Increasing Engagement and Online Interest in Women’s University Sport: An Analysis of a Canadian University Women’s Hockey Team’s Social Media Content

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The rise of social media has enabled sport organizations to enhance and deepen connections with an array of stakeholders; including fans (Meng et al., 2015). Historically, there have been differences in the way male and female athletes were depicted in mass media as men’s sport was often more glorified, but researchers suggested the rise of social media will provide more prominence to women’s sport (Chen et al., 2016). Women’s sport teams can use social media to attain the same level of exposure and engagement as men’s sport and connect with their fans more economically and effectively than through traditional media (Chen et al., 2016).

Organizations that utilize social media for marketing purposes share the goal of generating high levels of engagement, measured through likes, shares, retweets, and comments. There has been research conducted at the professional sport level in this area, but very limited research at the university sport level, especially in Canada. Martin et al. (2011) found that many university athletic departments operate and execute their social media accounts with few resources. University social media managers are challenged because of the lack of research in the Canadian university setting.

The purpose of this study is to explore how one university women’s hockey team utilizes social media to connect with key stakeholders to increase engagement through an analysis of content posted to their social networking sites over two seasons. In this study, one university hockey team’s posts to Twitter and Instagram will be analyzed to understand what content types are most engaging to the team’s followers. Additional factors will be examined, such as the day or time of day in which the content is posted.

Within the realm of Canadian university sport, there is limited knowledge around what type of content engages stakeholders with athletic departments and teams. When analyzing posts from the team’s Instagram page, differentiation will be made between posts with a sporting objective and a charitable objective (Kim and Hull, 2017). Additionally, content focused on brand attributes, like game promotion and team success, will be analyzed (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). The team’s Twitter is primarily utilized for live-tweeting hockey games; thus, tweets will be coded whether they are posted in-game or to deliver news (Gibbs and O’Reilly, 2014). Within both sets of analysis, posts will also be coded based on the content they include (i.e. photo, video, graphic).

Preliminary results indicate that engagement levels are highest amongst Instagram posts that focus on player promotion and team charity. On Twitter, tweets that include a photo and a post focusing on community news and player recognition have the highest engagement. Results of this study are expected to provide a new perspective on effective social media utilization at the university level and within women’s sport. Sport marketers of university athletics departments and individual teams will be able to utilize the results of this study to make effective decisions surrounding what type of social media content will engage stakeholders and how to better utilize the resources they have.