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Using Sport Identification & Rhetorical Strategy: Evaluating an NCAA D1 Collegiate Football Team's Social Media Presence

Maria Baldwin
Eastern Illinois University

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Using Sport Identification & Rhetorical Strategy: Evaluating an NCAA D1 Collegiate Football

Team's Social Media Presence

Maria Baldwin

Dr. Matt Gill

Masters Thesis

Abstract

Using social media platforms to build identification amongst stakeholders is of increasing importance for a growing range of organizations. Social media represents a powerful tool for marketing and developing business. In sports organizations, the use of social media can build identification amongst a fanbase by using George Cheney's (1983) rhetorical strategies.
The purpose of this study was to explore the content of a regional D1 university football team's twitter and Instagram platforms, using a content analysis to clarify the organization's use of rhetorical strategies and design elements to foster sport identification amongst their social media fanbase. Many sports organizations use social media campaigns effectively, and reap the monetary and generational benefits of having fans who support the team by following them on social media actively. An understanding of using rhetorical strategies may facilitate social media campaigns geared towards using sport identification to motivate and retain followers, creating fans. The researcher conducted this exploratory quantitative study from a rhetorical strategy and sport identification grounded perspective. The researcher conducted a purposive content analysis of the Eastern Illinois University football team's twitter and Instagram platforms and conducted in-depth analysis. This study found that by using consistent and excessive use of rhetorical strategies in social media campaigns, a sports organization can potentially foster sports identification effectively amongst their fanbase. The findings may guide organizations to develop and implement social media campaigns, strategies and initiatives geared towards attracting, integrating, retaining, supporting and motivating fans to be a part of the team's organization, and follow them on social media. This study contributes to an evolving body of knowledge aimed at understanding how to motivate a fanbase to follow a team, becoming a vested part of the organization.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Sports are embedded into the social fabric of American society and athletes have played a major role in the cultural development of our country. Consider when Major League Baseball aligned itself with the civil rights movement and desegregation by signing Jackie Robinson. Or when famous athletes, such as Jesse Owens, boycotted the Olympic Games in several cities due to the political climate of the country or their leaders. Regardless of the form it may take, sports have been a platform for athletes and organizations to get social and cultural messages and beliefs across to the public and this underscores the importance of sports to American society.

The messages sports organizations and athletes share with their fans reach millions of people nationwide, through television, newspapers, magazines, and social media. For example in 2017, ESPN, one of the largest sports media companies in the world, had over 87 million subscribers tuning into their shows and games (Gaines & Nudelman, 2017). Research from the United States Anti-Doping Agency found that three fifths of Americans are involved in sport in some way (USADA, 2014). For many Americans their involvement is rooted in their fanhood, as people who enjoy watching and being a part of the sports experience. Fans support their teams in multiple ways, from watching on television, to connecting with teams on social media, and attending games and events in arenas and at fields across the country.

Sports are also a vital part of the college experience for many students. Sports allow students to socialize with their friends and other students by identifying with the team and showing support for the university (Wann, 2006). College football, specifically, was the focus of this study because it is the most popular and most culturally relevant sport in the United States today. College football makes the most money for athletic departments, and therefore is

important to the success of athletic departments across the country. Because of this, some of the most prideful and intense crowds at sporting events across the country are found in the student sections at college football games, cheering for their home teams. But there is a problem looming on the college sports landscape. For the first time ever, college football attendance has decreased for four straight years.

Dennis Dodd of CBS Sports reports that in 2018 college football had its largest per-game attendance drop in 34 years and saw the second-largest decrease ever in overall attendance. Since 2008, annual attendance has declined 10.1% creating a shifting landscape where sports organizations must focus on creating messages that will get more people in the stands (Sanderson, 2011). As a result, college sports media relations departments are searching for different ways to have their messages reach a broader audience in hopes of encouraging event attendance.

Social media is of increasing importance for a growing range of organizations as it represents a powerful tool for public relations and developing business (Hutchings, 2012). McCorkindale and DiStasio (2014) found that no area in the history of public relations has grown and spread as fast as social media. Research from Forbes (2018) shows that using social media can aid in reaching key stakeholders, as 40% of people follow their favorite brands on social networks. Follower engagement has never been as important as it is today, as companies communicate with and provide content to stakeholders to build and maintain relationships (McCorkindale & DiStasio, 2014). In fact, companies are investing millions of dollars into technologies and strategies to help guide social media engagement in an effort to improve relationships and build their reputation, among other outcomes (McCorkindale & DiStasio, 2014). The immediacy of social media allows sports organizations to give their fans instant

access into the lives of athletes and coaches, while providing injury reports, scores, live play-by-play, statistics and more. When a sports organization can easily communicate with a fanbase in such ways, stronger relationships can be built. As a result athletic departments at colleges and universities across the country have become more cognizant of their messages on social media and are using social media accounts to strategically communicate with fans.

On college campuses students who use social media often to talk about sports also communicate about sports in other ways with their peers, which leads them to feel greater levels of college-group identity and collective self-esteem (Bumsoo & Yunghwon, 2019). One of the most attended collegiate sports is football, although attendance has dipped in recent years (Bonesteel, 2018) for multiple reasons. Today, students have numerous options as to how they would like to enjoy their free time, and are becoming more introverted socially, due to a modern computer mediated age of communication with their peers (Favotto, Michaelson, Pickett, & Davison 2019). With plenty of distractions, such as audio and visual streaming services, students do not have to leave home for entertainment, reducing the likelihood of socializing by attending football games. This creates a major problem for colleges and universities who want to encourage attendance at sporting events.

To understand how fans might react to rhetorical identification strategies, it is important to understand the concept of fanhood. Billings, Butterworth and Turman (2018) describe three types of fans. The first is a social fan; one who attends games as a socializing event and has little to no identification with a team. The second type is a focused fan that has some invested interest in, or affiliation with, the team they follow. This often takes multiples forms, such as connecting with them on social media or attending games. Lastly, a vested fan is a die-hard follower with high levels of emotional attachment to, and identification with, the teams they support. Vested

fans follow their teams on social media daily, attend games regularly, and purchase team merchandise and memorabilia often. The distinctions between fan types are important because they highlight that fans can follow their favorite sports teams differently, and the level with which a fan identifies with a sports team or athlete is perceived as indicative of fanhood (Hirt & Clarkson, 2011). Moreover, by recognizing and understanding different fan types, we can better understand the messages sports organizations create to reach them.

A person's level of identification with a team influences the communication that drives how fans enact and consume sports (Billings, Butterworth, & Turman, 2018). For example, fans that identify strongly with a team are more likely to partake in consumption, whether it is by purchasing a jersey, merchandise or tickets. Therefore is becomes imperative to understand how sports organizations try to influence fans' identification and recognize those messages as attempts to create deeper connections with fans, ultimately changing the way people interact with sports organizations. This study examines the challenges that sports organizations face in this endeavor and explores how organizations use rhetorical identification strategies on social media to influence their followers.

To help address these concerns this thesis will review literature on fanhood, sport identification, rhetorical identification strategies and the use of social media as a public relations tool. Then it explores the Eastern Illinois Football team's use of social media through a content analysis of their Twitter and Instagram accounts to create an understanding of the content shared. Finally, it will present results, draw conclusions from those results, and provide suggestions for improving the EIU football team's social media accounts to build and maintain relationships with fans.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

It is the goal of this study to provide insight concerning how social media messages embed rhetorical identification strategies to build and engage a collegiate fanbase. In order to achieve this goal, the thesis first examines the research on sports fanhood. Next it will review the literature on identification with an emphasis on its appearance in sports research and then lastly examine the use of social media as a public relations tool to build and maintain relationships.

Fanhood

Sports fans are multifarious, meaning that there are many different kinds, who experience fandom with different levels of intensity, and the lines between sports fanship and sport spectatorship are often blurred. Sports fanship is indicative of a person who follows the team closely through the media, but may not attend games. Sport spectatorship can be defined as those who attend games regularly. At times the terms are used interchangeably, but they cannot be understood as mutually exclusive (Gantz & Wenner, 1995). Wann, Melnick, Russell, and Pease (2001) found that by distinguishing between direct and indirect spectators of sports, there was a clearer line to defining true fans. According to the researchers, the term direct fan refers to those in attendance at sporting events, which they believe is more indicative of true fanhood than an indirect fan that only follows their teams through the media.

Burke, Jackson, and Buning (2011) argue that sports fans are emotionally attached to the team or individuals they support, have a sense of camaraderie with their favorite athletes, follow news about them, and share their experiences on social networks. Crawford (2004), found that being a fan is not just a label or category, but an identity and performance. Crawford (2004) argues that through identification, a fan not only follows and supports their team, but also

becomes a part of the team by claiming a connection. This identification is performed daily,

through rituals and proclamations; such as telling people they are a "Green Bay Packer fan,"

flying a team flag, or hanging a poster on the wall. Sports can also dictate how one dresses, eats,

speaks and feels (DeChristoforo, 2006).

An individual's categorization as a fan depends largely on numerous social factors, such

as social context or time. What makes one person a fan could be different than someone else.

One fan may follow their favorite team religiously on social media, watch every game on

television, but not attend a single game. Another may attend many games but not follow media

as closely. Since fan experiences are varied, there are many ways researchers categorize fans.

However, researchers agree that there are typically certain elements that make a person a fan,

such as a love and passion for sports, teams, or players, personal involvement with a team, one's

own experiences as an athlete, and childhood memories associated with sports. It is typical that

fans can detail lifelong involvement with sports in a variety of ways.

Van Driel et al. (2018) found that 61.5% of the people they interviewed considered

themselves fans because of their strong emotional ties to sport. The researchers also found

overall enjoyment played a role in what makes people fans. Respondents talked about the

pleasures associated with following sports, such as the entertainment factor or exciting rivalries

between teams. Finally, the social aspects of being a fan were revealed in their research. Such

responses focused on the relational ties that many people have with friends who are direct fans,

who attend games and follow sports regularly. For example, one person noted that being a sports

fan is equivalent to being a member of a family or community and, after all, sporting events on

television are often parts of American holidays.

The social aspects of attending a game, or being a fan, could be the reason many college students attend games. Robinson, Trail, Dick, and Gillentine (2005), cited Deci (1971), who stated that motivation is either an innate or learned behavior, because of the satisfaction or enjoyment generated by the activities one is involved in. Therefore for social and focused fans it is imperative that the experience of attending games is enjoyable. Team success often plays an important role in fan attendance, because social and focused fans would rather attend games that create an atmosphere of accomplishment and vicarious achievement. Fink, Trail and Anderson (2002) define vicarious achievement as the need for social prestige, self-esteem, and a sense of empowerment for an individual though his or her association with a successful team. This suggests that most spectator or fan behaviors fulfill social or psychological needs. Drawing on Wann and Branscombe (1990), Robinson et al., (2005), claim an individual's desire to increase their association with successful others could be linked to a students' motivation to attend games. By attending, students can live vicariously through the achievements of their school's team. These fans gain a sense of empowerment and increase their self-esteem by being associated with this level of competition (Robinson et al., 2005). Therefore, if a student is motivated by the achievement of their university's team, there is a greater chance they will look for other ways to connect with the team, including following them on social media, and then teams have the opportunity to encourage deeper identification with the team. Therefore, it is important that organizations understand what motivates fans across the entire spectrum of fandom.

Sport Identification

Daniel Wann (2006) cited Kagan's (1958) definition of group identification as an acquired, cognitive response within a person, in which some of the attributes, motives, and characteristics of the group are part of the person's psychological foundation. Wann (2006)

believes this definition to be the best foundation for defining sport team identification because

Kagan's research captures the fundamental elements of sport identification. Wann (2006) states

that individuals have a high level of group identification when the actions of the group are a

central component of their social identity and when categorization as a member of this group is

important and relevant. Such characteristics are demonstrated in fans that identify with their

teams by referring to themselves as the mascot of the team. For example, fans that have high

identification with Eastern Illinois University will call themselves a "panther," and will actively

attend games, or follow the team closely through the media. Using this approach, Wann

concludes that a fan does not have to be an active participant within group activities in order to

feel connected to the group. This conclusion is similar to the notion of indirect fans, whom

follow the team closely but go to limited games, and suggests that an active participant's

connection to a team is not necessarily stronger than a non-active participant.

Wann (2006) found that feeling a sense of belonging, affiliation, or connection to a group

and a desire to feel unity and cohesion with others are human psychological needs. This means

that it is human nature for people to want to feel connected to groups and categorize themselves

into them. Sutton, McDonald, Milne, and Cimperman (1997) found that community affiliation is

the most significant correlate of fan identification. Thus, if someone feels an emotional tie to a

team and its community, they will affiliate with the appropriate fandom because of their need to

associate with groups. Team identification can be fostered though interactions with socialization

agents such as exposure to the sport (through social media) (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003), friends

and other fans of the team (Crawford, 2003; Kolbe & James, 2003), and the fan's parents and

family (Funk & James, 2001; Greenwood, 2001; Wan, et al., 1996). Wann (2006) also noted that

repeated exposure to the team through the media or the Internet (social media) could be a

powerful agent in socialization. Finally, living in geographical proximity to a team you support

leads to increased opportunities for socialization by having easier access to live games and

providing more opportunities to develop connections with other fans (Wann, 2006).

Increased group status and prestige can also foster identification (Ashforth & Mael,

1989). Researchers have detected a positive relationship between sport team success and level of

identification (Wann et al., 1996). However, team success is not a required factor for group

identification, as Fisher and Wakefield (1996) found that team success has differential effects on

the identification of fans supporting historically successful and unsuccessful teams. An example

of this could be fans of the Chicago Cubs, a Major League baseball team. Cubbie fans remained

loyal to the organization, attending games at Wrigley Field and following them on social media,

even though the team went 107 years without winning a World Series title. Other factors, such as

player attractiveness, popularity of a player and player similarity to the fan, foster identification

for fans of poorly performing teams (Fisher & Wakefield, 1996).

Research indicates that fans report positive emotional responses to their team's successes

and negative affect to their team's failures (Wann, 2006) and such emotional responses differ in

intensity from fan to fan. Wann et al., (1994) studied identification of college basketball fans

prior to them attending a game involving their collegiate team. Highly identified fans reported

strong negative reactions to the loss and intense positive responses to the win. Fans with low

levels of identification did not report differences in emotion as a function of game outcome

(Wann et al., 1994). The most intense emotions reported were the intense highs and lows

occurring during rivalry games. Team losses can have a strong negative effect on the mood states

of highly identified fans and in some instances these negative moods can last for many days

(Wann, Grieve, Zapalac, Visek, Partridge & Lanter, 2008). Despite such potential negative

consequences of sport identification, Wann's (2006) Team Identification Social Psychological

Health Model shows that identification is positively associated with social well-being, because

fans have a general trustworthiness in other sports fans.

Wann (2006) studied fan behavior in regards to sport identification and found that highly

identified fans share in consumption. Consumption is divided into three categories: game, team-

related and sponsorship (Wann, 2006). Game consumption is understood as event attendance and

following the team on television, radio or social media. Team-related consumption involves the

extent to which fans purchase team apparel and products, and, sponsorship consumption involves

fans' perceptions and patronage of sponsors' products. Wann (2006) states that while the level of

team identification is a significant independent predictor of game attendance, it may also be the

most powerful factor. Team identification impacts indirect game consumption as well, as highly

identified fans are more likely to consume sport via the media (Fisher, 1998). Fans who are

socially identified with a team will feel the emotional highs and lows of supporting the team on

television or attending a game, and share in consumption by buying team apparel or supporting a

team sponsor. Therefore, sports organizations wanting to increase game attendance should focus

on developing or strengthening fan identification with the team and there are multiple rhetorical

strategies that teams can utilize in their message creation.

Rhetorical Identification Strategies

Ashforth and Mael (1996) define organizational identity as the stylized narratives about

the "soul" or essence of an organization. From this perspective, organizations enact their

identities through the stories they tell, directly or indirectly, about themselves, their past, their

ambitions and their perceptions of the organizational environment. Organizational methods

using identity developed in modern industrialized societies (Foucault, 1984).

Cheney and Tompkins (1987) argue that stakeholders identify with an organization when they choose the alternative that best promotes the interests of the organization rather than the just the self. Organizational identification is inherently communicative (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987), and organizations can gain identification through means of persuasive communication (Cheney, 1983). Identification strategies are important to modern organizational life, as they are intentional and unintentional attempts by the organization to build relationships with stakeholders (Cheney, 1983). Cheney (1983) adds that in his research, a policy director stated that no major, successful company has achieved a level of success without first having created an attitude of identification between the company and their stakeholders. Therefore, in order for an organization to operate effectively, organizational identity must be established (Cheney, 1983). When the stakeholder becomes one with the organization through a common shared identity, the stakeholder self-consciously makes the decision to behave organizationally (Cheney, 1983). The identification mutually benefits both the organization and the stakeholder, building a relationship that could last a lifetime.

Mina Vaughn (1997) found that organizational identification is both a process and a product. The process of relational development is initiated when organizational values and goals are communicated (Vaughn, 1997). If the process is successful, Vaughn (1997) believes a stakeholder complements the process by embracing those values and goals, and the stakeholder's identification develops with the organization itself. The organization and the stakeholder share and express common interests and motivations. The resulting product of this relationship is mutual feelings of similarity, belonging and membership in the organization (Cheney, 1983).

Cheney et al., (2014) stated that identity has become a focused and professionalized enterprise, adopted by organizations in all sectors through the successive development of

advertising, public relations and marketing. Because of this, organizations can use social media as a public relations tool to enhance identification amongst their stakeholders. Cheney (1983) identified four rhetorical strategies for the successful creation of identification: the common ground technique, identification through anti-thesis, the transcendent "we" and identification through unifying symbols.

The common ground technique is the most important technique used in identification in terms of frequency of appearance, the variety of types manifesting the strategy, and the diversity of ways in which similarity or commonality is expressed (Cheney, 1983). Cheney outlines six categories, or examples, in which this technique is often used, the first being the use of expression for the individual. This tactic is used when corporations express concern for the stakeholder as a member, or integral part, of the organization. Cheney used an example of R.R. Donnelley & Sons Co. that issued a "printer" which emphasized the role of "Donnelley people" in the corporation's success. The vice president credited "the people" of the company for contributing to his own rise to the top. He added, "our people are the key to what makes this company tick" (p. 150). In a sports context when a team wins a significant game, the owner of the team and athletes interviewed thank their fans, claiming that if it were not for their support, the win would not have happened. Sports social media use this technique constantly as sports teams and athletic departments are quick to create unifying hashtags such as #EIUPantherNation, or #WinAsOne.

A second tactic of the common ground technique is the recognition of individual contributions, which highlight shared values with the organization. One way many sports organizations accomplish this is by creating groups connected to the organization. Sports booster clubs, such as EIU's "Panther Club," donate religiously towards the organization and therefore,

are given special statues and benefits, such as a special place to sit during games, labeled "The

Panther Patio." Cheney (1983) stated that in singling out individuals for praise, there is always

the risk of fostering divisiveness and segregation, which would create a divide between the

organization and their stakeholders, ultimately affecting identification. Therefore, Cheney

believes that the organization must take care to present membership in achievement clubs as a

realistic goal for most stakeholders or employees.

      The third tactic is the espousal of shared values. This approach can be aimed toward

employees or donors of an organization. In this tactic, the "we" of the organization has the same

values as "you" the donor or employee. This tactic is different from the previous one because it

does not involve the stakeholders making monetary contributions to the organization. Cheney

(1983) writes that the implications of shared values are many, because this approach links

individuals with the organization, equaling its priority with family, organization and nation to the

stakeholder. In a sports organization, if a donor or fan aligns their values with that of the

organization, they will be more likely to identify with it and form a lasting relationship with the

organization. As such, sports organizations often become active members of their communities.

For example, the EIU athletic department holds a night in Lantz Arena where children can trick-

or-treat with athletes and play kiddie games for free. By reaching out to the community, a sport

organization will get support back in the form of good will, social media following, or a boost in

fan attendance.

      The fourth tactic of the common ground technique is the advocacy of benefits and

activities. In this approach, the value of a company-sponsored activity is linked with the

organization and its function (Cheney, 1983). Advocacy of company-sponsored benefits and

activities, such as training employees to give them more skills, increases their identification with the organization and its goals.

The previous tactics found in the common ground technique were framed from the organization's perspective, whereas the final two are framed as representing the perspectives of stakeholders and employees. The first of these is praise by outsiders. Examples of this technique include organization reviews, or social media posts and comments showing the organization in a positive light. Such tactics encourage employees and others to identify with an organization by representing the views of others (Cheney, 1983). The idea is that employees should hold the same positive view of their employer that stakeholders do (Cheney, 1983). The final approach of the common ground technique is testimonials by employees, which express dedication, commitment and affection towards the organization. Such statements give stakeholders an idea of how the organization treats their employees, and what they have to say about the climate of the organization (Cheney, 1983). Many sport organizations incorporate praise from outsiders into their social media channels by retweeting articles and blogs showing their teams in a positive light. This can be an effective strategy, because it shows what the public and stakeholders are saying about the organization, and not forcing the organization to speak highly about itself. Organizations can also further the reach of these articles and blogs by giving gratitude on the article, because social media sites allow posts to be reposted and shared.

In addition to the common ground technique Cheney (1983) discusses identification by antithesis as his second rhetorical strategy. This strategy is at work when organizational members are urged to unite against a common enemy, usually a threat from the outside environment. Identification with the organization is suggested as desirable (sharing values and goals), and also necessary to oppose threats from the outside. The act of joining together and uniting against a

common enemy allows the formation of a shared identity, or at least the expression of sharing a

common identity. Identification by antithesis can be utilized by sport organizations through

rivalry matchups and pre-game, in-game, and post-game hype posts. Fans love rivalries, because

of the intense suspenseful and exciting highs and lows occurring during these games, and sport

organizations can use them to boost their social media following and game attendance.

      According to Cheney (1983), the processes of association and dissociation are

inextricably interwoven in his third strategy, the assumed "we." In this strategy, Cheney (1983)

notes that the "we," and the corresponding "they," are found in statements where a common

bond among members of the organization is taken for granted, but the nature of the relationship

is not well defined. Cheney (1983) argues that the assumed "we" is both a subtle and powerful

identification strategy because it often goes unnoticed, and the use of this strategy allows an

organization to present commonality among organizational members as a taken-for-granted

assumption. Cheney (1983) believes that the extent to which stakeholders accept this assumption

is the extent to which they identify with the organization. Sport organizations can utilize the

assumed "we" by creating unifying hashtags that are used consistently, and by utilizing team,

game and sponsorship consumption.

      Cheney's (1983) fourth and final rhetorical strategy is unifying symbols. These symbols

can include the organization's name, logo and trademark, and this strategy demonstrates their

significance as major assets in an organization's corporate identity. Cheney (1983) elaborates

that if a stakeholder accepts the identifications that are shaped and suggested by symbols, such as

a well-crafted statement of organizational identity, they will build an identity with the

organization. Organizations make serious investments to brand these symbols in appealing ways,

in an attempt to reach and influence as many stakeholders as possible. Mascots, university logos,

and sponsorship logos are just a handful of the symbols sport organizations utilize to

communicate with their publics. Different items or even foods, such as a Chicago Style hot dog

at Wrigley Field, can also because unifying symbols for a fanbase.

Social Media

Elwood (1995) noted that rhetoric constitutes the core component of public relations

while Heath (1992) found it is through rhetoric that people and organizations negotiate and

manage their relationships. An essential way to help gain fans through identification is through

social media. Social media is comprised of messages created by stakeholders on web sites, blogs,

microblogs (e.g. Twitter), discussion groups and social networking sites (Coombs, 2007). As the

Internet became more advanced, social media sites grew at a rapid rate, allowing the creation and

wide transmission of content that aids in interaction, collaboration and community (Sanderson,

2011). Sports fans no longer have to rely on television, magazines, radio or newspapers for their

sports information, but can reach for their cell phones and open up their favorite social media site

instead. Social media offers fans easily accessible sites where they can connect with other fans,

create and share content, and more actively participate in media production and consumption.

Social media has created "citizen" journalists (Sanderson, 2011), members of the general

community who offer commentary and alternative viewpoints (Carpenter, 2008; Hamdy, 2009;

Witt, 2004). In addition, social media allows athletes to be more directly involved in media

production processes, and it enables them to integrate fans into their media messages (Sanderson,

2011), increasing opportunities for fan identification.

According to the PEW research center, around seven-in-ten Americans use social media

to connect with one another, engage with news content, share information and entertain

themselves (PEW, 2019). When the Pew Research Center began tracking social media in 2005,

5% of American adults used at least one platform. By 2011 that percent rose to half of all

Americans, and today 72% of the public uses some type of social media. In adults between the

ages of 18-29, 79% are on Facebook, 67% are on Instagram, 38% are on Twitter, 62% are on

Snapchat, and 91% are on YouTube. Social media use has become part of our everyday routines,

with roughly three-quarters of Facebook users – and around six-in-ten Instagram users – visiting

these sites at least once a day.

        According to Smith and Sanderson (2015), social media has become quite popular in the

sports world. As social media readily supports participation, peer-to-peer conversation,

collaboration, and community, it is not surprising that the use of social media as a public

relations tool has become integrated into many aspects of sport across multiple stakeholders

(Smith & Sanderson, 2015).

        Due to the accessibility of social media, sports fans now have a wide variety of choices

available when seeking information (Sanderson, 2011), and sports organizations are taking

advantage of this trend, supplementing their television and broadcasting resources with social

media tools (Sanderson, 2011). As a result, sports organizations and athletes are using social

media platforms more frequently to communicate with fans (Pedersen, Parks, Quarterman &

Thibault, 2010). The three most common social media platforms used by sports organizations to

promote their teams are Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (Hlavac, 2014). Facebook is used to

provide information, post pictures and videos, and promote upcoming events, while Twitter is

used as a quick source of information that does not require effort from an individual (Witkemper,

Hoon Lim & Waldburger, 2012). Twitter is becoming increasingly popular amongst sports

organizations. Every team in the professional sport leagues in the United States (NFL, NBA,

WNBA, MLB, MLS, NHL, WPS) utilizes Twitter (Pedersen, Parks, Quarterman & Thibault,

2010). By utilizing Twitter, each league is making an attempt to take advantage of its capacity to keep consumers aware and connected to their brands (Pedersen, Parks, Quarterman & Thibault, 2010). Organizations use Instagram by posting videos and texts that are easily accessible by audiences. Instagram allows an organization to quickly convey ideas and thoughts that are more engaging and easily remembered to a fan, due to the graphics and videos included in the posts (Hlavac, 2014).

Researchers have found several motivators in sport consumption when following sports organizations on social media, such as entertainment (Gantz, 1981; Sloan, 1989, Zillman, et al., 1989); a fan's sense of affiliation to a team (fanship); the ability to connect with other fans and eliminating feelings of estrangement (Branscombe & Wann 1990). Social media helps a fanbase connect to their team by fulfilling all three of these needs. Pedersen, Parks, Quarterman and Thibault (2010) found that Twitter represents the best avenue through which a relationship can be grown by providing an opportunity for organizations to work with their fans to enhance their experiences and meet their motivational and identification needs. Twitter can be used in relationship marketing to attract fans, develop relationships and retain consumers (Pedersen, Parks, Quarterman & Thibault, 2010). Specifically, sports organizations should utilize social media primarily as a source of information, while providing entertainment. Sports organizations should also attempt to inform athletes who engage in social media to communicate with their fans by sharing information about their lives (i.e., the fan/athlete identification mentioned earlier), (Pedersen, Parks, Quarterman & Thibault, 2010). Further, because fans are so invested in athletes and the lives they live, emphasis should be placed on aiding fans' connection with athletes.

Organizations are using social media as a tool to connect with fans (Pedersen, Parks, Quarterman & Thibault, 2010). Terms such as "fans," "fan zone," or "connect" are used as links to social media pages from official team websites to allow fans easy access to social media sites (Pedersen, Parks, Quarterman & Thibault, 2010). Media scholars have argued that social media relationship-building can augment an organization's overall social capital, which, in turn, may provide organizations with positive tangible outcomes, such as possibly increasing ticket sales, increasing game attendance, and possibly boosting advertisement revenue on social media pages as well (Himelboim et al., 2014). By utilizing social media, sports organizations can build crucial relationships with their fans, and enhance their brand image (Pedersen, Parks, Quarterman & Thibault, 2010). Social media can achieve direct and instant consumer contact. In this case, it provides quick and easy access to sports fans that actively choose to follow an organization, which is an opportune way to gauge purchase intentions and image perceptions (Pedersen, Parks, Quarterman & Thibault, 2010). For sports organizations, social media serves as a tool for awareness, and a fanbase who is aware will attend games. Two social media sites that are growing in usage by sports fans and hold potential to help teams connect with fans are Instagram and Twitter.

Instagram as a public relations tool

Sports have important cultural consequences because they create a vital part of individual identity and bring large groups of individuals, who may share nothing else in common, together as an organized collective (Gill, 2011). As social media continues to grow, building fanbases and communities on social media platforms becomes increasingly important to sports organizations. According to Bergström and Bäckman (2013), Instagram is an American company founded in 2010 but acquired by Facebook in April 2012 (Ochoa Siguencia et al., 2017). Instagram is a

mobile application for smartphones, available on both the App Store and Google Play. It is a

social media platform that offers stakeholders an opportunity to share their posts visually,

through a single, or series of, pictures. To use Instagram a user must create an account using their

email address, which can be connected to their Facebook account. The user can then follow other

users and be followed back, and when a user follows another user's account that user's photos

will appear on the home page (Bergström & Bäckman, 2013). The user can like or comment on

other user's photos, and by liking the photo, the user can show that they admire a post

(Bergström & Bäckman, 2013). The explore page, located on the bottom of the app's homepage,

can be used to search for other users or hashtags.   While on the activities page, the user can see

recent activities taken by followers.

Instagram can be used as a tool to connect and communicate with customers and potential

customers (Bergström & Bäckman, 2013). Bergström and Bäckman (2013) argue that an

organization can present a personal picture of their brand by using Instagram's visual elements,

and by doing so an organization can convey a more honest picture of their values. The value of

Instagram lies in its immediacy; a sense that the event posted is happening right now, and that

adds another layer to the personal and honest picture of a company using the platform

(Bergström & Bäckman, 2013). Another option Instagram provides is the opportunity for

organizations to get customers to reflect their values by encouraging them to use the

organization's hashtags (Bergström & Bäckman, 2013). Hashtags can be used to unify and build

cohesiveness in messaging throughout an organization's profile, building a relationship with

stakeholders and fostering identification.

Instagram is vastly differently from other forms of social media in two ways. First, a

company can choose to display images that go beyond the content usually displayed by a

company, such as posting behind the scenes images, due to Instagram's highly visual nature
(Bergström & Bäckman, 2013). Second, from a stakeholder perspective, Instagram can be used
to share and spread negative information about a company, by posting negative pictures of their
experiences with the organization (Bergström & Bäckman, 2013). This is different from other
forms of social media because of Instagram's highly visual nature; stakeholders are more likely
to post a picture instead of typing out a comment or review. Before the age of social media, such
information would never have been able to spread so rapidly and potentially affect an
organization.

According to Smith and Sanderson (2015), visual platforms such as Instagram and
Snapchat are increasing in popularity in sports media, with some industry analysts positing that
Instagram is the fastest growing social media platform (Lunden, 2014). Organizations can create
and promote the brand and image of their team, all while communicating with their fanbase.
Teams post photos and videos, training and athletic competition, live press conferences,
important events in the life of the team (transfer, the sponsors, presentation, drafting, etc.),
promotional and charity campaigns with the community they are a part of, and the personal life
of the athletes (Ochoa Siguencia et al., 2017). Billings, Butterworth and Turman, (2018) cited
Smith and Sanderson (2015) who found that more recently, Instagram moved into a fan's social
media lineup, and that athletes are heavily present on the platform, using it to carefully cultivate
desirable public images. Instagram becomes more popular every year, and for sports
organizations, it should be used in the development of activities related to communication with
fans, as well as aiding in efficient and effective marketing and public relations (Ochoa Siguencia
et al., 2017).

Twitter as a public relations tool

       Twitter is a social media application in which users can interact with one another through

the posting of micro-blogs, pictures, or videos. Twitter is a free social networking and micro-

blogging platform that allows its users to send and receive "tweets" from other users (Witkemper

et at., 2012). The tweets are then posted to the user's "followers" immediately. The process of

attaining a Twitter account works in the same way as Instagram, with the user downloading the

app from their app store on their mobile device (or computer) and creating an account with their

email. It shares features with communication mediums that stakeholders already use, such as

Facebook and Instagram, but in a quick and simple way (Witkemper et at., 2012).

       Social networking sites such as Twitter can be properly structured to foster identification

strategies and to identify with stakeholders because they offer the option to form social groups in

a way that is different from traditional media or other kinds of Web pages (Gilpin, 2010).

According to Himelboim et al., (2014), Twitter is the leading micro-blogging platform, and has

been recognized by public relations professionals and as an effective relationship-building tool.

Twitter's relationship-building potential is enhanced by its ability to develop an organization's

social media presence by linking to its profiles on other leading social media platforms, such as

Facebook and Instagram (Himelboim et al., 2014). Twitter can provide sports organizations with

the initial opportunity to interact with their fanbase (Witkemper et at., 2012)

       Recognizing Twitter's potential for fostering bilateral relationships between

organizations and their stakeholders, Himelboim et al., (2014) sites Rybalko and Selzter (2010)

who analyzed the use of Twitter by Fortune 500 companies. Rybalko and Selzter (2010) found

that most organizations underutilized Twitter and its capability to develop symmetrical, two-way

communication between an organization and their stakeholders. Himelboim et al., (2014) also

site Waters and Jamal (2011) who found that, many organizations are using Twitter as an information-sharing platform, rather than one for relationship-building (Himelboim et al., 2014). In a sports context fans use Twitter hashtags to express identity when discussing sports (Smith & Smith, 2012) and unfortunately Twitter also has become a vehicle for fans to direct hateful and abusive messages towards athletes and the organizations and teams who support them (Kassing & Sanderson, 2015).

Increasing the opportunities for fans to interact and communicate with a team, two core components of relationship building with the organization and their athletes, can lead to stronger relationships with college students on social media (Witkemper et at., 2012). Such relationships with fans can be maintained through Twitter as a way to keep them informed and close to the players and organization (Witkemper et at., 2012). Research shows that college students use Twitter to gain information about their teams, as a form of entertainment, to boost fan experience or as a way to pass time (Witkemper et at., 2012). To reach fans on Twitter, organizations should be informative about their team and athletes and also provide stories about their athletes and coaches. Twitter should become a source for a fanbase to learn facts and details about their favorite athletes, a place to provide entertaining content, and a way to promote events and upcoming games (Witkemper et at., 2012). Twitter is best used in an organized manner, moving away from basic interactions and posts towards sequences and campaigns in order to build relationships with fanbases and foster sport identification (Witkemper et at., 2012). Twitter provides an opportunity for sport organizations to work with their fans to enhance their fan experiences, to attract new fans, to develop relationships, and to retain fans (Witkemper et at., 2012). Twitter can also provide ways to enhance the fan/organization relationship by providing fans more direct access to athletes.

To summarize, a collegiate athletic team can develop sport identification with their fanbase by using rhetorical strategies, and this can be executed efficiently by using social media tactics. It is becoming more essential for programs to use social media effectively because of their wide reach, and ability to build and foster relationships between organizations and their fans.

Chapter 3

Methodology and Case

Founded in 1895, Eastern Illinois University (EIU) is a state university located in

Charleston, Illinois. EIU's enrollment for the 2019-2020 school year is 7,806, including graduate

students. EIU has 51 undergraduate programs and 32 graduate degree programs, with a faculty to

student ratio of 1:14. According to the University's mission statement, Eastern is a public

university that offers accessible undergraduate and graduate education. Students learn the

methods and results of free and rigorous inquiry in the arts, humanities, sciences, and

professions, guided by a faculty known for its excellence in teaching, research, creative activity,

and service. The university community is committed to diversity and inclusion and fosters

opportunities for student-faculty scholarship and applied learning experiences within a student-

centered campus culture. Throughout their education, students refine their abilities to reason and

to communicate clearly so as to become responsible citizens and leaders.

EIU prepares more undergraduates who go on to earn doctoral degrees than any other

master's college/university in Illinois (EIU, 2019). In addition to ranking first in the state in this

category, EIU ranks in the top 5% nationwide. The alumni satisfaction rate is 98% one year after

graduation and 99% nine years after graduation. Graduates are happy with their choice and this

suggests they should want to support the school.

Eastern offers 18 NCAA Division 1 sports and competes in the Football Championship

Subdivision and Ohio Valley Conference. The EIU football team played its first season in 1899,

just five years after the opening of the university. The football team has won seven Ohio Valley

Conference championships, the last being in 2013, and has had 10 NCAA FCS playoff

appearances since 2000, more than any other school in the OVC. In 2013, EIU averaged 8,012

fans in attendance at home games, totaling 56,065 fans for the season, the most they had seen

since 1986. EIU also has had a strong alumni presence in the NFL over the last decade, including

but not limited to, alumnus and 2002 Walter Payton Award recipient Tony Romo, 14-year

quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys and now the lead football analyst for CBS Sports; Sean

Payton, head coach of the 2010 Super Bowl champion New Orleans Saints; and Mike Shanahan,

former head coach of the Denver Broncos and Washington Redskins who won two Super Bowl

championships. The 2013 Walter Payton Award winner Jimmy Garoppolo is currently the

franchise quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers and a past member of two Super Bowl

champion New England Patriots teams. Kamu Grugier-Hill, linebacker for the Miami Dolphins,

is also a two-time Super Bowl Champion, one with the New England Patriots and another with

the Philadelphia Eagles.

       The Eastern Illinois football team is at a turning point in their program's rich history.

Coming off several unsuccessful seasons, Eastern's athletic director hired a new coach, Adam

Cushing, who was previously an assistant coach at Northwestern University prior to taking the

head coaching job at EIU. When Cushing was hired at Eastern, only one coach from the previous

staff was retained, wiping most of the slate clean for the football program and forcing current

football players into a brand-new culture. Cushing also started a new brand campaign via social

media in order to enhance fan interaction. EIU football fans now have the ability to follow the

team in ways they have not been able to before.

       Due to the accelerated use of social media and its growing importance to life in the

United States, it is important to understand how the EIU football team is using their social media

accounts to reach stakeholders. EIU football has several social media accounts on which they are

active. The team has 6,833 followers on Twitter, and their Instagram account has 1,291

followers. Posts are usually shared with graphics or images created with the team's new brand

aesthetic, including new font styles, a new graphic style, and new color schemes. In the pictures

included below, the aesthetic of the new social media accounts can be seen. The aesthetic

focuses on the use of blue, black and white, with an edgy font used across all graphics. Logos are

included, and player pictures are always seen in the graphics. Figures 1 and 2 are examples of

typical graphics the team is using to attract fans to their profiles. Figure 1 is a typical weekly post

that the team utilizes, called the student-athlete of the week. There are always multiple players

shown, and the picture is always of the student-athlete in a suit and tie. Figure 2 is a common

graphic that can be considered a "hype post" that gets the entire organization excited by using a

buzzword. These graphics are used to unite the entire organization and share their values.

Figure 1.

Figure 2.

ll's use of rhetorical identification strategies as a method to build relationships with their

fanbase then we must examine the content of their public messages to see what strategies are

being used and how. Based on the literature reviewed for this thesis, an obvious starting point for

such an examination is EIU Football's social media accounts. Creating a deeper understanding

of the message content will allow conclusions to be drawn about which strategies are being

utilized and to what degree they exist among the remaining social media content. Therefore, the

research questions for this study are:

RQ1: What content makes up the social media messages created by the Eastern Illinois football team?

RQ2: What rhetorical strategies are used by the Eastern Illinois football team's social media accounts to foster identification with fans?

To answer these questions, the researcher conducted a content analysis. This method helped the researcher describe and understand the content posted on the EIU football Twitter and Instagram accounts.

Deacon et al. (1999) defines a content analysis as a research technique for an objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. The purpose of a content analysis is to quantify salient and manifest features of a large number of texts from which the statistics are used to make broader inferences about the processes and politics of what the texts represent (Deacon et al, 1999). A content analysis can reveal textual features which one may usually take for granted, helping researchers examine how they are effective or why one may accept them as remarkable (Deacon et al, 1999). Conducting a content analysis was beneficial in this study because it is a very direct method: it gives answers to the questions posed by the researcher through coding phenomena found throughout the content and messaging.

During a content analysis, predetermined categories are created and used for the purpose of understanding and describing media messages in a way that can be counted and quantified (Manganello & Blake, 2010). A content analysis is used to create a "systematic and replicable" analysis of messages. Originally used in studies of newspaper content, and traditionally used in the communication field, scholars from other disciplines began using it as a method and it expanded in popularity as an effective way for studying messages in mass media and other sources, such as social media (Manganello & Blake, 2010).

A content analysis was the most effective method to use for this study because it focuses on analyzing the content of social media posts, and coding it for specific variables. This study's analysis included all posts from August 22nd, 2019, to November 30th, 2019, posted on the EIU football team's Twitter account and, from December 10th, 2018 (Coach Adam Cushing's first day as head coach) to August 29th, 2019 on the team's Instagram account. The dates for Twitter were chosen because it makes sense to track content during Coach Cushing's first season at EIU in order to understand the content he is driving during this time. The dates for Instagram posts are different because content is posted on this platform with less frequency and it was necessary to broaden the range to capture enough content for analysis. December 10th marked the first day on the job for Coach Cushing and so that made sense as a starting point.

Creating the codebook

A codebook was created and then social media posts were coded for their use of color, graphics, words, images and video, amongst other branding, content and messaging aspects. A fan that closely identifies with a team will most likely support it and teams can use social media posts to help with the fan identification process. Therefore, the communication theory of sports identification drove much of the code creation, as did Cheney's (1983) rhetorical strategies. Both Twitter and Instagram posts were coded according to process which also included several sub-categories.

Once the data was collected, it was used to answer the research questions and provided the basis for suggestions of what can be done to improve EIU football's social media posts. If the social media content and messaging affects a fan's sense of identification with EIU football, then the messages have a better chance of increasing fan engagement with the team on social

media, their intent to attend football games, and, most importantly whether they call themselves

an EIU football fan.

Chapter 4

Results

A content analysis of the EIU football team's social media messaging was completed to examine its use of rhetorical strategies that foster identification with the team amongst their followers. This chapter provides the results of the content analysis and reveals which strategies are used on the EIU football team's Instagram and Twitter. The analysis also examined the design elements found in the social media content. This data is used to address both research questions, which seek to evaluate and analyze the EIU football team's social media messaging content.

The EIU Football team's official Twitter account tweeted 101 times between August 22, 2019 and November 30, 2019. In those 100 days 39.6% of all tweets (40 tweets) were original content while 60.4% (61 tweets) was content created by other accounts and shared by the football team's account. These retweets included tweets from the coaches (15), athletes (12), news outlets (12), the athletic department (11), and fans (11).

The account's use of rhetorical identification strategies was varied but consistent. Overall the most commonly used identification strategy was the common ground technique. Variations of this technique were used in 90% of all original tweets (36 tweets). Variations of the unifying symbols and transcendent we techniques were also used significantly in original tweets with 65% and 55% of tweets respectively using the strategies. Identification through antithesis was the least used identification strategy appearing in only 22% of the account's original tweets.

Many of EIU Football's original tweets used combinations of the identification strategies. The most common combination was the use of unifying symbols in conjunction with the common ground technique. For example:

GAMEDAY. Tune in to the @BigTenNetwork at 2:30pm (CST) as we take on the Hoosiers from Indiana! #RunWithUs #ProtectTheStandard #WIN #CFB150.

This combination was seen in 60% of the original posts. Other combinations were also significantly used. The common ground and transcendent we strategies were used together in 47% of the original posts and identification through antithesis and unifying symbols were used together in 17% of the original posts. The three most commonly appearing strategies (unifying symbols, transcendent we, and common ground) were used collectively in 35% of all tweets

On Instagram, content was limited, and this channel was not utilized as much as Twitter. The EIU football team posted on its Instagram account 35 times during the study's time period. As on Twitter, the use of rhetorical strategies on Instagram was varied. Of the content shared on Instagram, 94% of all posts (33 posts) used common ground techniques, while 71% (25 posts) used unifying symbols, 54% (19 posts) used the transcendent "we." Less than 9% of posts (3) on Instagram used identification through antithesis.

All three strategies, unifying symbols, the transcendent we, and common ground, were used together in 45% of the posts. Like Twitter, the original posts on Instagram included combinations of identification strategies. The most common strategy combination was common ground and unifying symbols, which were used together in 66% of Instagram posts. The transcendent we and common ground strategies were used together in 48% of posts while unifying symbols and the transcendent we were used together in 37% of posts.

Coding Common Ground

The common ground strategy is demonstrated when corporations express concern for the

stakeholder as a member or integral part of the organization (Cheney, 1983). This strategy

appears on Twitter in multiple forms. The first form I coded was the use of hashtags, which were

used in almost 90% (36) of all original posts. The use of hashtags was coded because of their

frequency of use throughout the posts and their ability to allow the EIU football team to form

common ground with their social media fanbase. Hashtags form common ground amongst a

fanbase because they invite the fan to participate in the team's success, and be a part of the larger

effort to boost team morale. By using hashtags, a fan can become a part of the team by sharing

common language with other fans and the team while coming together over particular events or

ideas. Hashtags are easy to use, and can form a cohesive aesthetic in the messaging the team is

trying to implement.

Three hashtags stood out in the data as attempts at creating common ground:

#ProtectTheStandard, #RunWithUs, and #WIN. The hashtag, #ProtectTheStandard fosters

common ground amongst the fanbase by suggesting stakeholders are personally involved with

maintaining the high standard EIU football has set for itself and fans over the years. It suggests

everyone connected to the team, including fans, need to live up to these shared values. For

example:

> BIG DAY for #EIUFootball! To start the morning @jokeapoke will speak to the team
>
> about EXCELLENCE! Next, 40+ recruits from 5 different states will be on campus!
>
> Finally, we get ONE MORE opportunity to STRAP UP and PROTECT THE
>
> STANDARD! #RunWithUs #WIN #ProtectTheStandard

By using "protect," the team is calling the fanbase to action, to continue to support and advocate for the team. #ProtectTheStandard is used in 63% (25) of the team's original tweets and is often used alongside the other two hashtags, #RunWithUs and #WIN. In fact all three hashtags were used together in 98% of all tweets using hashtags, a total of 39 out of the 40 original tweets

#RunWithUs, used in 64% (26) of all tweets coded during the duration of the study, and #WIN, used in 63% (25), are considered common ground hashtags because they also foster unity within the team's fanbase. The term "run with us" generates a sense of cohesion amongst the organization and their fanbase by urging fans to join the team on the journey through the season and to see the team's successes or failures as one's own. It should not be seen as a transcendent we appeal, even though it uses the word "us," because in this context "us" is used to refer to the team and is not inclusive of the fans. Using the hashtag #WIN," is included in the common ground technique because it appeals to sharing a common goal with the organization. When this hashtag is used on social media, it forms common ground amongst the fanbase by providing a reminder of a common goal that everyone in the organization shares. When all three hashtags are used together it evokes the meaning that if we #ProtectTheStandard (live up to EIU Football values), by urging fans to #RunWithUs (be on our side and be a part of our journey), then both the organization and its fans can #WIN (together).

The next tactic Cheney (1983) outlined in the common ground strategy is the espousal of shared values. The EIU football team implemented this tactic by honoring the academic success of its student athletes. These students were celebrated for showing success on the field as well as in the classroom. For example:

Our Student-Athletes of the week are @MooreDomo & @WaddellDarius ! Both of these

men exemplified what it means to be a SA at @eiu #RunWithUs #ProtectTheStandard

#WIN #GoPanthers

Posts were coded for mentioning academics because more athletic teams are valuing their

student athletes having success in the classroom, including the EIU football team. This specific

tactic is based on the shared values between the larger EIU community, from which it draws

most of its fans, and the organization. As a result it was coded as a common ground technique.

The EIU football team even ran a student athlete of the week campaign. Although it was short

lived, it was highlighted by a weekly graphic, posted to the Twitter pages to bring awareness of

athlete success in the classroom to the public. Posts always included player pictures, along with

fonts and colors designed to the EIU panther aesthetic. Players were chosen for the honor by

showing significant improvement of their GPA or making strides to improve academically.

Mentions of academic success were included in 20% (9 tweets) of all tweets posted for the

duration of the study. All (100%) of these tweets included player pictures inside a graphic.

When using the common ground technique organizations can also recognize individual

contributions. The EIU football team implemented this approach into their social media channels

by posting tweets that reached out to those who contribute to the program, such as donors.

Therefore donor outreach was coded and comprised 15% of all tweets posted (7) for the duration

of the study. Most of the donor outreach tweets (75%) were posted between November 26, 2019

and November 30, 2019, a four-day span in which the EIU athletics department was conducting

the Giving Blue Day campaign to raise money for EIU athletics. The hashtag, #GivingBlueDay,

was used in posts with instructions on how to donate to the football program. During this time,

the tactic of demonstrating benefits was exclusively implemented, showing the Twitter following

how their donations would be utilized throughout the EIU football program.

On Instagram the common ground strategy was used in 94% of all posts. Tactics coded

under this strategy were the same as Twitter (hashtags, shared values, academics, and donors)

and for the same reasons. The most used tactic of this strategy was the use of hashtags, 84 of

which were used in 35 posts, an average of over two hashtags used per post. The most used

hashtag was #RunWithUs, which was utilized in 68% (24) of all posts examined. However,

#WIN was used in 60% (21) and #ProtectTheStandard was used in 22% (7) of the posts.

#RunWithUs and #WIN were used together in 54% of the posts. #ProtectTheStandard was not

introduced until April 20th, almost five months after coding began for the use of hashtags, and for

this reason the numbers are not as high as the other hashtags.

While the use of hashtags remains significant on Instagram, the same cannot be said for

the espousal of shared values, academics and donors. The EIU football team utilized these three

tactics in only one post per tactic, accounting for 2% of messages posted in the duration of the

study. The team utilized the donor outreach tactic in 8% of all posts.

Coding Unifying Symbols

The next major strategy found in the social media content was unifying symbols. Cheney

(1983) states that if a stakeholder accepts the identifications that are shaped and suggested by

symbols, such as a well-crafted statement of organizational identity, they will build an identity

with the organization. Game consumption, sponsorship consumption, team consumption and the

EIU logo were all coded under this strategy. Sponsorship consumption includes logos that the

organization places on social media posts, on programs, or all over the stadium. Game

consumption is considered a unifying symbol in this study because visuals and messages about

attending a game communicate a fan's passion for the team and pictures of full stadiums are often used in symbolic ways to demonstrate strong fandoms. Fans who sit in the stands are used as symbols of allegiance and therefore showing or discussion that symbol encourages connection with the team and the fanbase. Team consumption was largely centered on symbols of jerseys that fans buy, or team apparel of the organization. These are symbols of fan loyalty to the organization and to the team. Unifying symbols are important because they are valuable communication tools the EIU football team can implement into their posts to help build identification with their fanbase.

Unifying symbols incorporated the use of logos in 65% (26) of the team's original tweets. Surprisingly game and team consumption were only found in a single tweet, but sponsorship consumption was used in 15% (6) of all tweets coded during the duration of this study. All of the tweets coded as sponsorship consumption included both the Adidas and Ohio Valley Conference logos. Most tweets examined during the study included the EIU athletics logo (77%).

While common ground was the most used rhetorical strategy found in the team's Instagram posts (used in 94% of all posts), unifying symbols also played a key role in the content. One major way unifying symbols appeared was through the use of sponsor logos, encouraging fans to support both the corporate and non-profit sponsors of EIU football. As with Twitter, game consumption, sponsorship consumption, team consumption and the EIU logo were all coded under this strategy.

Game consumption, which is an organization's promotion of their events through social media posts, was not used on Instagram during the duration of the study. However, over half (57%) of the posts included some kind of sponsorship consumption, whether it being Adidas or the Ohio Valley Conference. Sponsorship consumption was typically demonstrated by messages

that incorporated logos into posts, embedding them inside a graphic, or directly tagging an

organization. Team consumption was used in 5% of all posts, and was used to promote the

purchase of EIU football apparel. Team consumption was not used in this manner on Twitter.

The EIU athletics logo was prominently featured and was used in 80% (28) of all the

posts examined during the study. The posts included this logo much like they showcased

sponsor logos, by adding it to the corner of a graphic or photo, or by tagging EIU Athletics in the

post.

Coding Transcendent & Assumed "We"

Cheney (1983) argues that the assumed "we" is both a subtle and powerful identification

strategy because it often goes unnoticed, and the use of this strategy allows an organization to

present commonality among organizational members as a taken-for-granted assumption. Based

on this understanding, community involvement, volunteering and status group were all coded as

uses of the assumed "we" strategy. The distinction between the community involvement tactic

and the volunteering tactic is subtle but important. A post using the community involvement

tactic might involve the EIU football team reading to children at a local grade school, while the

volunteering tactic might show the team picking up trash on campus or clearing trails at a local

forest preserve. Whereas one focuses the reader's attention on the act of volunteering, the other

highlights the team interacting with members of the community. These three codes represent the

assumed "we" strategy because they identify messages that suggest the EIU football team's

active involvement, not just on the EIU campus, but also in the Charleston community. This

gives the community a sense of "we" that would motivate them to identify with the team because

they are in this together. Ideally, from the team's perspective, this sense of "we" would lead to

community members following the team on social media or buying tickets to attend football

games.

Overall tactics that implemented the "we" strategy were used in 55% (22) of all tweets

examined. The community outreach tactic comprised 40% (16) of all tweets coded. An example

of the EIU football team's use of community outreach can be seen in tweets such as pictures of

the EIU football players spending an afternoon in the community at a local elementary school.

The volunteering tactic was only utilized twice during the duration of the study, a total of 5% (2)

of all tweets coded.

The status group tactic was used in 42% of posts. Status group posts highlight a person

doing something significant or celebrating a member of the EIU football community. It

represents the assumed "we" strategy because by showing the success of those associated with

the program, posts are showing the organization and fanbase who they are, the values they

advocate for on social media, and showcasing it for those following to see. These posts

transcend the community and are centered on events significant enough to garner media

attention. These posts were also the ones that consistently got the highest number of likes per

post. These posts were found to be the most popular content created by the EIU football team

account, and they were heavily engaged with amongst followers. For example:

> The moment @CoachCushing got his first W! Then the much deserved Gatorade bath
>
> followed... and then another! #RunWithUs #ProtectTheStandard #WIN

The tweet that received the most likes (412) over the entire study period was a video

taken of Coach Cushing getting a Gatorade splash after this first career win at EIU. The second

most liked (224) tweet was a graphic in honor of Joe Caputo, who received the scholar athlete

award. This specific tweet was also coded for mentioning academics. The third and fourth both

contained 175 likes, one being a happy birthday graphic for Jimmy Garoppolo and the other a

graphic about former Panthers in the NFL. The average likes a tweet received on the EIU

football page was 8, so tweets that gather almost 200 likes were well above average.

Community involvement, volunteering and status group were all also coded from the EIU

football team's Instagram content. For example:

It was an awesome morning hanging out with the 1st graders from Carl Sandburg! Push-

off competitions, tug-of-war, and tons of controlled chaos to get our Friday started!

#RunWithUs #WIN #ProtectTheStandard

Community involvement was used in 37% (14) of the posts on Instagram and the tactic

was used in pictures and videos that showed the team at events around the community. The team

was shown also volunteering in 8.6% of the posts (3) and they utilized the status group tactic in

43% (15) of posts.

Like Twitter, the Instagram posts that utilized the status group tactic contained the most

popular content the EIU football team had, and they were heavily engaged with among

followers. During the time data was collected, content on Instagram averaged 138 likes. The

posts that stood out the most received significantly more likes. A post about EIU football

alumnus Alexander Hollins got the most likes with 300, a photo of the players playing an

"escape room" got 246 likes, a graphic of Jimmy Garoppolo being inducted into the EIU Hall of

Fame got 231 likes, and a gameday graphic towards the start of the seasons received 209 likes.

Coding Identification Through Antithesis

The act of joining together and uniting against a common enemy allows two entities to

form a bond and share a common identity piece. Identification with the organization (team in this

case) is suggested as desirable (sharing values and goals), and also is necessary to oppose threats

from outside organizations (or other teams). For the identification through antithesis strategy, I coded for the use of opposition, presenting another team, school, or outside group as the other.

Opposition was the only tactic coded using the identification through antithesis strategy. Only 20% (8) of the original 40 tweets used this tactic, but opposition accounted for 33% (1,073) of all likes garnered by the posts, 28% (201) of all retweets, and 50% (20) of all mentions. These are staggering numbers compared to the other strategies suggesting this content was engaged with at a much higher rate than other content.

Instagram posts also utilized the identification through antithesis strategy. It was found in 8% (3) of posts. Similar to the content posted on Twitter, if an Instagram post mentioned the opposition, it was in a post that announced a coming match-up for the team. For example:

On December 9th, 2018 a New Era of EIU Football begun. Tonight, we head to the

gridiron for the first time under Coach Cushing!Kickoff at 6pm (CST)⬦

Coding Design Elements

In determining the content of social media messages created for Twitter by the Eastern Illinois football team, it was also important to assess the design elements of the posts since they can play a factor in the successful engagement of stakeholders. Moreover, it is possible design elements could enhance any rhetorical strategy implemented by the post. For these reasons, player pictures, videos, gifs, links, or graphics highlighting play-by-play, NFL alumni, game highlights, statistics, or ticket sales were all coded. Coding the design elements of each post started broad and then was narrowed down to the essential elements incorporated in the posts.

Of the tweets posted 65% (26) included graphics, making them by far the most used visual content strategy on Twitter. Five posts included highlights or statistics. A total of 57 players were shown throughout 40 tweets. Almost one-quarter (23%) of the players shown were

included in graphics about students of the week or players of the week. Players of the week and

students of the week were two on-going tactics the team tried to implement but did so

inconsistently and this may be a reason they were not effective in receiving engagement. For

every graphic posted, there were at least two photos included inside a graphic. A variety of visual

elements were utilized alongside the graphics. Tweets that utilized statistics about a game, or that

highlighted a player from the game, showed a picture of the athlete and included the statistics or

highlights in the caption of the tweet.

The most utilized design element was player pictures, which were included in 60% (24)

of all tweets posted. Player pictures were typically used in graphics or posted alone. Posts with

player pictures also impacted engagement with 61% of all likes occurring on a tweet that

included at least one picture. Two-thirds (67%) of all tweets that were ultimately retweeted

included at least one picture and 82% of all tweets included in mentions were done from a tweet

that included at least one picture. There was minimal use of links, gifs or videos on Twitter, as

well as Instagram, and this quickly became a reoccurring theme in the coding.

Instagram is a visual medium and therefore visual elements play a huge role in creating

successful engagement. Under this strategy, posts were coded for their use of: player pictures,

GIFs, including links, or graphics highlighting play-by-play, NFL alumni, highlights, statistics

and promotion of ticket sales. There was no use of video, GIFs, or links on Instagram. This is

not any different from Twitter, which used these tactics minimally as well.

Graphics were the most utilized content tactic on Instagram, comprising 74% (26) of all

posts examined during the duration of the study. This is not surprising, as graphics are an

effective way to reach an audience visually. The EIU football team used graphics to showcase

their athletes, sponsors, and form a uniform aesthetic on their profile, with a consistent use of fonts, symbols, pictures, and colors included in their graphics.

Player pictures were the next most utilized design tactic, included in 63% (22) of all posts. Pictures were taken by the EIU athletic department and show the athletes in their uniforms, posing with their game faces or posing to show their excitement by shouting or smiling. Player visuals also used graphics of alumni in the NFL and this tactic was seen in 14% (5) of posts. The posts using this tactic that received the most likes were a post about EIU alumnus Alexander Hollins (300 likes) and a graphic of Jimmy Garappolo being inducted into the EIU Hall of Fame (231 likes).

In my next section, I will analyze the use of these tactics and strategies as well as discuss ways to improve the EIU football team's social media Twitter and Instagram pages.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the content of the EIU football team's social media messages to uncover potential rhetorical strategies used to foster identification with their fanbase. Based off my results section, it may seem like the social media pages are unsuccessful in using rhetorical strategies, because of lack of engagement throughout the pages. If the team's social media pages are not engaging their followers, it becomes even more important for the team to utilize the strategies in this study. The numbers throughout the previous section and throughout this analysis show that by using strategies, posts were able to gather more engagement. From this, we learn that using strategies consistently can work in increasing follower engagement. Being consistent in posting content would lead to different results in engagement because followers would be given more chances to see the content, and by having different social media campaigns posted weekly, the team can give their followers a steady flow of reliable content.

While collecting data, specific trends emerged concerning how the team was creating and sharing content on their social media pages.

The first research question asked:

RQ1: What content makes up the social media messages created by the Eastern Illinois football team?

There were multiple content themes that emerged in the data. First, the use of graphics was a common trend seen throughout the results. Graphics are easy to create, and when they adhere to the athletic department's aesthetic, they can be identifying to fans following the team and viewing the organization's profile. Potentially, these can be fans who would identify

themselves as an EIU panther, but may not necessarily be a follower of the EIU football team. Graphics are also easily viewable and enjoyed by virtually any other kind of fan.

Highly visual forms of social media, such as Instagram, benefit from using graphics. Athletes are heavily present on Instagram, using it to carefully cultivate desirable public images (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). University athletic departments are becoming aware of this and providing their athletes with images and graphics to use on their personal profiles to build a larger following with their fans. Instagram becomes more popular every year, and for sports organizations, graphics should be used in creating a unified aesthetic. The content analysis revealed that the EIU football team created an effective and unified aesthetic for their content and graphic images, all with unifying symbols (logos) attached to the images. Many athletic departments, such as Eastern Illinois, are conducting photo shoots of their athletes in uniform to post routinely and on game day. The EIU football team does a great job of incorporating their athletes into their social media channels, as there are 57 players featured during the duration of the study. All of these examples are essential to creating a brand that fans can identify with.

Second, there was a heavy focus on the players. The EIU football team incorporated their players into their content in some way, but almost always in pictures included inside graphic images. On Instagram, 22 of the posts included pictures in some way, and with only 35 posts included in the analysis, this is a large number. On Twitter, 57 player pictures were included out of 40 Tweets, and this is a staggering number. Pictures can be effective in building relationships with the audience, as they give the follower insight as to what the player looks like and how they act off the field.

Third, there was a surprising lack of game related content. There was none on either page, and this is a part of social media that the EIU football team could benefit from, as they

have lower and lower attendance at their games. If the EIU football team posted about their

games, when and where they are, and also current in-game stats, their social media channels

would engage more fans to become a part of the organization and potentially motivate the fans to

attend games.

Fourth, there was no use of videos or gifs. Using videos and GIFS could benefit the

team's social presence. For example, one of two videos that were tweeted out during the duration

of the study received the most likes of all posts with 411. That number is miles ahead of the 81

average likes that each tweet received.

Fifth, most of the time the content included logos. I believe that including the logos

inside the graphics and including them in hashtags (sparsely) showed their audience who

supports them, and in turn, could potentially allow for increases in fans supporting those brands.

As more fans support the brands that support EIU football, EIU football could potentially benefit

from these relationships by gaining more sponsorship opportunities.

The second research question asked;

RQ2: What rhetorical strategies are used by the Eastern Illinois football team's social

media accounts to foster identification with fans?

Multiple trends in the data were found that address this question. The first trend revealed

by the content analysis was the EIU football team's significant use of the common ground

technique. Cheney (1983) believed the common ground technique is the most important

technique used in the creation of identification because of how frequently it appears, the variety

of tactics that utilize the strategy, and the diversity of ways in which commonality can be

expressed. The data from this study supports all of these claims. The EIU football team used the

common ground technique in almost every single tweet. This means that they are either

intentional in their messaging when it comes to forming alliances and forming common ground

with their social media fanbase or such rhetorical construction is so pervasive in a sports context

that it should be considered an inherent feature of fan facing communication. Likely all sports

organizations understand that fans are an important stakeholder and an integral aspect of the

organization's ongoing success. However, considering how many different kinds of fans there

are, it is important to intentionally craft copious and varied messages to create common ground

with all of them. While it is hard to define a "true Eastern fan," by using the common ground

technique to foster identification, more fan types are able to identify with the team.

The second trend found in the data regarding RQ2 is the EIU football team's use of

hashtags, often to create common ground. The use of hashtags in social media promotes

connectivity in communication amongst the organization they are representing and the followers

of the account. Hashtags encourage connection, foster inclusivity, and promote identification

amongst a fanbase. Those who identify with a team, and the organization as a whole, can use a

hashtag to communicate in like ways as they support their favorite team and brand. Due to the

accessibility and widespread use of social media, it is more important than ever for a sports

organization to build a successful and engaging social media channel for their fanbase to follow.

Hashtags are essential to building and maintaining a social media following because they allow

others to identify relevant content and connect people to accounts that are potentially interested

in the same organizations, brands, or topics. By using hashtags at a game, during the draft, or

after a big win, a fan is able to share a tweet using the specific hashtag identifying the content of

their post and potentially increasing the team's followers.

Next, the team utilized unifying symbols throughout their social media pages by

implementing logos in their graphics. It is important to include unifying symbols, specifically,

logos, in a sports organization's social media channels because fans that identify with the team

will support the brands that sponsor the team. The three most used logos on EIU's pages were

the Ohio Valley Conference logo, the EIU panther athletics logo, and the Adidas logo.

The use of the EIU athletic department's logo throughout the content is integral in

creating sport identification because it is the symbol of the athletic department and the unifying

symbol that every single EIU fan identifies with. When it is used in graphics, the EIU panther

athletics logo brands the content in a way that helps viewers quickly identify the content's source

and encourages viewers to engage with the content. By using the EIU panther athletics logo

often and as widely as possible, the team reinforces identification with some fans, deepens the

connection with others, and, at the same time, reaches out to connect with new followers.

The team also used other logos. The Adidas logo is especially important to add on to

graphics because of their official support of the team and the university. By adding the Adidas

logo to football team social media graphics, the team can communicate the support of Adidas

and subtly suggest that fans can support the team by partaking in sponsorship consumption.

Studies have found that sponsorship consumption creates a unifying experience amongst fans

across the entire organization. Eddy (2014) found that psychological and emotional attachments

are often manifested within team identification in sport settings. Committed supporters of a team

are the most affected by sponsorship in forming a positive image of the sponsor or intent to

purchase their brand (Eddy, 2014). Sponsorship activations gained through college athletics can

have a greater impact than those in professional sports, due to the high level of psychological

attachment that has been observed in college sport fans (Eddy, 2014). Forming unifying bonds,

such as these, are essential in creating a unified fanbase. In Eastern's case that means that fans

connect to Adidas since they are an Eastern sponsor and then they will potentially buy Adidas

products and eschew competitors.

Instances of the EIU football team identifying themselves as a status group could be seen

throughout the content analysis and were coded under the identification strategy of the

transcendent "we." Cheney (1983) argued that the assumed "we" is both a subtle and powerful

identification strategy because it often goes unnoticed and in the EIU football team's social

media channels, posts that align with assumed "we" strategy resulted in the most follower

engagement. While posts using this strategy were not frequent or plentiful, posts coded under

"status group" received between four and five times the amount of engagement (likes, retweets,

and mentions) than any other post on either Instagram or Twitter. This suggests that this strategy

is powerful in attracting followers and encouraging them to engage with social media content.

Suggestions to Improve EIU's Football Team's Social Media

This study resulted in a number of findings that could positively impact the EIU football

team's use of their social media accounts. First, the rhetorical strategy, identification through

antitheses, was underutilized. The results demonstrate that when it was used there was a

significant amount of follower engagement that resulted from this strategy. It was very effective

in fostering interaction amongst the fanbase, which increased the reach of these posts and

exposed more people to the team's messages. This strategy is important to use, because every

effort should be made to increase follower engagement with posts. This is where the power of

social media lies. Announcing when Ohio Valley Conference or interstate rival games are will

not only inform the audience, but also will increase engagement and hopefully lead to increased

attendance and fan participation. In college football, every week brings another rivalry. Fans will

support a team if they are excited to be a part of the organization. However, the EIU football

team can rhetorically define themselves in opposition to others, beyond just rivalries, by posting

historically accurate graphics that show EIU at the top of the OVC standings for many years.

EIU is a prestigious program, with rich history. Despite not being successful in recent years,

historically the team is still a top contender for being the overall best program in the OVC. By

posting athletes from the past, videos of them introducing themselves, or graphics that show

EIU's winning OVC record, the team can put themselves on a pedestal above other teams in the

OVC.

Another suggestion is to utilize more coordinated message campaigns. Two campaigns

were started during the duration of my study. First, there was a weekly graphic posted that

showed several athletes who were successful in the classroom. This was a useful tactic because it

had the ability to not only attract recruits who are interested in being an EIU athlete, but also

students at EIU. This graphic can also attract parents of these recruits to the athletic program by

aligning with the team's value of "protecting the standard." Part of holding yourself to the

standard of being on the EIU football team is by holding yourself accountable in the classroom.

We cannot know for sure if these graphics motivate recruits and student athletes to hold true to

their values and the identity of being a panther based off of this study, but based on the

engagement that these few posts received, there should be more campaigns such as this one.

The EIU football team also attempted to utilize a "player of the week" tactic during the

duration of this study. Graphics included in this campaign resembled the student-athlete of the

week tactic, but included more player pictures highlighting their positions on the field. Such a

tactic has the possibility to be really valuable when executed properly because it allows the

community to get to know who the players are, making them better equipped to be a fan who not

only follows the team, but someone who can connect with individual athletes. Executing this

tactic could also mean gaining media attention for players who had a really great week. If posted weekly, a "player of the week" message could foster more excitement for the team in times of success and lessen the pain felt in down times by giving fans something positive to focus on after a loss.

Next, the EIU football team must increase the frequency of their posting. In today's mediated world, there is an inherent expectation for daily, and for avid sports followers maybe hourly, content on both Twitter and Instagram. Consistent content is important more-so on Twitter because of the high turnover rate of content on the platform. For example, game day score updates, running feature content on game days, and weekly updates on student athletes is normal content, and most universities and professional athletic organizations post over 40 times weekly, not 40 times over the course of an entire football season. Only posting 40 original posts for one complete season is not normal, and it does not engage followers effectively or efficiently.

Lastly, if the EIU football team quoted the tweets by simply adding a message to the retweet, they could include their hashtags and post it as original content. By doing this, they could post something original almost every single day.

Implications

Findings from this study have multiple implications. First, the results of this study are consistent with existing research on rhetorical identification strategies and sport identification (e.g. Cheney, 1983; Wann, 2006). The findings reinforce the legitimacy of Cheney's (1983) rhetorical strategies and their continued value to public relations 35 years after Cheney's (1983) initial work. From this study a sports organization can learn that using rhetorical strategies can potentially build identification with their fanbase through their social media content. By building

sport identification, an organization can increase their fanbase, potentially increasing the number of individuals who support the team.

Second, it is possible for a regional D1 university to utilize rhetorical strategies in social media messaging. The organization can communicate such messages through social media pages but we will need to examine followers to find out if doing so fosters sport identification amongst a fanbase. Still, collegiate football teams, and all other college sports teams, should realize how important it is to utilize social media in order to reach their fans.

Identification through antithesis should be used to foster identification with a sports organization. Based on the results of this content analysis it appears this strategy has incredible potential to increase follower engagement and connect with fans. This can be done by hyping up rivalry games with graphics that are centered on defeating a specific team. Utilizing the rhetorical strategy of identification through antithesis is a practical, general consequence of the results found here.

Fans have limited interactions with student athletes, and social media must be used effectively to build these relationships. However, just being on social media is not enough. The experience a follower has while currently following the EIU football team is haphazard and random. The team's social media message content was all over the place, and they never posted consistent messaging to create the crucial connections amongst their fanbase. The organization completely abandoned any campaigns they attempted to implement during the duration of the study. In order to maintain a successful social media platform, there must be a coordinated effort to be successful, with a consistent and organized approach.

Although most of the posts included references or visuals of players, they never provided depth about the players or ways for followers to connect with the players. If a sports

organization does not post about who their athletes are, then fans will not get to know them, idolize them or build relationships with the organization. Social media provides an opportunity to provide followers content that expands their knowledge of the team and its players. Teams need to utilize this chance and create content that is meant to connect and engage followers, not just fill pages with surface level content just to have a social media presence.

Limitations

Although this study is beneficial to collegiate football organizations, it has a number of limitations. One limitation of this study is that it focused only on Instagram and Twitter. Sports fans are active across all platforms of social media, whether it is Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube or TikTok. This study does not analyze the content of the social media posted on those sites, so we do not know if the team utilized the same identification strategies on the other sites or if each site was used in different ways.

A second limitation is the timeline of posts examined for this study. Any given stretch of time could have been chosen to code social media posts. In this case, most of the content was posted during the football season or following major announcements like a coaching change. Content tweeted or posted during any other time may not receive much engagement and may include messages that vary greatly from those studied. There is no reason to assume that content posted in other parts of the year would look the same or receive equal engagement.

The third limitation of this study is that the content was examined for rhetorical identification strategies and focused on the manifest content of social media posts. Different methods for building and maintaining efficient and effective social media channels were not included. Plus latent content was not coded and therefore it is possible there were underlying messages that were not examined.

While this study did include post engagement it did not have access to any analytics outside of the vanity numbers that were easily accessible and located directly under the post. No member of the EIU athletic department, or EIU football coaching staff, provided further information during the duration of this study. Therefore, it is not known if the posted content was planned strategically on part of those who run the accounts or if the content was posted at random.

A final limitation of this study is that it did not examine the impact the messages had on fans. The study did not find if there is any causal connection between using rhetorical strategies on social media and building a deeper relationship with a fan. Moreover, it is not known if people changed their behavior as a fan while interacting with the posts.

Future Directions

With fans using content across the internet, especially social media pages, to help keep in close contact with their favorite sports organizations, teams must become cognizant of ways to reach fans and build identification with them. Instagram and Twitter are just two of the social media channels that can be used to build identification. With the use of rhetorical strategies sports organizations may be able to increase their fanbases, and utilizing the benefits of social media, increase attendance at games.

The most important questions that still need to be answered are those that lie in why students are not attending collegiate football games. My study focuses on a small portion of this question, as it addresses different, yet effective ways reach students on social media in order to foster identification. Future studies could examine which aspects of social media can be used to influence such audiences. More work also needs to be done determining the impact of social media messages on fan behavior and sport consumption. Determining the impact, if any, that

social media messages are having on fans, from across the fanhood spectrum, would reveal

potential avenues for sports organizations to take. Lastly, it is important to examine whether or

not social media posts are effective in creating and maintaining identification with teams.

Current and previous research clearly demonstrates the importance of identification to

understanding fan behavior. Having a better understanding of the ways in which current media

channels are impacting fan identification may lead to better and more effective social media

accounts.

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