Sport Comm Research Paper

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Research Questions

Research Question 1: Does a win create an environment for fans to interact with posts more than a loss?

Research Question 2: Does the level of interaction from fans change based on the written content of the post?

Research Question 3: Does the level of interaction between account types change significantly based on hashtags, emojis, reposts/shares, quotes, likes, and comments?

Methods

The Boston Red Sox, founded in 1901, are one of the most iconic professional baseball teams in the United States. Based in Boston, Massachusetts, they compete in Major League Baseball's American League East Division. Renowned for their historic ballpark, Fenway Park, and a rich tradition of success, the Red Sox boast a fervent fanbase. A fanbase that follows the team throughout the year with passion, between the offseason and regular season engagement remains the same. The expectation will always be the postseason. The team maintains an active presence across major social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, engaging with fans through updates, highlights, and behind-the-scenes content.

As one of the primary platforms for real-time updates and fan interaction, Twitter serves as a focal point for this study. With a significant following, the Red Sox leverage Twitter to communicate with fans, share game insights, and promote team-related content.

Tweets from Tyler Milliken were also analyzed. Milliken is a well-known Red Sox fan in the community who works for the local radio station 98.5 The SportsHub as well as the most popular Red Sox podcast in the country The Section 10 Podcast.

Chris Cotillo is the media member who is discussed. Chris Cotillo is a beat reporter from MassLive.com. Cotillo is one of many Red Sox beat reporters but is the most consistent which made him the best option to analyze for this research.

For this study, tweets from the official Boston Red Sox Twitter account, well-known fan Tyler Milliken, media member Chris Cotillo, and athletes Jaren Duran, Kenley Jansen, Wilyer Abreu, and Triston Casas were analyzed over a specific period, spanning from March 28th to April 11th. This period encompasses the early stages of the Major League Baseball season both Opening Day and the two weeks proceeding, providing insights into the team's social media engagement during a crucial time for fan interaction.

275 tweets/posts were systematically analyzed during the specified period. Each tweet was carefully examined to assess its content, tone, engagement metrics (such as likes, retweets, and comments), and relevance to the overall social media strategy of the Boston Red Sox. This comprehensive analysis provides valuable insights into the team's social media presence and effectiveness in engaging with fans during the specified period.

The Coding Scheme assigned twenty different categories of numerical values based on the factual (likes, reposts, bookmarks) or the subjective opinion (Written Content, Photo Content). This process was completed in Excel. The first eight consisted of ID, Sport, Year, Day, Season Timing, Event Timing, Platform, and Account Type.

ID was a number assigned to the research to distinguish between codes when running the code to find significance. Sport helped determine which sport was being discussed, in this case, the research discussed baseball which was assigned code number one. The year was between 2023 and 2024, the research was conducted in a 2024-time frame so 24 were assigned to this section. Day was concerning the day of the year it was (Ex: Feb 1 = 32), this study was conducted from March 28 – April 11 so Day

went from 88-102. Season Timing concerned the timing of the posts studied relative to the season. All posts occurred during the MLB season, so all posts had a two. Event Timing concerned the timing of the posts studied relative to the season. All posts with an 88-designation occurred on Opening Day so those posts received a two designation which represents the post occurring the day of the event. All others received a three which indicates the post occurring the day after the event.

Platform referred to the social media platform the post occurred on. There were two used (Twitter 1, Instagram 3). All four account types were used, and the designations are as follows: Official/Team, Athlete, Reporter, and Fan Account. Hashtags refer to the number of hashtags used per post. Emojis refers to the number of emojis used in each post. Engagement measures included reposts, quotes, likes, bookmarks, and comments.

Finally, there is the subjective piece of the coding sheet. This included Written Content which consisted of nine categories: No Written Content, Interactivity, Diversion, Content, Fanship, Updating, Publicizing, Selling, and Other. Photo Content consisted of nine categories: No Photo or Media, Personal Life, Professional Life, Related to Sport, Related to Other Sport, Reposted Photo or media (not original content), Pop Culture, Meme, GIF, Screen Shot, Other. Message Tone consisted of five categories: Business Driven (Score Update, Tickets), Professional information (business-like, information 'dump'), Professional yet in character or tone, Casual and conversational, Unrelated, off-topic, or random information. Sponsored Content, Yes and No. Gendered Post which consisted of four categories: No person mentioned or pictured, no pronouns used, only male names, pronouns, Both men and women names/pronouns, only female names, nouns.

For example, the Red Sox official Twitter account just posted a score update where a player had just hit a home run, with a video of the home run being hit. This post would receive an updating in

written content, a Related to Sport for photo content, a Casual and conversational for the message tone, a no for sponsored content, and a men only in the gendered post section.

For this study, all posts occurred in-season. Thirty-six posts occurred on Opening Day (13%), and 239 posts occurred after Opening Day (87%). 265 posts were taken from Twitter (96%), and ten were taken from Instagram (4%). 129 posts were taken from the Red Sox team account (47%), ten posts from athletes (4%), thirty-four posts from the media (12%), and 102 were taken from a fan account (37%). 132 posts took a business tone in their message (48%), eleven took a professional-informal tone (4%), twenty-one wrote in a casual, yet in-voice approach (8%), 107 used a casual tone (40%), four posts had content that was unrelated to their post (2%). 269 had content that was not sponsored (98%), and six posts had content that was sponsored (2%). 249 posts had posts that included men only (91%), eleven included both men and women (4%), and fifteen did not mention gender at all (5%).

For written content, 153 posts were updating (56%), 44 were fanship (16%), 32 were interactive (12%), 30 were informational (11%), 7 were publicizing (2.6%), 4 were other (2%), 2 were selling (1%), 2 were a diversion (1%), 1 post had no written content (.4%).

For photo content, 243 posts had to do with baseball (88%), 14 had no photo content (5%), 7 were reposted content (3%), 5 had to do with business (2%), 3 were posts about personal life (1%), 2 were about other sports (.6%), and 1 fell into the other category (.4%).

Results

Research Question 1: Does a win create an environment for fans to interact with posts more than a loss?

What we found was that there was little significance between wins and losses in terms of fan interaction. There is no significant difference between fan interaction on posts with emojis on days when the Red Sox won and where the Red Sox lost (t_{273}=-.679, n.s). There is no significant difference

between quotes on posts on days when the Red Sox won and when the Red Sox lost (t_{263}=-1.50, n.s). There is no significant difference between likes on posts on days when the Red Sox won and when the Red Sox lost (t_{273}= -.890, n.s.). There is no significant difference in bookmarks when the Red Sox won and when the Red Sox lost (t_{263}=-1.52, n.s.). There is no significant difference between the number of comments on posts on days when the Red Sox won and when the Red Sox lost (t_{273}=1.805, n.s.). There is no significant difference in the message tone of the account measured on days when the Red Sox won and when the Red Sox lost (t_{273}=.390, n.s.). There is a significant difference between the number of hashtags used per post on days when the Red Sox won and when the Red Sox lost. Hashtags on days the Red Sox won (x= .14, SD= .455) were used significantly more than hashtags when the Red Sox lost (x= .05, SD= .208). (t_{273}= -2.06, p = .040). There was a significant difference in the number of reposts/shares on posts on days when the Red Sox won than when the Red Sox lost, with the number of reposts/shares on days the Red Sox won (x= 126.99, SD= 189.21) being significantly greater than the days the Red Sox lost (x= 69.58, SD= 76.95). (t_{263}= -2.96, p=.003).

Research Question 2: Does the level of interaction from fans change based on the written content of the post?

There is no significant difference between interaction on posts with no written content, interactive, diversion, information, fanship, updating, publicizing, selling, and other on the number of hashtags per post. ($f_{8, 266}$= .476, n.s.). There is no significant difference between interaction on posts with no written content, interactive, diversion, information, fanship, updating, publicizing, selling, and other on the number of emojis per post ($f_{8,266}$= 5.63, n.s.). There is no significant difference between interaction on posts with no written content, interactive, diversion, information, fanship, updating, publicizing, selling, and other between shares/reposts. ($f_{7, 257}$= 1.01, n.s.). There is no significant difference between the number of quotes on posts with no written content, interactive, diversion, information, fanship,

updating, publicizing, selling, and other. ($t_{7,257}$= 1.18, n.s.). There is no significant difference between the number of bookmarks on posts with no written content, interactive, diversion, information, fanship, updating, publicizing, selling, and other. ($t_{7, 257}$= 1.06, n.s.). There is a significant difference between interaction on posts with emojis on posts with no written content, interactive, diversion, information, fanship, updating, publicizing, selling, and other with Selling (x= 1.00, SD= 1.41) significantly more than Diversion (x=0, SD= 0) or Information (x=0, SD=0) ($f_{8, 266}$ = .5.63, p= .001). There is a significant difference between the number of likes on posts with no written content, interactive, diversion, information, fanship, updating, publicizing, selling, and other with Other (x= 11125.50, SD= 3284.19) having significantly more than Publicizing (x= 91.71, SD= 150.57) ($f_{8, 266}$ = 15.78, p= .001). There is a significant difference between the number of comments on posts with no written content, interactive, diversion, information, fanship, updating, publicizing, selling, and other, with Selling getting significantly more comments (x= 78, SD= 106.06) than Diversion (x= 9, SD= 7.07) or Publicizing (x= 7.71, SD= 7.29) ($f_{8, 266}$ = 1.96, p =.05).

Research Question 3

Does the level of interaction between account types change significantly based on hashtags, emojis, reposts/shares, quotes, likes, and comments?

There is no significant difference between the number of bookmarks amongst the team, media, fan, and player accounts ($t_{2, 262}$ = 2.907, n.s.). There is a significant difference between the team, media, fan, and player accounts with the level of interaction based on the number of hashtags, with the team account (x= .22, SD= .530) having significantly more than the athlete, media, or fan accounts (x= 0, SD=0) ($f_{3, 271}$ = 8.11, P= <.001). There is a significant difference between the team, media, fan, and player accounts with the level of interaction based on the number of emojis, with the player account (x= .80, SD= 1.033) having significantly more than the team (x= .01, SD= .088), media (x= 0, SD= 0), and fan accounts (x=.02,

SD= .139) ($f_{3, 271}$ = 43.227, p= <.001). There is a significant difference between the team, media, fan, and player accounts with the level of interaction based on the number of reposts and shares with the team account (x= 181.19, SD= 194.37) having significantly more than the media account (x= 10.91, SD= 11.82) ($f_{2,262}$ = 39.89, p = <.001). There is a significant difference between the team, media, fan, and player accounts with the level of interaction based on the number of quote tweets with the team account (x= 36.25, SD= 49.19) getting significantly more than the media account (x= 1.47, SD= 4.83) ($f_{2, 262}$ = 26.868, p = <.001). There is a significant difference between the team, media, fan, and player accounts with the level of interaction based on the number of likes with the player accounts (x= 10409.20), SD= 4784.91) getting significantly more than the media account (x = 154, SD= 171.92) ($f_{3, 271}$ = 173.12, <.001). There is a significant difference between the team, media, fan, and player accounts with the level of interaction based on the number of comments with the player accounts (x = 152, SD = 53.83) getting significantly more than the media account (x = 13.53, SD= 28.04).

Discussion

For our first research question, we were able to determine that there is little difference between interaction on posts whether the Red Sox won or lost that day, with the exception being if hashtags were used in the post and the number of reposts/shares between wins and losses.

Regarding the second research question we were able to determine that posts with hashtags and their interaction did not change significantly based on the written content. We also determined that the number of reposts/shares, quotes, and bookmarks did not change significantly based on the written content within the post. Interaction on posts with emojis did change significantly and the number of likes and bookmarks were significantly correlated based on the type of written content.

For the third research question, the data suggests that different types of accounts receive varying levels of engagement across different interaction metrics, with player accounts often receiving higher levels of engagement compared to team, media, and fan accounts in certain aspects such as emojis, likes, and comments. Additionally, team accounts tend to lead in metrics like hashtags, reposts/shares, and quote tweets, indicating strong engagement with content directly from the team.

To attack the second research question, we found that written content did some but not much for interaction on the posts but the amount of likes and bookmarks did have significant differences. The likes were buoyed by the fact that the athlete posts were all taken from Instagram, a platform that averaged 10,409 likes per post. This is a number Twitter never approached and so the significant difference was caused by our athletes. There is still information we can take from this portion of the study. **Chris Gibbs and Norm O'Reilly** did a study on professional sports teams and sought gratifications from the user when interacting with sports teams on Twitter space. What they found was that there were four primary gratifications sought by Twitter followers of sports teams: Interaction, Promotion, Live Updates, and News. These factors also encompassed aspects such as engaging with other followers, receiving promotions, staying, updated on live game information, and getting timely news about players and teams. The study also found significant mean differences between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained. With gratifications being exceeded in expectations. Interactions with other followers and reading tweets while watching the games.

This is to say, regarding the second research question, users go to Twitter with certain expectations. That could be up-to-the-minute score updates and news, discourse about events that occurred in the game or the day of, or just general info and promotions the team may be running. Fans expect content that is updating and that was the most common type of written content with 53.5% of the posts falling under the umbrella of updating. Due to this, one should not expect a significant change

in interaction in reposts/shares, quotes, or comments because the fanbase will expect this by logging on to Twitter and following these Red Sox-based accounts.

It was also found that there was not much significance in the interactions of posts on days when the Red Sox won or lost except that interactivity on posts with hashtags and reposts/shares went up on days when the Red Sox won. The hashtags can be explained by multiple factors: after every game the Red Sox would post the final score in the following format: FINAL #RedSox 17, Cubs 0, and with a win they would include a second hashtag, #dirtywater. This would increase the correlation in the interactivity and number of hashtags on days the Red Sox win simply because there are more hashtags on days they win. On losses, they would simply include the one #RedSox. The use of #dirtywater alone helped drive fan engagement according to **Reichardt Smith** who did a study on identifying the unique identifiers for specific teams. Examples from the study include Arizona's #BearDown or South Carolina, #FearTheFish. As is often the case with sports teams, Red Sox fans are very proud of their team and will represent their red and white when possible. After a win, this pride will often take effect in the online space. Smith says in the study "Most of the identifiers were preexisting constructions within the framework of those communities. Every one of the prominent ones was an iconic identifier or an action-acted version of that icon." #DirtyWater comes from a place of pride for Red Sox fans, especially those who have been to Fenway. After every Red Sox win, they will play the song "Dirty Water" and they have done so for decades now. This hashtag is perfect for increasing engagement for a fanbase that is already very passionate about their team.

Finally, we see the impact of player-to-fan interaction compared to the others in our third research question. When running through emojis, likes, and comments athletes had a significantly greater number than the other account types, that being media, fan, and team. On average, the player account gets 8,592.15 more likes than the next highest account (1,817.05). A study done by Alice

Marwick looked at the ways celebrities interact with fans on social media. She found that celebrities use Twitter to create an appearance and performance of “backstage” access, revealing personal information to create a sense of intimacy and authenticity with fans. They publicly acknowledge and interact with fans, using techniques like @replies and retweeting to show connection and availability. They affiliate themselves with fans by using similar language, and cultural references, sharing links/content that resonates with their fan base. Interactions between celebrities give the impression of candid, uncensored glimpses into their lives and relationships with each other. An example of this would be an Instagram post from Jarren Duran captioned, “When @mariaschroder7 catches you dancing you gotta make sure it’s @pabloreyes approved.” Here we see Duran tag two people or “fellow celebrities” including someone who is a teammate. In the picture, he is smiling with Maria who is tagged, and his teammate Pablo Reyes. This all occurs pregame as well, so it gives fans a “backstage” look at Duran’s career as a ballplayer. This post and his motives based on the findings of Alice Marwick align with the findings when the code was run, with the common forms of fan interaction such as likes and comments being the most prominent on the athlete's account.

Limitations and Future Directions

If this were to be run again, I would increase the general sample size as well as the sample size on more platforms. Facebook and TikTok were not included in the study, and Twitter was far more prominent than the other platform used, that being Instagram, which was used only for the athlete accounts. Both a greater sample size, as well as a broader use of platforms would provide a better study. The Instagram like and comment numbers skewed the mean as Instagram often garners a lot more likes per post than Twitter. A greater emphasis on the athlete posts would also be useful. The athlete is the aspect of every team that fans care about the most. Understanding their impact is essential. The next step is figuring out a way to maximize interactivity and fan happiness with these accounts. There are certainly external

factors that contribute to this such as losses, and poor moves from a front office. But in a completely controlled environment understanding ways to maximize this is possible, especially with a passionate fanbase like the Red Sox have. Be sure not to generalize from this study too much because of how limited the sample size was, both on the study as well as limits in the individual categories.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the social media engagement strategies of the Boston Red Sox and the subsequent interactions from their fanbase. As one of the most iconic teams in American professional baseball, the Red Sox have cultivated a fervent following that transcends the on-field outcomes. The findings shed light on several key aspects of social media engagement. Firstly, while the outcomes of games did not significantly impact fan interaction in most cases, certain elements such as the use of hashtags and reposts/shares saw an uptick on days when the Red Sox emerged victorious. This underscores the importance of leveraging celebratory moments to amplify fan engagement. Secondly, the study explored the impact of written content on interaction metrics. While written content did not consistently influence interaction levels, the presence of emojis significantly correlated with increased likes, highlighting the importance of visual elements in driving engagement. Lastly, the analysis revealed distinct patterns in interaction across different types of accounts. Athlete accounts emerged as the frontrunners in terms of likes, comments, and emojis, indicative of the unique connection fans have with individual players. On the other hand, team accounts led in metrics such as hashtags, reposts/shares, and quote tweets, indicating strong engagement with official team content. This study serves as a foundational exploration of the intricate relationship between sports teams, social media, and fan engagement. By understanding the nuanced factors that drive interaction, teams like the Boston Red Sox can tailor their strategies to effectively connect with their passionate fanbase in the digital realm, fostering a sense of community and loyalty beyond the confines of the ballpark.

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