Facebook and Twitter Variations Across Pittsburgh Steelers and Carolina Hurricanes Social Media Platforms

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Abstract

As the reach of social media continues to expand, it plays an influential role in the promotion and advertisement of sports organizations. Through a content analysis, the researcher analyzed the social media posts – specifically Facebook and Twitter posts – of two professional sports organizations over a three-week period. The researcher looked at social media activity before and during games for the Carolina Hurricanes and the Pittsburgh Steelers. The study found that while Facebook received more interactions, Twitter had more posts. The research also concluded that the Steelers had a visible social media strategy, while the Hurricanes were less visible and consistent.

I. Introduction

The use of social media has grown significantly as a way for sports organizations to communicate with their fan bases. Specifically, both Facebook and Twitter have played a huge role in giving sports organizations instant communication to their fans. This two-way engagement has provided many additional opportunities for these sports organizations to interact with their audience. This research examined the official Twitter and Facebook accounts media usage for the Carolina Hurricanes and the Pittsburgh Steelers.

II. Literature Review

As technology continues to evolve, sports teams have access to several social media platforms. It is up to individual teams within each professional sports league to construct an effective social media strategy. Depending on various motives in social media usage, teams use these platforms in a variety of ways.

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Twitter, Facebook, and Communication

Twitter and Facebook are both social media outlets that people can use to communicate their thoughts, feelings and interests. The sports industry is essentially an entertainment industry that caters to a great number of audiences. Hutchins (2011) took a deeper look into the NFL and its national and global fan base. He found that to keep both national and global fans informed, the NFL uses its Twitter profile as a promotional vehicle, providing fans with updates, news, and scores. Social media platforms are an avenue for athletes to disseminate information directly to fans, which is an example of modern-day sports communication.

Social platforms like Facebook and Twitter provide room for fan engagement with constant communication between organizations and fans. Stavros, Meng, Westberg, and Farrelly (2014) suggested that teams use Facebook for branding purposes, providing timely information, and highlighting the potential for two-way engagement between sports organizations and their fans. Furthermore, Sanderson (2014) revealed that Twitter was used to link events and content for fan engagement. These two studies show that the main goals are still quite similar although different social media platforms offer different communication routes. Sports organizations want to engage with their fans and keep building on those relationships to make them stronger.

Facebook and Twitter are beneficial not just for fans, but also for professional sports writers for gathering information. According to Reed (2013), "Full-time American print sports writers who cover at least one professional sport beat are using Facebook and Twitter to gather information" (Reed, 2013, p. 559). These platforms can also give sports writers opportunities to capture from athletes and organizations, which helps eliminate "misquoted" accusations.

Social Media and Sports Communication

Social media has played a vital role in sports communication by being accessible at all hours of the day, giving sports organizations constant contact with fans. The main goal is communicating to audiences in a sport environment. The types of communication have evolved over time, but the current mode of sport communication is social media. Pronchinske, Groza, and Walker (2012) addressed the value of social media and the immense influence it has on sports via marketing, communications, and brand management. Sports communication is about interacting with fans, so as more fans use and have their everyday lives revolve around social media, sports organizations need to cater to that environment. This study also discussed the importance of a visible online presence to attract fans, increase team awareness, and sell team-related merchandise. Another key element to sports communication is engaging with the audience. The more connected fans feel to an organization, the more likely they want to maintain a relationship with the organization.

Sanderson (2014) examined the personal quality that two-way communication that social media can give these sports organizations. Athletes can utilize social media to create more of a personal feeling between them and the fans. Sanderson found that athletes generate support of their views and commentary via their personal social media pages. These athletes are also able to provide exclusive information to fans, giving fans an "insider feeling" that would not be able to be obtained without the use of social media. Sports organizations are the product, and the fans are so invested in this product, which makes using social media effectively so important.

Theory

Various theories and approaches can be used for analysis of communication objectives. The Relationship Marketing Approach, described by Williams and Chinn (2010), focused on building long-lasting relationships to generate further business. Another relationship marketing approach comes from Grönroos (1994), who addressed two parts to establishing a relationship: attracting a customer—a fan in the context of this study—and building on that relationship. Grönroos concluded that "marketing is seen as an interactive process in a social context where relationship building and management are a vital cornerstone" (Grönroos, 1994, p. 9). This approach is seen throughout the sports industry when sports organizations create and maintain relationships with their fans via social media. Williams and Chinn pointed out the connection between this relationship marketing approach and sports communication: "Relationship marketing is a piece of sports communication because sports organizations are looking to build strong, long lasting relationships that will help to further enhance their fan loyalty and brand" (p. 431).

Other scholars emphasized the importance of community through the lens of the Corporate Social Responsibility Theory. This theory has a recurring theme about putting the emphasis on the local community "as a strategic initiative, a focus on the community in which the sport team operates may provide the organization with a stronger, more loyal customer base" (Sheth & Babiak, 2010, p. 442). There is a consistent theme throughout both this theory and the relationship marketing approach, which prioritizes creating proper relationships and maintaining those relationships.

Communication is vital in strengthening a sports organization's relationships with fans because these organizations have optimal opportunities to succeed with the support of the community behind them.

As the literature reveals, social media is an important means of sports communication, and it continues to evolve in partnership with today's ever-evolving technology. This study focused on analyzing the Twitter and Facebook profiles of the Carolina Hurricanes and the Pittsburgh Steelers.

The current author raised the following research questions:

RQ1: How do social media posts vary before and during a game?

RQ2: What types of posts, and on which platform, were most common and what was the frequency of them?

RQ3: Is there a clear social media strategy?

A social media strategy is essential, especially in the professional sports industry. This topic is important because of the continuous evolution of sports and social media. As social media platforms become more prominent, the influential sports industry is going to have to adapt even more than it currently does.

III. Methods

The current study analyzed the content of social media posts leading up to and during the respective organization's games. The official Twitter and Facebook accounts was verified by clicking on the links on the official NFL Pittsburgh Steelers and NHL Carolina Hurricanes team websites. Their Facebook and Twitter pages were analyzed for three days over three constructed weeks from the end of October to the middle of November. In their study, Wallace, Wilson, and Miloch (2011) classified the social media posts into one of four themes: the form of communication, brand attributes, brand association factors, and marketing strategy. The current author adopted it with minor changes, using only three categories.

• "*Form of Communication"* refers to the type of posts presented. Every post analyzed fit into this category, whether it be a status update, picture, video, promotion, contest or hyperlink. In using this as a coding variable, the researcher was able to see the frequency of certain forms of communication and look at consistencies and variations across both platforms and teams.

• *"Brand Attributes"* is composed of product or non-product factors.

• *"Marketing Strategy"* refers to posts involving marketing.

Table 1 shows a more detailed description of the three themes.

Table 1. Three themes of social media posts

Category	Subcategories
Form of Communication	Status Update, Picture, Video, Promotion, Contest, Hyperlink, Reply/Retweet
Brand Attributes	Product: Hype posts, star players, head coach, team performance, beat reporter Non-product: logo, management, stadium, history, culture & values, team history, rivalry posts, team characteristics
Marketing Strategy	Recap, ticket sales, sponsorship, event coverage, in game coverage, team coverage or individual coverage

IV. Findings

This study explored how the Pittsburgh Steelers and Carolina Hurricanes used social media, specifically Facebook and Twitter, during a game and beforehand. The Pittsburgh Steelers had more social networking sites (SNS) posts than the Carolina Hurricanes. Both teams had more Twitter than Facebook posts (refer to *Figure 1*). Throughout the three weeks, both teams, in general, had the fairly consistent number of posts across both platforms.

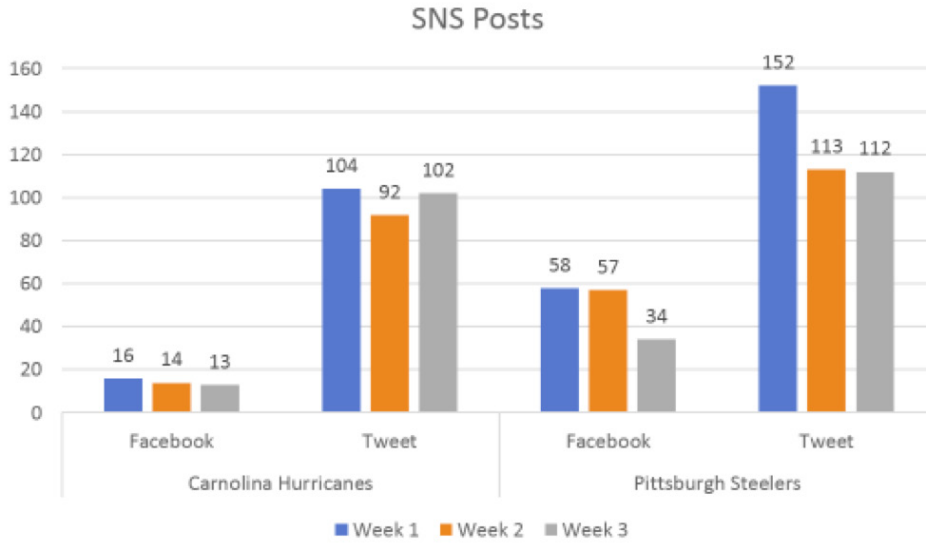

Figure 1. A breakdown of the social media posts by teams and platforms

In most of the cases, this research also found more social media activities on game day than on days prior to game day, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of Messages on Game Day vs. Days Earlier

Social Media	**Facebook**	**Twitter**
Teams	No. of Posts	No. of Tweets
Steelers		
Nov. 6	10	12
Nov. 9	15	17
Nov. 12 (Game Day)	32	84
Hurricanes		
Nov. 6	14	14
Nov. 8	2	35
Nov. 11 (Game Day)	8	53

The same trend was found in terms of followers and likes these two teams collected. For example, on November 6, 2017, the last day for data collection, the Steelers outperformed in all areas of fan engagements except for their total number of tweets. The Hurricanes had more tweets than the Steelers on that day.

Table 3. Social Media Engagement Statistics

Team	**Facebook Followers**	**Facebook Likes**	**Number of Tweets**	**Twitter Followers**	**Twitter Likes**
Carolina Hurricanes	241,563	262,996	About 50,200	About 332,000	4,546
Pittsburgh Steelers	6,088,859	6,493,386	About 35,300	About 2,910,000	5,876

The Steelers showed a consistent social media strategy on both Facebook and Twitter. On a weekly basis, the Steelers had the same kind of social media plan for which posts and sponsors would appear on a specific day. For example, the Steelers "injury reports" come out three times leading up to the game. For the first week, an injury report was released on the 25th, 26th and 27th, with the game happening on the 29th of October.

They also used consistent visual images for every game updating the end of the 1st quarter, halftime, 3rd quarter, and then the final score. For the Steelers, they also made sure to promote the game, posting videos of players arriving at the stadium, warming up, in the locker room, and even in the team huddle. Another example was the Steelers' "sight and sound" videos, which were released following the game, highlighting the key moments from the game.

The Steelers also had a visible beat reporter presence, whereas the Hurricanes did not. Missi Matthews, the Steelers team reporter, was responsible for covering a lot of the brand attribute videos. Matthews, a Steelers employee, was a frequent face across steelers.com and the Steelers social media sites. Also, the game was immediately followed by videos of postgame press conferences and other interviews between Steelers beat reporters and players.

The Steelers also were consistent with their #tbt and #Steelershistory posts, highlighting their history in a previous matchup with the opponent of the week. These strategies seemed to reflect the Relationship Marketing Approach. The Steelers have the same consistency on both platforms from week-to-week, enhancing their relationship with their fans and making their platforms easy for their fans to understand.

On the other hand, the Hurricanes needed to work around multiple games a week, so it was more challenging to establish a fixed schedule to incorporate consistent hashtags and a clear social media strategy across both Facebook and Twitter. Throughout the course of the week studied, the Hurricanes did have more events and promotions they would highlight than the Steelers. This finding aligns with the tenets of the Corporate Social Responsibly Theory. Since the Hurricanes are not as popular as the Steelers, the Carolina team needs to make sure it is engaging fans and offering various events and promotions to increase attendance.

a) In terms of communication forms, both the Hurricanes and the Steelers utilized all varieties of the different forms of communications across both Facebook and Twitter.

b) Regarding the brand attributes, there was a much bigger presence of product attributes than non-product. Both teams heavily covered head coach and player interviews. Continuous updates were issued in a variety of forms regarding the team's performance, whether it was pregame, postgame or during the game. The majority of the beat reporting for the Steelers occurred within this product brand attribute category. Game day showed more promotional, hype features. Non-product brand attribution was most visible when it showed the culture or values of the team and its players, like volunteering in the community (refer to Table 4).

Table 4. Product and Non-product Brand Attributes Conveyed via Social Media

	Product Attributes	**Non-Product Attributes**
Hurricanes (Facebook)	Gameday links Team performance updates Game highlights Game outcomes #CanesCast videos	Pictures of players at the local hospitals Pictures of fans
Steelers (Facebook)	Coach recap video Coach interview video Star player pictures and statistics Player interview videos Pregame pictures and videos Beat reporter video	Video and pictures of the team volunteering and giving back to the community
Hurricanes (Twitter)	"In the Room" videos Gameday Hub links Team performance updates	Team history Team characteristics and values Arena
Steelers (Twitter)	Postgame picture and video Beat reporter video Pregame picture and videos #tbt posts	#SteelersHistory video

c) In terms of marketing strategy, the Steelers relied on Facebook to help sponsors get the attention of fans. For example, a post on Facebook used a word "Paid" and then tagged the sponsor, as shown in *Figure 2*.

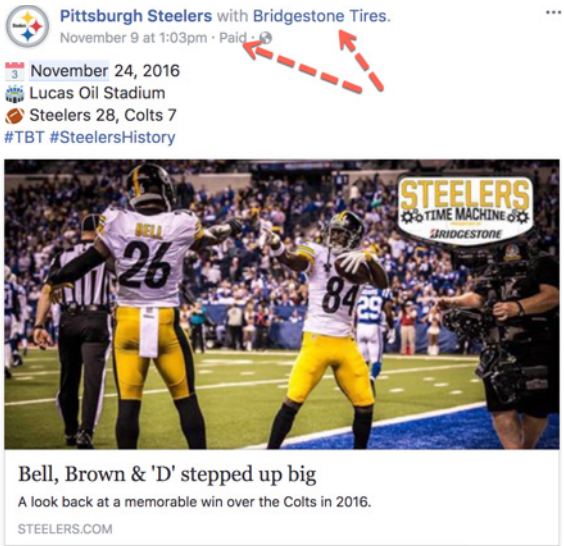

Figure 2. The image above exemplifies sponsored Facebook posts for the Steelers. The two red arrows were added by the author to emphasize the term "Paid" and the sponsor name in the post.

V. Analysis

As mentioned in the literature, it is important to have a strong, visible online presence to attract fans and increase team awareness (Pronchinske et al., 2012). This strategy seemed to be adopted by the Hurricanes and Steelers, which both had a strong online presence on Twitter and Facebook, especially during their games.

Hutchins (2011) found that the NFL used Twitter as a promotional vehicle to provide fans with instant updates, scores, and news. This study found the same strategy with the Steelers' Twitter account. This study also found that the Steelers' pregame videos tried to create personal feelings through social media. For example, the teams' videos showed players warming up, in the team huddle, and in the locker room.

Hutchins (2011) mentioned the use of Twitter as a promotional vehicle for the NFL. With the use of Twitter, the Steelers and Hurricanes were able to communicate directly to their fans and use their account as a way to promote their brand.

This research was limited in that it only looked at two different professional sports teams' accounts and only on Twitter and Facebook.

VI. Conclusion

In summary, this study revealed multiple variations in the posts on Facebook and Twitter for both the Carolina Hurricanes and the Pittsburgh Steelers. Both teams had more tweets than Facebook posts, during a game than other times in the weeks studied. The Steelers had a larger social media following and influence than the Hurricanes, which, in turn, results in the Steelers having a more visible social media strategy with a consistent timeline for one game a week. The Hurricanes balanced their posts and content around how many games they have each week, leaving their social media plan inconsistent. All in all, this study tried to show the role and influence of social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, in the professional sports industry.

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