a collegiate athletic team and how Twitter interactions may increase fan identification level. For example, if fans get their tweet re-tweeted/favorited by the team account, or have their tweet shown on the scoreboard at a game, does it enhance their identification towards the team? If so, does this lead to action such as purchasing more tickets to games and/or school apparel and merchandise?

With this information, athletic department personnel can better understand fan identification, which can then help inform communication and marketing strategies. It is important for athletic department personnel to understand the varying levels of fandom within their fan base so that they can construct and format messages that match each group’s needs and wants.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media in Sport

During the course of the 2014 World Cup, a single-event record 672 million tweets were sent worldwide. Furthermore, from September through December 2013, 50% of all tweets about television were about sports programming despite the fact that less than 2% of all programming were about sports (Burns, 2014). In the college football setting, many schools have large Twitter followers on their team-specific accounts. Per the University of Tennessee’s ranking of all collegiate athletic Twitter followers (Tennessee, 2015), as of March 23, 2015, 14 schools have more than 100,000 followers: Michigan, Alabama, LSU, Tennessee, Georgia, Auburn, Florida State, Texas A&M, Oklahoma, Notre Dame, Wisconsin, Oregon, South Carolina and Penn State. But what does all of this mean? Social media has become a growing platform where people discuss sports (Sanderson, 2013) and as a result, public relations professionals and communication specialists have embraced social media as a way to connect and interact with fans.

Social media enables creativity to go along with immediate information that fans seek about their favorite teams (Burns, 2014). Specifically, Twitter enables conversation between fans and sport organizations (Sanderson, 2011b). Twitter allows teams to “reach fans directly and convey their message without the, at times, unwanted input and analysis of journalists” (Price, Farrington, & Hall, 2013, p. 458). From a fan’s standpoint, in addition to simply mentioning the team in a tweet, hashtags have facilitated wider
conversations (Smith & Smith, 2012). As mentioned previously, the hashtag #IStandWiththeU had many people exchanging messages about the University of Miami in a positive manner amidst an NCAA investigation (Brown & Billings, 2012). Hashtags also can be developed to prompt fans to talk about their favorite teams and to communicate with other fans. Hashtags can originate from traditional team cheers to something more event specific, but regardless there is great potential to foster communication between sport teams and fans. Indeed, many fans crave updates about their favorite teams and players and seem to have an insatiable appetite for any news the team can provide.

Chris Yandle, the Assistant Athletic Director for Communications and Public Relations at Georgia Institute of Technology, contends that athletics are the “front porch” to any university and social media is the “lawn to that front porch” (Yandle, 2013). Athletics undoubtedly bring in enormous amounts of publicity for any major university, however there is one more step. Because social media can be accessed by anyone, anywhere at any time, an active presence on social media will arguably bring more attention to a university. If athletics is the “front porch,” then it is important to present a positive image.

With the rapid ascension of social media, it is easy to see why collegiate athletic departments have adopted these platforms to connect with fans. Twitter and Facebook allow collegiate athletic departments to keep fans abreast with the latest news and information, but also allow for fans to have “access to insider information that they would be unlikely to receive via traditional mass-media broadcasts” (Kassing &
In addition, athletic departments can use Twitter to interact with fans for various promotions. This communication between athletic departments and fans allows relationships to be formed, which can, in turn, lead fans to have a higher level of identification in the program (Williams & Chinn, 2010). In this capacity, social media is more than just providing quick updates or links, it can potentially change communication between fans and their favorite team (Price et al., 2013). Furthermore, it affects how sport organizations develop and operate their marketing campaigns.

**Social Media Marketing and Sport**

Scholars have conceptualized marketing into four elements: organizational goals, profitability, need satisfaction and integrative marketing activities. These are used in various ways to strategically emphasize the customers’ needs and wants (Churchill & Peter, 1995; Kotler, 1997; Stanton, Etzel & Walker, 1994; Theakou, Kriemadis, & Leivadi, 2008; Thrassou, et al., 2012; Zikmund & D’Amico, 2001). Social media allows organizations to accomplish all elements of these goals, making social media a viable and extremely useful tool for any business. By using one or more social media platforms, businesses are able to appeal to their target audiences’ wants and needs quickly and efficiently. On top of the ease of use that social media provides, most platforms are free of cost, allowing for maximum profitability and ensuring any business can enhance their marketing abilities if used effectively.

Sport organizations use the same basic premises in their marketing goals. However, more so than other businesses, sport marketers use the emotional bond that people have on certain teams or players to increase awareness and sell more of their
products (Schlossberg, 1996; Thrassou et al., 2012). Ultimately, sports are the basis for relationships between the organization and its fans, and using Twitter provides an excellent avenue for marketing and public relations when used properly. With the ability to directly communicate with the target audience, organizations have the opportunity to craft their marketing efforts in a more efficient and effective manner, based squarely on the views and opinions of the customers. Fans will voice their feelings on a particular sport team or player, so the marketing efforts of that team can be strategically targeted to ensure that they remain in a positive light by their clientele. Furthermore, compared to a website, Twitter encourages interaction between customers and the products, further developing a relationship between the organization and the product. In the words of Mike DiLorenzo, the director of social media marketing for the National Hockey League (NHL), “social networks...are about experiences” (Wyshynski, 2009, para. 4) and these experiences come from reach, intimacy and engagement between the organization and the fan (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011). Therefore the question becomes, how can sport organizations best incorporate Twitter to enhance fan identification and prompt fans to continue to show their support by buying merchandise and attending games?

Social Media

Recent research conducted by Leverage (2014) found that every second, 5,700 tweets are posted, while Facebook’s over one billion active users share 2.5 billion pieces of content every single day. Add in Instagram with its more than 200 million active users (Ong, 2014) and other platforms such as YouTube, and it becomes clear that social media has had a profound impact on today’s society. In fact, per the Pew Internet Research
Project (2014), as of January 2014, 74% of American adult Internet users are active on social networking sites with the age demographic of 18-29 year olds leading the way with an astounding 89% activity rate.

Meraz (2009) characterizes social media as “architected by design to readily support participation, peer-to-peer conversation, collaboration, and community” (p. 682). However, to differentiate between solely online communication and social networking, boyd and Ellison (2007) defined social networking sites (SNS) as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (p. 211).

Although the term social media was not coined until the early 2000s after the launch of platforms such as MySpace in 2003 and Facebook in 2004 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), the idea of social media is not a new concept. It was with the advent of Web 2.0 shortly after the turn of the millennium, when online services shifted from offering channels for networked communication to become interactive, two-way vehicles for networked sociality (Castells, 2007; Manovich, 2009). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) view Web 2.0 to be a platform that enables users to modify content in the form of wikis, blogs and other projects. The advent of Web 2.0 then gave rise to user generated content (UGC) in which people were no longer restricted to fixed applications, but could now create content. Thus, through the development of Web 2.0 and UGC, social media has come to its current status, a place for users to create and share ideas and messages with each other across a public (or semi-public) domain.
There has been much debate as to what platform was the first true SNS, however, boyd and Ellison (2007) credit the website Sixdegrees.com, which was developed in 1997, as being the first genuine SNS as its users could freely interact with one another and view their profiles. Its capabilities, however, were limited as the Internet was still a fairly new phenomenon and there were few people accessing it regularly. Over time, new social media sites were launched with each having their own niche features to make them unique. Sites such as MySpace allowed users to personalize their page because there were no restrictions on users from adding HTML into their profiles (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Later, Facebook, which originally was designed only for Harvard students at its inception in 2004 (Cassidy, 2006), would adapt features such as Timeline and Chat, which allowed users to remain in constant contact while sharing the latest information with one another. This response came in part from social media being “dynamic objects that are tweaked in response to their users’ needs and their owners’ objectives” (Feenberg 2009, p. 49). Video sharing platforms like YouTube allow users to create their own videos and were not restricted to certain profile restrictions that other platforms had in that users were free to create any video that they desired. Photo sharing sites like Flickr and later Instagram allowed users to take, post and even edit their pictures to form albums. Finally, blogging sites such as Open Diary, Tumblr and Twitter allowed users to post blogs while sharing this content with other users, often creating communities of similar interests. Social media has only become more widespread. In addition to more people using the Internet and more sites being available, the ease of use is much higher now than in the past. Social media is closely linked to mobile technologies. Rather than being restricted to a home
computer, users now have the luxury to post, share and view from wherever they are, such as football games, with laptops, portable devices and mobile phones. Currently, Twitter has become a very popular site to post short messages and communicate with others and has come to be one of the top means of sharing sporting news (Daley, 2009; Hambrick & Sanderson, 2012).

Twitter is a microblogging site that limits posts (“tweets”) to 140 characters or less (Ben-Ari, 2009; Honeycutt & Herring, 2009; van Dijck, 2013). Quickly increasing in popularity, Twitter attracted more than 94,000 users within its first eight months (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007), more than 41 million in less than three years (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010) and by 2015 had become the most popular microblogging service in the world, attracting 288 million monthly active users with 500 million tweets sent per day (About Twitter, 2015). Although the initial purpose for Twitter was to provide a way for friends to communicate in short bursts with each other, (Hagan, 2011) it also enables knowledge to spread quickly.

Java et al. (2007) conducted an early study on Twitter users and defined three categories of users: information sources, friends, and information seekers. Those in the information sources category tend to post frequently and had many followers, whereas those in the friends category encompassed a vast majority of Twitter users and included those who used the platform to connect with family, classmates and co-workers among others. Finally, information seekers are conceptualized as users who rarely post but follow a large number of other users. One feature that Twitter has that is unlike many other social media sites is how users follow each other. Whereas other platforms such as
Facebook require a reciprocal friendship (i.e. both users are friends with each other), on Twitter a user can follow another without being followed back (Kwak, et al. 2010). This allows users to be information seekers or sources, depending on how they choose to use the platform. Specifically, businesses and corporations can have their tweets reach target audience on a large scale without needing to follow each individual person. Twitter arguably has become the go-to platform for information sharing at high rates of speed used by practically all businesses and organizations in their communications and marketing efforts.

As sports fans continue to steer towards Twitter to demonstrate their fandom and tweet at their favorite sport organizations and athletes, it is important to understand what drives them to do so. Social identity theory is a useful framework to conceptualize why and how sport fans and sport organizations use Twitter to build and develop relationships. 

**Social Identity Theory**

The social identity approach taken in this project is derived from two theories: social identity theory and self-categorization theory. This approach seeks to understand the relationship between an individual and a group by “seeing ourselves and others in terms of social categories [that affect] our perceptions, attitudes and behaviors” (Kriendler, Dowd, Star, & Gottschalk, 2012, p. 349). In its basic form, SIT interprets “the role of self-conception in group membership, group processes and intergroup relationships” (Hogg, 2006, p. 111). Developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970’s, the basic premise of the theory seeks to predict in-group behaviors and actions (Hogg, 2006). Per Tajfel and later Hogg (2006), SIT rests on four basic premises:
TWITTER AND FAN IDENTIFICATION

(1) Investigations of how people categorization causes people to perceptually accentuate similarities among stimuli within the same category and difference between stimuli from different categories (Tajfel, 1959), (2) analysis of the role of cognitive processes, specifically categorization in prejudice (Tajfel, 1969), (3) research showing that being categorized, on a minimal or trivial basis, causes people to discriminate in favor of their own group (Tajfel, 1971) and (4) a critique of social comparison research, arguing that in intergroup contexts, people make comparisons that maximize differences between self and others (Tajfel, 1974; Hogg, 2006, p. 112).

SIT suggests that people have two distinct identity sources: personal and social. Personal identities consist of a wide variety of attributes, such as abilities and interests, while social identity is made up of significant group categories (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009). Said differently, the theory posits that when a person claims to be a member of a group, they observe “a oneness with or belongingness to the organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) of which he or she is a member” (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 104).

With this premise, a correlation can be conceptualized between why fans behave the way they do and say what they do. If a fan identifies himself/herself with a team, he/she perceives others of similar stature to be like him/her, or part of the in-group. An important aspect of the theory to note, though, is that beliefs are not just limited to the in-group. Differentiating and separating the out-group helps to add to the level of identification. Brown, Devlin, and Billings (2013) put this in a sports perspective:

fans of rival teams are frequently cast as villains and subsequently classified as being in the ‘out group,’ for which they are often demonized. This sense of in-group favoritism and out-group derogation only strengthens perceived social identity felt through identifying with a certain sports team (p. 21).

Thus, an individual’s perceptions are not based solely on the foundation of his/her beliefs. Instead, and very importantly, an individual can increases his/her commitment to
and values to a particular group based on the rallying around a dislike for another group of people or organization. While SIT sets the foundation for how people are perceived as members of a group, it does not conceptualize the group identity. Thus, a look at self-categorization theory is needed.

**Self-Categorization Theory**

Building on the premises of SIT, Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher and Wetherell (1987) developed self-categorization theory (SCT) to produce a more specific account of self and group processes. SCT “submits that social identities are formed and operate through a cognitive process that accentuates individuals’ similarities to and differences from salient comparative dimensions of the in-group” (Mastro, Tamborini, & Hullett 2005, p. 324). Zhang (2010) posited that people will perceive in-group-normative media messages to have a stronger influence on themselves and in-group members than on out-group members and will perceive out-group-normative media messages to have a stronger influence on out-group members than on themselves and in-group members (p. 192).

Specifically, Spinda (2012) explained that fans may choose to retain an individual identity by simply stating that they are a football fan or they can self-categorize by stating that they are fans of a specific team. In this scenario, group identity overrules the individual identity. With this, the self-categorized group identities guide behavior where the “I” becomes “we” and “us” becomes “them” (Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1999; Spinda, 2012). Rubin and Hewstone (1998) further argue that self-categorization is relevant because people have an inherent need for a positive self-image.

SCT specifically describes the circumstances under which a person will perceive collections of people (including themselves) as a group, as well as the consequences of
perceiving people in this manner (Haslam, 1997). SCT proposes that categories function to define a perceiver’s place within a dynamic social context (McGarty, 1999). These social contexts, as described by Worchel, Morales, Paez and Deschamps (1998), furnish a subjective social frame of reference in which people’s attitudes, feelings and behaviors are perceived and compared. In a given social comparative context, the human cognitive system tends to impose that categorization of social stimuli which best ‘fits’ the stimulus domain. This categorization process serves to organize social perception in such a way as to optimize the meaningfulness of the social stimuli. It subjectively minimizes intracategory differences and maximizes intercategory differences and so produces stereotypic in-group and out-group perceptions. In this way, SCT explains how conformity to group norms arise from salient self-inclusive social categorizations. Being a member of a group is important for many people as it provides a sense of connectivity and belonging as they associate with others who share their same beliefs. In the era of social media, these capabilities are perhaps more convenient, and extend beyond boundaries of time and space.

With most sports teams having Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media accounts, fans flock to these platforms to show support, offer criticism, and react essentially to the most minutaie of detail. Couple this reality with research that suggests that members of a group will tend to act and think in similar fashions (Hogg & Terry, 2000), and it becomes important for athletic department personnel to optimize this group dynamic and the relational opportunities that come with it. If members of a group think
alike, athletic department personnel can construct messages on their various social media platforms and receive somewhat anticipated responses.

In part, this outcome may stem from self-categorization. For example, as identification increases fans will be more likely to use the terms “we” and “us” to describe a team, despite not having any affiliation with that team (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman & Sloan, 1976; Sanderson, 2008, 2014). Partridge, Wann and Elison (2010) noted that winning increases the level of identification that fans feel because they associate themselves with a successful entity. Even when the team shows poor performance on the field, highly identified fans remain loyal to the team and continue to exhibit their fandom (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; Dietz-Uhler, End, Demakakos, Dickirson & Grantz, 2002; Haridakis, 2010).

Self-enhancement helps aid in the argument that people have an inherent need for a positive self-image. Spinda (2012) stated that the most developed line of research regarding sports fans’ self-enhancement is basking in reflected glory (BIRGing). Developed by Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman and Sloan in 1976, BIRGing occurs when “individuals strategically align themselves with a successful group and publically display their association for others to see” (Spinda, 2012, p. 331). BIRGing behavior has been shown to elicit higher levels of self-esteem and more team-related Internet usage (Pradhan, 2014). With this knowledge, athletic teams can tap into fan’s affection for a team via social media and foster a relationship (Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2011). Phua (2008) found that the more media that fans consume, the higher their identification levels are with a particular team. With a team account engaging fans
via Twitter, fans should be able to experience heightened solidarity with that team and feel a part of the in-group. The question, though, is how will fan identification change if there is a perceived relationship between them and the sport team via Twitter? And if there is a change in fan identification, what outcomes might that elicit?

This project contemplates how fans identify with a team to see if interaction with a sports team via Twitter leads to higher levels of identification and how that might manifest in future behavior (e.g. attending more athletic contests.) Although a group member may identify him/herself as a fan, there are varying degrees of fandom. It is important for athletic departments to understand these levels of fandom to construct and format messages to the need and want of their fan base. For example, highly identified fans may be more likely to respond to certain messages, whereas less identified fans may respond to different messages. Wann (2006) observed that social media serve as outlets for fans to express their feelings of connection between themselves and the teams for whom they cheer. Twitter, for instance, gives highly identified fans a medium to share their fandom while feeling a sense of “unity and cohesion with others” (Wann, 2006, p. 334) in the tweets that they post.

How interaction and engagement towards fans via Twitter is helpful for athletic department personnel as it can provide understanding about tangible actions fans may be likely to undertake as a result of this gesture from the team. Thus, this could potentially be a way to combat what appears to be declining game attendance or other indicators of an under-engaged fan base.
**Game Attendance**

Sports are an important area for leisure and recreation for millions in the United States and attending sporting events is a way to not only enjoy the product, but to display fandom (Beaton, Filo, Funk & Pritchard, 2009). College football, specifically the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), is one of the most popular sports in the United States and traditionally attendance numbers have supported that claim. Although there is typically a wide discrepancy between the attendance numbers of the “Power Five” conference schools (ACC, Big Ten, Big 12, Pac 12 and SEC) versus the rest of the FBS, some of the same issues have arisen with dwindling attendance numbers within the “Power Five.” But what exactly are these issues?

Historically, the glamour of the gameday experience and attending the game itself has far outweighed the perceived costs of staying at home and watching the game on television. However recently the home experience has provided a better option for many fans and schools are starting to feel the consequences. The University of Georgia, for example, reported that during the period from 2009-2012, 39% of student tickets went unused (Cohen, 2013). When asked about the issue, Athletic Director Greg McGarity called the lack of student attendance a “significant hole” that was “very noticeable” (Cohen, 2013, para. 6). Michigan State University Athletic Director Mark Hollis shared the same sentiments during the 2014 football season. During the Big Ten Conference opener on October 6, Hollis tweeted: “I spoke with many students and they share my disappointment and embarrassment of the support coming from the southeast corner on Saturday” (Hollis, 2014). Despite cold temperatures, both Hollis and Head Football
Coach Mark Dantonio noticed the small crowd and felt disappointed by the lack of support (Murphy, 2014). For many fans today, the attractiveness of going to the game has dwindled.

With the rise in Internet technologies, fans have more options to watch the game. With a cellphone, fans can text, tweet, post photos on Instagram and surf the Internet throughout the entire game. However, this technology has begun to keep fans away from the game. Thus the question becomes, how can schools incorporate technology as part of the gameday experience to help keep fans attending games and ultimately stay engaged throughout the game?

To start, many schools have offered various promotions to fans based off of incentives such as staying the entire game or when the team scores a certain number of points. Cohen (2013) noted that the University of Oregon offers free fast food to students when the Oregon football team scores 40 or more points. While such measures are a starting point, they have limited utility as a permanent solution. Furthermore, promotions such as Oregon’s apply only to students of the university and fail to take into consideration alumni or other general fans of the team. Although students are an important group to cater to and will one day become alumni and future potential season ticket buyers/donors, student sections comprise only a small portion of the stadium. Accordingly, marketing and media relations departments need to take the entire population into consideration.

Thus, athletic departments who move beyond simple promotions and truly foster a relationship with their fans in an attempt to increase fan identification, may experience
fans continuing to purchase tickets and attending games. It is imperative that there be authentic communication between the athletic social media platforms and the fans. Media relations personnel already use social media as a way to deliver information to followers, however taking this communication a step further and truly engaging with the audience seems likely to give fans an increased sense of identification with their favorite teams which should translate to high attendance rates.
CHAPTER THREE

WORK EXPERIENCE

Social media undoubtedly is a major part of my job. Although social media is not the only focus of a sports information director, it definitely plays a large role. As the rowing contact, I am the primary contributor to all of the rowing team’s social media platforms – Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Moreso than just posting race updates, I must create content that is not only informative and sharable, but that also hits our four target areas as a department in the process of telling the story of what it is like to be a Clemson Tiger. In addition to rowing, I also monitor and respond to fans from the @ClemsonTigers, @ClemsonFB, @ClemsonBaseball and @ClemsonMBB accounts.

From this experience, I have learned what motivates a fan to tweet particular content and what are some of the best approaches to take when responding to fans. That has helped mightily in Clemson Athletics’ approach to become the best listeners and engagers that we can be as a department with our fans on social media.

Engagement is perhaps the biggest aspect of Twitter that I try to capture. With sports like rowing, the fan bases are smaller. Thus, it is especially important to capitalize on the fans we do have and build relationships with them to keep them coming out to support the team. In my opinion, replying to tweets is a minimum. Going out and creating personal experiences for the fans, when possible is great. At baseball, for example, one thing that we do is make our fans’ stay at Doug Kingsmore Stadium much more enjoyable and have it be something they can talk about. For instance, if a fan was to tweet out a picture of his kid saying “my kid’s first game” we will go out and give the kid a ball
or t-shirt or something to make that moment even more special. At the end of the day and if used correctly, social media is about the relationships that are formed, not simply disseminating information to the masses.

Another large role that I have with social media in the athletic communications department is in analytics. Working with Jonathan Gantt, the Director of New Media, I not only track the followers/mentions/engagement rates of all of our accounts and of different platforms, but I also look deeper into the numbers and see what we can do to improve or do differently. I believe that analytics play a large role in social media because we truly strive for it to be a two-way street. Social media is not something that we just use to divulge information. Yes, it is a way to disseminate information to followers, but we must also be engaged and really social with social media. By tracking some of our basic numbers as well as looking at the direction of the conversation and comparing that to other schools, we can improve the content that we put out there and improve how we interact with our fans.

The following examples demonstrate how I have used Twitter to engage with fans. These examples range from favoriting fan tweets to re-tweeting and responding to them and bringing athletes closer to the fans.

One form of content that we get a lot are photos of fans sharing their view at the game. As demonstrated below, at a minimum I like to favorite these tweets to show our gratitude for them coming out and supporting the team. I believe that if fans go out of their way to tweet themselves enjoying time at our events then the least we can do is say thanks for coming out. I also believe that these fans are showing their identification to
their favorite team with these pictures, so favoriting them only further validates their fandom.

The next example is of a brief conversation that I had with a fan. Engagement is not a one-off thing. Said differently, more than one response is sometimes necessary and conversation is ok. As evident by the picture, Hunter Thomas mentioned @ClemsonBaseball in a tweet as he enjoyed the game. Being on top of our mentions, I began by favoriting the tweet and then replied with a message of gratitude for coming to
the game. Not unexpectedly, Thomas then replied again, to which I re-tweeted. As evident by his final tweet, he enjoyed his first trip to Doug Kingsmore Stadium and expressed his pleasure with the staff and engaging with Thomas via Twitter was just one more way to enhance his in-game experience.
A real joy for me happened when former Clemson football player Jacoby Ford returned to Clemson for a brief time. Ford had tweeted that he was in Clemson and originally sought to find someone to go bowling with him. However, I (from the baseball account) suggested that he come to the game instead. This was great because not only do the fans that follow the baseball account see the interaction, but Ford also tweeted out that he was at the game, promoting Clemson baseball to his followers that don’t follow us. It also shows that the #ClemsonFamily (a hashtag that Clemson promotes) is a real thing and that there is a connection between a school and athletes that didn’t even play that sport, which is big for collegiate athletics. While something like this is not possible for every game or every sport, it shows the power that social media has to capture people and promote the sport. A blog was later written recapping the series of events (Link: http://www.clemsontigers.com/ViewArticle.dbml?DB_OEM_ID=28500&ATCLID=209963588).
Come to the baseball game at DKS!! "@JacobyFord12: Who in Clemson? •• I wanna go bowling"

RETWEETS 5  FAVORITES 10

2:38 PM - 14 Mar 2015

"@ClemsonBaseball: Come to the baseball game at DKS!! "@JacobyFord12: Who in Clemson? •• I wanna go bowling"" on my wayyyyyy

RETWEETS 2  FAVORITES 8

2:59 PM - 14 Mar 2015

Great to welcome back former Tiger WR @JacobyFord12 to today's game! #ClemsonFamily @ClemsonDRad @TennesseeTitans

RETWEETS 20  FAVORITES 55

3:14 PM - 14 Mar 2015
Every Sunday baseball home game we designate as Social Sunday. From discounted food at the concession stands to having fan photos on the scoreboard, we really try to make this an event to encourage fans to interact with us via social media. One thing that we do is a trivia question relating to the baseball team. Similar to the fans that tweet their photos of the game, I will go through and favorite all tweets that have the correct answer. As to not make others feel left out, sometimes I will reply to people who did not answer correctly and say something along the lines of “not quite,” “try again” or “better luck next week” but in a friendly manner to encourage future participation. Evidence of this can be seen below:
In addition to the correct answers, one will see that the fans tweet their seat location, too. I select one winner and that person gets a prize pack, which brings me to one of my favorite moments. On April 5, 2015, I picked a winner to the trivia question and noticed he had his son at the game with him, so I brought down a pennant, autograph book and Tiger Rag for him. When I got to their seat location and explained that they were the winners, the kid’s face was priceless; he was so ecstatic that he was getting these prizes. His dad thanked me numerous times and I even had the people sitting behind them thank me for doing this simple gesture. I then took a photo of the kid with the pennant (below) and tweeted it from our account. This simple nod to the fans had a profound impact on their game experience and is something that kid will have with him
for a long time. At the end of the day, the experiences that I can create for others at a
game via social media is one of the most rewarding things I can think of.
CHAPTER FOUR

SURVEY

To consider how Twitter might effect fan identification and potentially lead to increased merchandise purchasing, and future game attendance, a three-part survey was conducted. The survey yielded 162 complete responses.

Sampling Procedure

Data were collected via an online questionnaire on Qualtrics after receiving IRB approval. Network and snowball sampling was used to collect data as tweets were sent from the researcher’s Twitter account asking for participation in the study and for people to re-tweet the request for participation. The researcher also enlisted the help of associates to tweet the link to the survey and request that others re-tweet the request for participation. The first tweet was sent January 20, 2015. The final tweet was sent February 9, 2015. Multiple tweets were sent daily during this time period. This resulted in 202 surveys completed with 162 fully completed for an 80% completion rate that were used in data analysis. Only Twitter was used to seek participation in the study, which proved to be a challenge.

A tweet is essentially only active in a timeline for five to 10 minutes then it quickly disappears in a user’s timeline. Sending three tweets a day results in having the link visible by most people for 15 to 30 minutes a day. To ensure only Twitter users participated in the study, it was determined not to post the invitation to participate in other social media forums, message boards or through direct e-mail. Most surveys took between five and 10 minutes to complete. The sex of the respondents was split evenly at
50% male \((n = 81)\) and 50% female \((n = 81)\). Of the 162 respondents, 91.4% \((n = 148)\) reported being white followed next with 3.7% \((n = 6)\) Asian/Pacific Islander and 3.1% \((n = 5)\) Black/African American. Hispanic/Latino \((n = 1)\), Native American \((n = 1)\) and Other \((n = 1)\) each made up less than one percent each of the total sample. A vast majority of respondents were younger than 31 with 74\% \((n = 121)\) of the respondents between the ages of 18-22 and 17.9\% \((n = 29)\) between 23-30 years old.

The survey began with a yes/no question for the participant to consider. The first question asked if the respondent has ever interacted (had their tweet favorited, re-tweeted or had been motioned) with a sport organization via Twitter and to consider that moment when completing the rest of the survey. If the participant answered no to the question, they were asked to consider a scenario in which the preceding had occurred. The participant was then asked to consider their favorite sports team and to consider that team when answering questions. Questions relating directly to Twitter usage were then asked that gauged how many users the participant followed, how many sport organizations participant followed, and how often the participant interacted with these sport organizations.

**Measures**

Moving forward, the second aspect of the survey was the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS). Developed by Wann and Branscombe (1993), the scale measures levels of identification, which can be defined as “the extent to which a fan feels psychologically connected to a team” (Wann et al., 2001, p. 3). This scale has been found to be reliable and valid and it has been used in a myriad of studies, (see Bernache-
Assollant et al., 2007, Parry, Jones & Wann, 2014, Theodorakis et al., 2006, Wann et al., 2001, Wann et. al, 2013 and Wann & Melnic, 2010). The reliability of the scale is quite high with an alpha of .91 (Bernache-Assollant, Bouchet & Lacassagne, 2007). The scale contains seven questions using a semantic differential scale ranging from 1 - low identification, to 8 - high identification and asks questions ranging from asking the participant how important it is that their favorite team wins to how much they dislike their favorite team’s rival or even how strongly their friends see them as a fan of their favorite team.

The third part of the survey dealt with game attendance and apparel and asked both multiple choice questions and questions on a semantic differential scale. Concluding the survey were a series of demographic questions.
CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS OF SURVEY

Question 1: Have you ever interacted (had your tweet favorited, re-tweeted or been mentioned) with a sport organization via Twitter?

Yes – 84 (51.9%)

No – 78 (48.1%)

Question 2: If yes, which of the following has happened? (Mark all that apply)

The team re-tweeted my tweet:

Yes – 32 (19.8%)

No – 130 (80.2%)

The team favorited my tweet:

Yes – 52 (32.1%)

No – 110 (80.2%)

The team replied to my tweet:

Yes – 28 (17.3%)

No – 134 (82.7%)

Question 3: What is your favorite sports team?

Arizona Wildcats – 1 (0.6%)

Atlanta Braves - 5 (3.1%)

Atlanta Hawks - 1 (0.6%)

Baltimore Ravens – 1 (0.6%)

Baylor Bears – 1 (0.6%)
Boston Celtics – 4 (2.5%)
Boston Red Sox – 1 (0.6%)
Carolina Panthers – 5 (3.1%)
Chelsea FC - 1 (0.6%)
Chicago Blackhawks – 1 (0.6%)
Chicago Cubs – 2 (1.2%)
Clemson Tigers – 62 (38.2%)
Cleveland Cavaliers – 1 (0.6%)
Denver Broncos – 2 (1.2%)
Detroit Tigers – 2 (1.2%)
FC Barcelona – 2 (1.2%)
Florida Gators – 1 (0.6%)
Georgia Bulldogs – 1 (0.6%)
Green Bay Packers - 1 (0.6%)
Indianapolis Colts – 1 (0.6%)
Iowa Hawkeyes – 1 (0.6%)
Liverpool FC – 1 (0.6%)
Los Angeles Angels – 2 (1.2%)
Manchester United - 2 (1.2%)
Miami Heat – 1 (0.6%)
Michigan Wolverines – 1 (0.6%)
Minnesota Vikings - 1 (0.6%)
Nashville Predators – 1 (0.6%)
New England Patriots – 3 (1.9%)
New Orleans Saints – 2 (1.2%)
New York Giants – 3 (1.9%)
New York Jets - 1 (0.6%)
New York Junctions – 1 (0.6%)
New York Rangers – 2 (1.2%)
New York Yankees – 2 (1.2%)
None – 2 (1.2%)
Oklahoma Sooners - 8 (4.9%)
Oregon Ducks – 1 (0.6%)
Philadelphia Eagles – 3 (1.9%)
Pittsburgh Steelers - 4 (2.4%)
PSG – 1 (0.6%)
Purdue Boilermakers – 1 (0.6%)
Real Madrid – 1 (0.6%)
San Francisco 49ers – 1 (0.6%)
San Francisco Giants – 1 (0.6%)
Seattle Mariners – 2 (1.2%)
Seattle Seahawks – 1 (0.6%)
Sporting Kansas City – 1 (0.6%)
St. Louis Cardinals – 2 (1.2%)
Tampa Bay Buccaneers – 1 (0.6%)
Tampa Bay Lightning – 1 (0.6%)
Tampa Bay Rays – 3 (1.9%)
Toronto Raptors – 1 (0.6%)
North Carolina Tar Heels – 1 (0.6%)
South Carolina Gamecocks – 1 (0.6%)
Washington Capitals – 1 (0.6%)
Washington Redskins – 1 (0.6%)
West Virginia Mountaineers – 1 (0.6%)
Women’s Basketball – 1 (0.6%)

**Question 4: Approximately how many people do you follow on Twitter?**

0-50 – 31 (19.1%)
51-100 – 13 (8.0%)
101-200 – 34 (21.0%)
201-300 – 30 (18.5%)
301-400 – 18 (11.1%)
More than 400 – 36 (22.2%)

**Question 5: Approximately how many people follow you on Twitter?**

0-50 – 36 (22.2%)
51-100 – 15 (9.3%)
101-200 – 24 (14.8%)
201-300 – 29 (17.9%)
Approximately how many tweets do you post per day (including re-tweets)?

- 0-1 – 108 (66.7%)
- 2-4 – 40 (24.7%)
- 5-10 – 5 (3.1%)
- More than 10 – 9 (5.6%)

How many, if any, sport organizations do you follow on Twitter?

- 0 – 33 (20.4%)
- 1-2 – 34 (21.0%)
- 3-4 – 38 (23.5%)
- More than 5 – 57 (35.2%)

How often do you favorite the tweets of a sport organization?

- 0 times per day – 98 (60.5%)
- 1-2 times per day – 55 (34.0%)
- Multiple times per day – 9 (5.6%)

How often do you re-tweet a sport organization’s tweet?

- 0 times per day – 102 (63.0%)
- 1-2 times per day – 56 (34.6%)
- Multiple times per day – 4 (2.5%)
Question 10: How often do you mention a sport organization in your tweets?

- 0 times per day – 123 (75.9%)
- 1-2 times per day – 37 (22.8%)
- Multiple times per day – 2 (1.2%)

Question 11: What type of posts from sport organizations on Twitter are you most likely to respond to?

- Statistics/Score updates – 39 (24.1%)
- Pictures – 69 (42.6%)
- Questions/Trivia/Requests – 17 (10.5%)
- Behind the scenes content – 25 (15.4%)
- Other – 10 (6.2%)
- Missing – 2 (1.2%)

Question 12: How often do you wear team-affiliated merchandise?

- 0 days per week – 39 (24.1%)
- 1-2 days per week – 92 (56.8%)
- 3-5 days per week – 25 (15.4%)
- Everyday – 6 (3.7%)

Question 13: Approximately how many games of your favorite team do you attend each year?

- 0 games per season – 37 (22.8%)
- A couple of home games per season – 53 (32.7%)
- About half the home games per season – 9 (5.6%)
Majority of home games per season – 29 (17.9%)
All games per season – 28 (17.3%)
All games regardless of location – 6 (3.7%)

**Question 14: What is your age?**

18-22 – 121 (74.7%)
23-30 – 29 (17.9%)
31-50 – 11 (6.8%)
51+ - 1 (0.6%)

**Question 15: What is your gender?**

Male – 81 (50%)
Female – 81 (50%)

**Question 16: What is your race?**

White – 148 (91.4%)
Hispanic/Latino – 1 (0.6%)
Black/African American – 5 (3.1%)
Native American – 1 (0.6%)
Asian/Pacific Islander - 6 (3.7%)
Other – 1 (0.6%)

**Question 17: What is your annual household income?**

$25,000 or less – 42 (25.9%)
$25,001-$35,000 – 11 (6.8%)
$35,001-$45,000 – 12 (7.4%)
TWITTER AND FAN IDENTIFICATION

$45,001-$55,000 – 9 (5.6%)
$55,001-$66,000 – 6 (3.7%)
$66,001-$75,000 – 13 (8.0%)
Over $75,000 – 65 (40.1)
Missing – 4 (2.5%)

Question 18: How long have you been watching sports?
Less than 5 years – 13 (8.0%)
6-10 years – 35 (21.6%)
11-15 years – 36 (22.2%)
16-20 years – 21 (13.0%)
21+ years – 48 (29.6%)
Missing – 1 (0.6%)

Question 19: On average, how many sporting events do you attend in a year?
0-5 games – 21 (13%)
6-10 games – 35 (21.6%)
11-15 games – 36 (22.2%)
16-20 games – 21 (13.0%)
21+ games – 48 (29.6%)
Missing – 1 (0.6%)

Question 20: How close do you live to your favorite team?
0-50 miles – 80 (49.4%)
51-100 miles – 12 (7.4%)
101-300 miles - 20 (12.3%)
301-500 miles – 11 (6.8%)
501+ miles – 38 (23.5%)
Missing – 1 (0.6%)

**Question 21: How do you primarily access social media?**

- Desktop computer – 4 (2.5%)
- Laptop computer – 21 (13%)
- Cellphone – 132 (81.5%)
- Other – 1 (0.6%)
- I do not use social media – 4 (2.5%)

**Sport Spectator Identification Scale**

**How important is it to you that the (favorite team) wins?**

\[ M = 7.51, \quad SD = 1.781 \]

**How strongly do you see yourself as a fan of the (favorite team)?**

\[ M = 6.57, \quad SD = 1.607 \]

**How strongly do your friends see you as a fan of the (favorite team)?**

\[ M = 6.19, \quad SD = 1.812 \]

**During the season, how closely do you follow the (favorite team) via ANY of the following: a) in person or on television, b) on the radio, c) television news or a newspaper, and/or d) the Internet?**

\[ M = 6.26, \quad SD = 1.721 \]

**How important is being a fan of the (favorite team) to you?**
How much do you dislike the greatest rivals of the (favorite team)?

\[ M = 6.02, \ SD = 1.946 \]

How often do you display the (favorite team) name or insignia at your place of work, where you live, or on your clothing?

\[ M = 5.91, \ SD = 2.149 \]

If a sport organization re-tweeted your tweet, how likely are you to wear that team’s apparel?

\[ M = 5.35, \ SD = 1.957 \]

If a sport organization favorited your tweet, how likely are you to wear that team’s apparel?

\[ M = 4.32, \ SD = 2.138 \]

If a sport organization replied to your tweet, how likely are you to wear that team’s apparel?

\[ M = 4.06, \ SD = 2.098 \]

If a sport organization shows your tweet on the scoreboard at a game that you attend, how does your fan identification change?

\[ M = 5.84, \ SD = 1.556 \]

If a sport organization shows your tweet on the scoreboard at a game that you attend, how likely are you to attend a future game?

\[ M = 5.67, \ SD = 1.950 \]
If your favorite team interacts with you (favorite, re-tweet or mentions) via Twitter, how likely would you be to purchase tickets to future games?

$M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.863$
CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION

As noted previously, Williams and Chinn (2010) stated that communication via Twitter between fans and team accounts allow relationships to be formed, which in turn, can lead to higher levels of fan identification. Zhang (2010) posited, “people will perceive in-group-normative media messages to have a stronger influence on themselves” (p. 192). The more interaction between a fan and sport organization occurs, a fans level of identification to that team is heightened and they may be more likely to attend future games and purchase that team’s merchandise. Building on Phua’s (2008) findings that stated the more media fans consume, the higher their identification levels are with a particular team, media relations personnel should take note and respond to fan tweets to build that relationship. With a team account engaging fans via Twitter, fans will, as evident by my work experience, gain heightened solidarity with that team and feel a part of the in-group. Social identity theory seeks to predict in-group behaviors and actions. Understanding how Twitter interactions between a team account and a fan affect the fan’s level of identification taps into their behavior pattern. It is plausible that the more interaction occurs, the more likely a fan will be to attend future home games and purchase team-affiliated merchandise. Thus, by simply engaging with fans, sport organizations can plausibly expect an increase in ticket and merchandise sales.

Social media has risen to prominence over the past few years and now all sports teams are on multiple platforms. Traditionally, though, social media has been reserved for simply disseminating information to the fans. With this rise in social media, though,
some fans have little incentive to actually attend games as they can receive the same information while sitting at home or at a restaurant. Recently, teams have begun to tap into the potential of engaging with fans, however much more is possible. As evident by my work experiences and some of the survey data, engaging with fans via Twitter has demonstrated to have a positive impact on fandom and game attendance. From personal experience, I have noted a positive effect on the fan when we as the team account engage with them via Twitter. As a manager of various social media accounts for an ACC school, I frequently respond to fan inquiries or reply to general fan tweets that were not questions. Often times I will go to the profile of the fan that we replied to and see that not only have they re-tweeted our response to them, but sometimes they even post an additional tweet saying how awesome it was that we, the team, tweeted at them. This is one way to show a positive self-image which Rubin and Hewstone (1998) argue is relevant in self-categorization because people have the inherent need to present themselves in a positive image and showing that their favorite team tweeted at them may display that image of worth.

In addition to simple responses, more fan engagement can be implemented to bring the online, offline, or make the social, personal. A major implication for social media practitioners to take away from this data is how to incorporate fans into their digital strategy. For example, teams can hold trivia contests via social media and give prizes away to the first person to answer correctly, give a fan a token of appreciation (t-shirt, ball, sunglasses etc.) to a fan that tweets that they or their family member is at their first game or even start a hashtag to encourage fans to share photos of themselves at a
game and then put those pictures on the scoreboard at that game.

These are just a few ideas that media relations personnel can implement to encourage fans to tweet at them which, in turn, the team can respond and potentially increase fan identification levels. However, a case can be made that unsolicited responses make for more genuine feelings of fandom than a scripted response. In this scenario, in addition to and separate from standardized responses such as trivia questions, general responses to fans (who might not even mention the team in their tweet) might elicit a different and potentially higher feeling of gratitude towards the team. The hope is that with this data in mind, media relations personnel will adapt their digital strategy to include more fan engagement, which, in turn, will help stop the trend of declining attendance at games and have a higher invested fan base.
CHAPTER SEVEN

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One limitation to this project deals with specific sports. Though the focus of the literature review was on football and men’s basketball, the survey hinted at no specific sport and the participants were asked to think of all sports in general. Future research should target specific sports and specific sport audiences to test if there is a different relationship between fan-to-team Twitter interaction based on the sport. The second limitation is the use of Twitter only. With different social media platforms already in use by sport organizations and new ones always coming up, it would be interesting to see if the platform makes a difference in fan identification, game attendance and the purchasing of team affiliated merchandise or if the results hold across multiple platforms. A third limitation deals with the demographics of the respondents. Of those that completed the survey, 91.4% reported being white with the next highest percentage being 3.7% (Asian/Pacific Islander) followed by 3.1% (Black/African American). Future research should seek to have a more balanced sample of ethnicities to see if there is any difference in the data.

One key area to note is how the use of social media can affect fan identification for a team that is not very successful or going through a rough stretch. While winning may be the ultimate cure (with some notable exceptions such as the Chicago Cubs), not all teams are consistent winners. As such, media relations personnel may be charged with generating digital content that can keep the fan base passionate towards the team and keep identification levels high. This is a unique circumstance to consider on just how
plausible social media engagement is in practice. Can social media engagement with fans really keep fan morale high with a poor on the field product? This would be a rich area to explore in future research.

In conclusion, this project highlighted that fan-to-team interaction via Twitter may have a positive impact on fan identification, future game attendance and the purchasing of team merchandise. This project should provide valuable data to media relations personnel on how to design and implement their digital strategy with respect to fan engagement. Twitter gives highly identified fans a medium to share their fandom and a team response to that fan influences and enhances that identity.
APPENDICES
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL

Information about Being in a Research Study
Clemson University

Investigating Fan Identification and Twitter in Sports

Description of the Study and Your Part in It

Joseph Johns, a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies at Clemson University, under the supervision of Dr. Jimmy Sanderson, assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Clemson University, is conducting research to explore how interaction between a fan and a sports organization via Twitter affects fan identification and consumer behavior.

Your part in the study will be to participate in completing a survey about your interactions and experiences with sports teams’ social media accounts along with completing information about fan identity.

It will take you about 20 minutes to be in this study.

Risks and Discomforts

We do not know of any risks or discomforts to you by participating in this research study.

Possible Benefits

This research will be beneficial in increasing our understanding of the role that Twitter can play in helping sports organizations combat the rising trend of declining attendance and how interacting with fans can alter fan identification and consumer behavior of fans.

Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy and confidentiality. The survey contains minimal personally identifying information. This is requested only for internal purposes to facilitate the research and will not be used in any research reports or public discussions of the research and your participation in the study will not be disclosed.

Choosing to Be in the Study

You do not have to be in this study. You may choose not to take part and you may choose to stop taking part at any time. You will not be punished in any way if you decide not to be in the study or to stop taking part in the study.
Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Jimmy Sanderson, at Clemson University, at 864-656-1567 or jsande6@clemson.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at 864-656-6460 or irb@clemson.edu. If you are outside of the Upstate South Carolina area, please use the ORC’s toll-free number, 866-297-3071.

You can print a copy of this document or request a copy from Dr. Jimmy Sanderson.
SURVEY QUESTIONS

Have you ever interacted (had your tweet favorited, re-tweeted or been mentioned) with a sport organization via Twitter?

_______ Yes
_______ No

If yes, which of the following has happened? (Mark all that apply)

_______ The team re-tweeted my tweet
_______ The team favorited my tweet
_______ The team replied to my tweet

If no, please imagine that you have had an instance in which a sport organization interacted with you via Twitter and use that as you complete this survey.

What is your favorite sports team?

____________________________________________________

Approximately how many people do you follow on Twitter?

_______ 0-50
_______ 51-100
_______ 101-200
_______ 201-300
_______ 301-400
_______ More than 400

Approximately how many people follow you on Twitter?

_______ 0-50
_______ 51-100
_______ 101-200
_______ 201-300
_______ 301-400
_______ More than 400
TWITTER AND FAN IDENTIFICATION

Approximately how many tweets do you post per day (including retweets)?

______ 0-1
______ 2-4
______ 5-10
______ More than 10

How many, if any, sport organization accounts do you follow on Twitter?

______ 0
______ 1-2
______ 3-4
______ 5+

How often do you favorite the tweets of a sport organization on Twitter?

______ 0 times per day
______ Once or twice per day
______ Multiple times per day

How often do you retweet the tweets of a sport organization on Twitter?

______ 0 times per day
______ Once or twice per day
______ Multiple times per day

How often do you mention a sport organization in your tweets?

______ 0 times per day
______ Once or twice per day
______ Multiple times per day

What type of posts on Twitter from sport organizations are you most likely to respond to?

______ Statistics/Score updates
______ Pictures
______ Questions/Trivia/Requests
______ Behind the scenes content
______ Other
Sports Spectator Identification Scale (for favorite college team)

Instructions: Please consider your favorite athletic team. If you do not have a favorite team, please consider the team that you are most familiar with.

Now answer each of the following questions by selecting the most accurate option for each item.

How important is it to you that the (favorite team) wins?
Not important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Very important

How strongly do you see yourself as a fan of the (favorite team)?
Not at all a fan 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Very much a fan

How strongly do your friends see you as a fan of (the team)?
Not at all a fan 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Very much a fan

During the season, how closely do you follow the (favorite team) via ANY of the following: a) in person or on television, b) on the radio, c) television news or a newspaper, and/or d) the Internet
Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Almost every day

How important is being a fan of the (favorite team) to you?
Not important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Very Important

How much do you dislike the greatest rivals of the (favorite team)?
Do not dislike 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Dislike very much

How often do you display the (favorite team) name or insignia at your place of work, where you live, or on your clothing?
Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Always
TWITTER AND FAN IDENTIFICATION

How often do you wear team-affiliated merchandise?

_____ 0 times per week
_____ 1-2 times per week
_____ 3-5 times per week
_____ Everyday

If a sport organization retweeted your tweet, how likely are you to wear that team’s apparel?

Not likely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Very likely

If a sport organization favorited your tweet, how likely are you to wear that team’s apparel?

Not likely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Very likely

If a sport organization replied to your tweet, how likely are you to wear that team’s apparel?

Not likely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Very likely

If a sport organization shows your tweet on the scoreboard of a game that you attend, how does your fan identification change?

Negative change 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Positive change

If a sport organization shows your tweet on the scoreboard, how likely are you to attend a future game?

Not likely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Very likely

If your team interacts with you (favorites, retweets or mentions) via Twitter, how likely would you be to purchase tickets to future home games?

Not likely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Very likely
Approximately how many games of your favorite team do you attend each year?

- _______ 0 games in a season
- _______ A couple home games in a season
- _______ About 1/2 of the home games
- _______ A majority of the home games
- _______ All home games
- _______ All games in the season regardless of location

What is your age?

- _______ 18-22
- _______ 23-30
- _______ 31-50
- _______ 51+

What is your gender?

- _______ Male
- _______ Female

What is your race?

- _______ White
- _______ Hispanic or Latino
- _______ Black or African American
- _______ Native American or American Indian
- _______ Asian/Pacific Islander
- _______ Other ______________

What is your annual household income?

- _______ $25,000 or less
- _______ $26,000-$35,000
- _______ $36,000-$45,000
- _______ $46,000-$55,000
- _______ $66,000-$75,000
- _______ $76,000+
**How long have you watched sports?**

- [ ] Less than 5 years
- [ ] 6-10 years
- [ ] 11-15 years
- [ ] 16-20 years
- [ ] 20+ years

**On average, how many sporting events do you attend in a year?**

- [ ] 0-5
- [ ] 6-10
- [ ] 11-15
- [ ] 16-20
- [ ] 20+

**How close do you live to your favorite team?**

- [ ] 0-50 miles
- [ ] 51-100 miles
- [ ] 101-300 miles
- [ ] 301-500 miles
- [ ] 501 miles or more

**How do you primarily access social media?**

- [ ] Desktop Computer
- [ ] Laptop
- [ ] Cell phone
- [ ] Other
- [ ] I do not use social media
REFERENCES


Ankeny, J. (2011, August). Facebook on fire. Entrepreneur, 39, 44-45


an e-commerce world (7th ed.) Cincinnati, OH: South-Western College Publishing