Show Me the Honey (Barbecue): An Exploration of College Football Fans’ Instagramming of Food

Mark Slavich, Virginia Commonwealth University
Craig Morehead, Northern Illinois University
Brendan O’Hallarn, Old Dominion University

Communication - Social Media (College Sport) 20-minute oral presentation (including questions) Abstract 2017-067

Thursday, June 1, 2017 3:55 PM Room: Columbia

During week two of the 2016 college football season, fans from Tennessee and Virginia Tech converged near the state line at Bristol Motor Speedway for a one-of-a-kind football experience billed as the Battle at Bristol. More than 150,000 fans packed the famed half-mile racetrack for the unique non-conference match-up under the lights. Volunteers and Hokies alike arrived well ahead of the Saturday evening kickoff to partake in the tailgating experience, which included cooking generous portions of meat and drinking copious amounts of adult beverages on the grounds surrounding the facility. Relatively new to tailgating culture, however, the tailgate was experienced virtually as well, as fans shared posts of their tailgate parties on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. A long-standing tradition at football-mad schools across the country, the tailgating experience has also become an exercise in online social sharing. This study represents an attempt to analyze the phenomenon of social sharing of food and drink connected to sport, specifically from the participants’ point of view.

Food and drink are popular subjects that social media users display in their posts. Notably, the phenomenon of sharing of food via social media is displayed in literature investigating symbolic communication (Calefato, La Fortuna, & Scelzi, 2016; Ibrahim, 2015). While food has always been a symbol that has built and strengthened social bonds, food has also become a form of social currency, serving as a tool of self-expression (Calefato et al., 2016). Playing a large role in this communication, “our identity is defined by what we eat and by the way we eat it and as a result of this everyone, everywhere is constantly speaking about food, mainly through the media” (Calefato et al., 2016, p. 372). The social media site Instagram is a popular medium for this type of social sharing. The mobile-based photo- and video-sharing platform allows users to post personal photos and link them simultaneously to other social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Instagram Help Center, 2016). Hu, Manikonda and Kambhampati (2014) found that 10 percent of all photos shared on Instagram were of food, and that individuals who Instagrammed their food most often also took many photos of themselves, friends, and their activities. The prevalence of such social sharing exhibits the connection between food, family, and friends, and sheds light on the role that food plays in symbolizing our identity and strengthening connections within our social communities. One type of social community with which many people are connected are the fan groups that exist, both formally and informally, around our favorite university sports teams.

College football tailgating is a tradition that has been well documented (e.g., Delaney, 2008; James, Breezeel, & Ross, 2001), and previous research displayed that an estimated 50 million people tailgate in the United States annually, and spent $7-15 billion in one previous season (Iarmolenko, Bae & Chick, 2013). While the ties between tailgating and social sharing of food have been drawn in popular press (Cappello, 2013), a formal investigation of the phenomenon is still needed. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore fans’ desire to share photos of their tailgating food and beverage via social media, and how these photos might symbolize an emotional connection to their favorite school. Taking a qualitative approach, Instagram users are being surveyed to explore their desire to share photos of their tailgating fare to answer the following research questions: (1) What motivates fans to share their tailgate food on social media? (2) What outcomes do fans attain from sharing their tailgate food on social media?

The researchers utilize symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework for this exploratory study, which is centered upon interpersonal communication via symbols of shared meaning (Charon, 2010). One of the tenets of symbolic interactionism is that individuals act toward other people as well as objects based upon the meaning they have attached to these items (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interactionism “sees meanings as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact” (Blumer, 1969, p. 5). In order to
create meaning, individuals need a system of interpretation, such as language (Mead, 1934). A symbol becomes universal when it is interpreted the same way by all individuals (Denzin, 1970). Sport environments and activities can influence the shared meanings and symbols that can affect consumer behavior (Armstrong, 2007). In addition to language and sport environments, food is also viewed as a symbolic resource. With a strong connection to individuals’ culture, food is able to establish and maintain one’s connection within a community (Morasso & Zittoun, 2014). This study is thought to extend the theory of symbolic interactionism related to sport by investigating the interplay of social sharing and symbolic consumption in the context of tailgating culture.

There are relatively few sport studies of Instagram. Those that do exist rely on content analysis, and well-tested critical frameworks such as Social Identity Theory (Bowles, in press; Kian, Burden, & Shaw, 2011, Lebel & Harmon, 2014, McNely, 2012). This exploratory study utilizes symbolic interactionism, a theory rarely used in the sport context, to investigate the motives and interactions of fans posting tailgating food on Instagram through qualitative survey data gathered from a purposive sample of Instagram users. More specifically, we examine fans’ Instagramming of tailgate food and beverages in the context of Southeastern Conference (SEC) football. Data collection is ongoing throughout the 2016 college football season. Fans of all 14 SEC schools who posted photos of food and/or beverage that include a popular school-themed hashtag (e.g., #GeauxTigers, #RollTide, #WarEagle) are being solicited to participate. Searching these hashtags within Instagram, the researchers are publicly soliciting responses from a delimited population of social sharers who post photos of game-day food and beverage by commenting directly to such posts. Comment-based solicitations identify the researcher as part of a university-affiliated academic study, and a request to email a survey link. The link takes respondents to a seven-question qualitative questionnaire posted in Qualtrics. Following the conclusion of the 2016 college football season, researchers will independently analyze the survey data utilizing constant comparative methodology, to see what themes emerge (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). The emergent themes will be triangulated among the three researchers, and then compared to the principles underlying symbolic interactionism.

This study seeks to explore the motives of tailgaters’ Instagramming of food and beverages and how these photos symbolize their connection to both their school and fellow fans. The results are expected to have both theoretical and practical applications. As one of few sport consumer studies to utilize symbolic interactionism, the research team aims to extend this theory and demonstrate how it can be used in the context of college sport. In addition, with identity, emotion, and nostalgia all part of both sport and food consumption, this study seeks to further our understanding of the relationship between food and sport (Duruz, 1999; Fairley, 2003; Mannur, 2007; Wann, 2006; Wann, Royalty, & Rochelle, 2002). Finally, as tailgating has grown into an avenue for revenue generation for universities across the nation (Muret, 2015), these results will provide insight into the behavior of tailgaters, which will allow schools to both strengthen their relationship with fans and potentially help to further monetize the popularity of tailgating culture.