Fandom in the Twitter World: A Content Analysis of Sports Fans’ Tweets during the 2018 College Football National Championship

Bumsoo Park, The University of Alabama
Nathan Towery, The University of Alabama
Andrew C. Billings (Advisor), The University of Alabama

Communication - Social Media (College Sport) virtual asynchronous
Poster Abstract 2020-006 Session: Poster Session III

The advancement of social networking technologies allows sports fans to become more active media consumers (Dart, 2009) and an increasing proportion of fans watch sporting events via television or streaming devices while simultaneously interacting with friends or other fans on social media (Hwang & Lim, 2015), a concept known as social TV. According to Cunningham and Eastin’s (2017) survey of sports fans, 79% of televised sports viewers have accessed SNSs during sporting events. Recently, there has been a growing number of attempts to examine sports fans’ social TV usage, primarily screen related backchannel. For example, recent research shows sports fans engage social TV to increase social interaction with others and to access game-related information (e.g., Gallus, 2018; Larkin & Fink, 2016).

Moreover, many scholars (e.g., Fan, Billings, Zhu, & Yu, 2019; Yu & Wang, 2015) reveal that sports fans also use social TV to express their emotional responses to the events. Particularly, due to the unpredictability of game processes and outcomes in sports, fans often experience various emotions (e.g., happiness, anger, sadness) while they are watching sports (Kim, Magnusen, & Lee, 2017) and social media provide attractive space for expressing these aroused emotions (Billings, Qiao, Conlin, & Nie, 2017; Wakefield, 2016; Zolkepli & Kamarulzaman, 2015). Specifically, fans tend to post more positive emotions on social media when the team they root for scores or wins than when their team fails (Mudrick, Miller, & Atkin, 2016).

To explain fans’ emotional reactions or expressions on social media, previous research (e.g., Fan et al., 2019; Mudrick et al., 2016) mainly focuses on the concepts of “Basking in reflected glory” (BIRGing), which indicates fans want to promote their association with the success of the team (Cialdini et al., 1976; Wann & Branscombe, 1993) and “Cutting off reflected failure” (CORFing), which describes sports fans’ tendency to disassociate themselves from failure in an attempt to manage their negative feelings (Snyder et al., 1986).

However, BIRGing (when the team wins) or CORFing (when the team loses) is not the only way to express their feelings according to previous research (e.g., Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Raney, 2006), suggesting that people can also manage their positive feelings by criticizing other teams or disliked characters. Moreover, BIRGing and CORFing previously pertained to activities and emotions fans exhibit post-game, yet social media now allows for the management of these feelings while the game is unfolding. Thus, there appears to be a demonstrable difference between how one responds to actually winning a game as opposing to thinking one is going to win the game.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine why and when sports fans use social media, and what they post on their social media (i.e., Twitter) during a key sporting event (the 2018 College Football National Championship game) with a focus on content analyzing fans’ natural real-time emotional expressions. Particularly, the researchers will examine both Alabama and Georgia fans’ tweets and compare their “in-the-moment” emotional expressions in accordance with the success and failure of their team during the game.