MOTIVATORS FOR SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT WITH OFFICIAL NFL TEAM
TWITTER ACCOUNTS

by

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Motivators for Social Media Engagement with Official NFL Team Twitter Accounts

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Abstract

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Generating nearly $10 billion in revenue during the 2012 season, the National Football

League (NFL) has been shown to be, by data, to be by far the most popular and profitable

professional sports league in the United States of America ("Why Football Is Still A

Money Machine," 2013). Dominating attention both during its season, and even during

its offseason, fans ingest material around the clock from the league and its teams. The

purpose of this thesis is to explore why consumers follow official NFL team Twitter

accounts; what keeps them engaged with those accounts; and what types of content create

positive long-term relationships. One of Twitter's operational functions from a sports-

level is producing stories, intensifying and spreading this content and information

available in a public setting, and in turn, creating new ways of thinking about the

interaction between sport and digital media by organizations, athletes, journalists,

publicists, and fans among others (Hutchins, 2011). A quantitative methodology was used

to identify fan motivators for following an official NFL team's Twitter account and also finding reasoning behind why certain content tends to be more engaging. Through regression analysis, content from eight NFL teams' official Twitter accounts was gathered over a two-week period. Twitter content was analyzed to identify fan engagement based on specific categories compared against an average number of "retweets" to determine which fans were most motivated to engage with both instantly and long-term.

Chapter One: Introduction

Papasolomou and Melanthiou (2012) explain that social media allows for
expansion beyond one-on-one interaction and marketing. Through social media,
marketers are beginning to realize that the platforms give power to consumers to move
from spreading word about brands from a one-on-one basis to a one-to-hundreds, or even
one-to-thousands basis: Consumers also feel a 56% stronger connection and more
satisfaction with the services received from an organization when they use their social
media platforms efficiently in the communicative interaction (Cone Inc., 2008).
Weinberg (2009), meanwhile, says social media is a rising phenomenon and can be
defined as relating to the sharing of information, experiences, and perspectives through
community-oriented websites. Since the expansion of Internet usage started including
active engagement with social media, Twitter has become a go-to media source for
people looking to receive both breaking news and in-depth content. Sports fans also crave
constant updates on their favorite teams and leagues with around the clock, twenty-four-
seven access on the thoughts and actions of idolized individuals–professional athletes and
coach–that can be beneficial to the team and the league in terms of promotion and
publicity (McCoy, 2010-2011). But, while social media creates several new and valuable
channels in connecting with fans, there are several downsides to social media, most
notably cyberbullying. Schurgin O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson (2011, p. 801) write that

cyberbullying is "deliberately using digital media to communicate false, embarrassing, or hostile information about another person. It is the most common online risk for all teens and is a peer-to-peer risk." With users having the ability to "hide" behind a pseudonym and not being required to have a picture of themselves as their profile picture, social media lends itself to cyberbullying attacks. 32% of teenagers ages 12-17 reported that they have been targets of cyberbullying (Lenhart, 2007).

Twitter's current structure features several content and definitions that are exclusive to the company. First, a Twitter user must create a handle, which is a user name with an "@" sign before a variation of characters ("About Twitter," 2014). Some NFL teams have their city and team name in a handle, while others just have the team name. The Atlanta Falcons' Twitter handle, for example, is @AtlantaFalcons, while the San Francisco 49ers' handle is @49ers. Tweets must be a specific length, as they cannot exceed 140 characters. Twitter's 140-character limit for tweets is rooted in its origin as a text-based service: SMS messages have a 160-character limit, so tweets were limited to 140 characters, leaving 20 for users' handles. Users can share content from another user through a process called retweeting. When a tweet is retweeted, it will appear exactly as it was originally on the sharer's timeline. Users can connect in real-time through the use of hashtags (#). If there is breaking news or an event that is catching the eye of users across the world, they are able to post their own thoughts, along with seeing what others are saying, by posting a specific word or series of words with a hashtag in front of it. In the sports realm, many teams have coined their own hashtagged phrases, such as the

Washington Redskins using #HTTR, that are featured in many of their tweets to begin conversations with their followers.

Twitter was founded on March 6, 2006, and from February 2008 to February 2009, the number of users spiked from 475,000 to more than seven million. As of November 2014, there were approximately 284 million monthly active users that send more than 500 million tweets – a 140-character message that can include pictures, embedded videos, and emoticons – daily ("About Twitter," 2014). The platforms also saw nearly four million new users join during the last quarter of 2014 (Koh, 2015). News outlets have also shifted their focus to social media for its up to the minute capabilities and the increasing interest in having immediate updates. News consumers have begun to show more interest in creating their own news and interacting with media outlets than remaining passive news consumers (Papper, 2008). Twitter allows for this functionality. Its value as a means of interaction with audiences and promoting and linking work on other platforms has made it the latest tool in newsrooms across the country (Sheffer & Schultz, 2010). Sports sections in newspapers have been forced to switch to a greater percentage of coverage devoted to "color" commentary and features as social media has taken over the instant news niche (Billings et. al., 2015).

One of the earliest forms of social media on the Internet were interactive journals known as blogs, which came to the forefront of Internet activities after the invention of the platform in the mid-1990s. The amount of blogs has exploded through the years, increasing from an estimated 30,000 in 1998 to at least three million by the beginning of 2004 (Amis, 2002). In 2014, it was reported that more than six million people blog and

12 million people blog through social media sites like Twitter ("The Blog Economy," n.d.). Twitter supports marketing of blogs through their site, and have 12 different blogs in 18 different languages of its own with categories ranging from advertising to engineering ("About Twitter," 2014). Unlike certain traditional media outlets that are considered to either have a specific slant or avoid reporting certain activities in fear they will lose established relationships, blogs gave any user on a free medium to express their own opinions. Original belief was that these blogs, which have been credited for unveiling information, were not reliable sources and would never match the credibility traditional media has built. This, however, was debunked. In fact, users may find blogs to have greater credibility because they are independent rather than under control, and those running these blogs may discuss issues traditional media shy away from because they might hurt corporations (Cristol, 2002).

Social media and traditional media (newspapers and print magazines) have at least some differences when reporting on news for interested readers. While traditional print and broadcast media can cover breaking news, it simply cannot react instantaneously like social media can. In a study conducted by Zhao et al. (2011, p. 8) comparing how social media and *The New York Times* (NYT) covered events during a designated nearly three-month period between late 2009 and early 2010, they found that, "Twitter clearly has relatively more tweets and users talking about entity-oriented topics than NYT. In contrast, event-oriented topics are not so popular in Twitter although it has a much stronger presence than entity-oriented topics in NYT. We suspect that many entity-oriented topics are about celebrities and brands, and these tend to attract Web

users' attention." And while traditional media, at least in the case of *The New York Times*, focused on categories like history and science, social media lent itself to pop culture, with celebrities like Chris Brown and Lady Gaga receiving greater amounts of attention on those platforms.

The NFL, meanwhile, announced in 2009 that "the growth of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook has created new ways for the NFL and clubs to communicate and connect with fans. The NFL has been at the forefront of the use of new media and will continue to emphasize innovation and approach use of these new forms of communication" ("League Announces," 2009). All the advantages that Twitter brings to media and journalism are even more pronounced for sports, which already has a large, built-in audience hungry for the opportunity to talk directly with sport journalists, athletes and coaches (Sheffer & Schultz, 2010).

The league has since used Twitter as its primary go-to for instant and exclusive content for fans, and to further longstanding relationships with sponsors. During the 2013 season, the NFL began producing highlight video clips on Twitter, delivered as promoted tweets, that were released to followers just minutes after a big-time play happened on "Thursday Night Football" games. These video clips had five to eight seconds of pre-roll with an advertisement from Verizon before the play was shown. Hans Schroeder, Senior Vice President of Media Strategy and Development for the NFL said the following:

> Because of the nature of their platform [Twitter], of being open publicly and real
> time… and really seeing a synergist experience … we thought this was a great
> way to start off with something deep with a social media partner. …For us, one of

the real attractive things about this partnership … is the ability to take our content and use their ability to promote within their distribution network, and make sure a number much larger than 5 million people see this content and become more aware of this conversation around the NFL (Van Grove, 2013).

In November 2014, the New England Patriots became the first NFL team to reach one million active followers on Twitter (Speros, 2014). The Dallas Cowboys became the second team with more than one million Twitter followers shortly after. While they do not have nearly as many followers as European soccer teams Barcelona (@FCBarcelona) and Real Madrid (@realmadriden), each with around 15 million followers, they do have a sizable following. Below is a table that lists the 32 NFL teams and the number of followers they had for their Twitter accounts as of November 2014:

Table 1: Number Of Followers For Each NFL Twitter Account

NFL Team	Total Twitter Followers
Arizona Cardinals	139,257
Atlanta Falcons	384,889
Baltimore Ravens	511,909
Buffalo Bills	298,159
Carolina Panthers	356,363
Chicago Bears	605,034
Cincinnati Bengals	300,918
Cleveland Browns	354,068
Dallas Cowboys	1,015,474
Denver Broncos	629,466
Detroit Lions	427,890
Green Bay Packers	801,276
Houston Texans	478,213
Indianapolis Colts	321,773
Jacksonville Jaguars	160,931
Kansas City Chiefs	348,787

Miami Dolphins	372,177
Minnesota Vikings	384,701
New England Patriots	1,038,380
New Orleans Saints	575,786
New York Giants	673,747
New York Jets	699,133
Oakland Raiders	412,673
Philadelphia Eagles	593,333
Pittsburgh Steelers	842,310
San Diego Chargers	343,638
San Francisco 49ers	813,387
Seattle Seahawks	681,564
St. Louis Rams	214,387
Tampa Bay Buccaneers	212,153
Tennessee Titans	216,345
Washington Redskins	372,491

Twitter has become the online voice for NFL organizations by providing the dual purpose of providing both marketing of the team and being the team's first line of public relations. It is also one of the most engaging social media platforms, bringing both more attention and scrutiny in the process. Jimmy Sanderson, Assistant Professor at Clemson University, said the following:

> Twitter is clearly the king of sports engagement. It's the place sports fans go for the most current news as well as to interact with sports media members, sports figures, athletes and other fans. Twitter has changed sports. ESPN now integrates tweets into *SportsCenter*; most networks display the Twitter handles of their broadcaster. For sports fans, the possibilities for engagement are tremendous (Billings et. al., 2015).

The product is still early in its life cycle, though, leaving many organizations, both sports and beyond, still in search of what really resonates with their followers and

target audiences. The sports media market is also congested as teams not only have to battle with local news outlets and newspapers, but national outlets like ESPN and Fox Sports for preferred content. When teams do find out what intrigues their followers most and what will hopefully create a long-term and loyal relationship, they will then be able to market their product accordingly and better satisfy the demand. If you would like your followers to engage with you, you need to give them a reason for doing so.

While Twitter continues its ascension from a nascent form of communication to a reliable go-to source for news exchange, there has been limited academic research in sports and social media. This study, however, will highlight some of the work that has been done in the field to provide a groundwork for an analytical study that compares both content and NFL teams during a select period.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

While social media is a realm that has gotten much public exposure over the last few years, the vast landscape of this new phenomenon has little in terms of academic research. However, there have been studies that have touched on different areas of social media such as athlete-fan interaction, keys for quality content, and using platforms as an extension for public relations.

Coinciding with social media's growth over the last few years has been an increased amount of interaction between followers and professional sports teams. This is both during the week and on game days. While the NFL is the top American sports league, studies have shown that fan interaction on Twitter with the sport is actually not as frequent as it is in other sports. During the Catalyst Digital Fan Engagement report conducted on behalf of *SportsBusiness Journal*, it was found that sports with "more ethnically diverse and younger-skewing fan bases, such as mixed martial arts, the National Basketball Association (NBA), and college basketball, have the most engaged users, and those fans are the most receptive to activation by corporate partners of those properties" (Broughton, 2012). Furthermore, only 23% of NFL fans interacted on Twitter in comparison to 24% of NBA fans and only 71% of Twitter users follow an NFL team compared to 77% for NBA teams (Broughton, 2012). This also extends to game days, as only 25% (9% for Twitter) of NFL fans will use social media in some capacity on mobile

devices during games, while more than 30% (19% for Twitter) of NBA fans will do so ("Social Network Sites," 2015).

Some teams are exploring ways to encourage usage of social media while attending games. For example, the Seattle Seahawks used Extreme Networks to revamp their Wi-Fi network at CenturyLink Field. During the first game with the enhanced Wi-Fi network, fans in the stadium let their appreciation of an interception and subsequent touchdown by safety Kam Chancellor be known virtually, as phone usage at that moment pushed the network to a peak load of 1.4 gigabytes per second, beating Extreme's previous record of 1.1 GB set in Philadelphia ("Seahawks Hit New High," 2015). The Golden State Warriors, meanwhile, are experimenting with several technological assets to provide their fans with better means to remain on social media. In their current home stadium, Oracle Arena, the Warriors are using Apple's iBeacon technology to send notifications about the team to phones in the vicinity ("Warriors to Expand Tech," 2015). The Patriots have also used mobile apps to drive traffic to not only their website, but their social media accounts as well. Through a partnership with SessionM, a startup designed to increase fan engagement, the Patriots have found that fans enjoy using to a team-specific app. In an interview with *Forbes* in 2012, Patriots head of new media Fred Kirsch said, "our biggest growth area in digital has been our app for iOS and Andriod. After talking with SessionM and discovering their solution for incentivizing and rewarding fans, we felt it was a way to take engagement to the next level" (Smith, 2012).

One team that has excelled in the social media realm is the NBA's Atlanta Hawks, who has been featured in several publications for their success in creating unique

content of public relations language with humor and for using the platform as a new way to generate sales (Lehman, 2015). While the Hawks were one of the best teams in the league during the 2014-2015 regular season, accumulating an Eastern Conference best record of 60-22, they had won 50 or more games just once in the 16 seasons prior (1998-1999 to 2013-2014). But, through specific targeting of millennials and having a unique online voice that attracts that age group, they have become a Twitter follow for both Hawks fans and users seeking compelling content. From December 27, 2014, to January 31, 2015, the Hawks won all 19 games they played. With each ensuing win, the Hawks' Twitter handle would add a 'w' to represent the number of wins they had in a row. Shortly after the winning streak was snapped, the Hawks' Twitter account used a playlist mashing together different song titles to thank the fans for their support. When pieced together, it read: "Dear Atlanta, we can't stop thinking about you. Thank you for your support over this incredible season of dreams. The streak may be over; nonetheless, we are just getting started. We love you. Let's go make more memories together. Love, the Hawks." During the NBA All-Star Weekend, they also changed their handle to "#ATLStarWeekend," as they had four players on the Eastern Conference All-Star Team. The Hawks have run "Swipe Right Night," where single fans connected via Tinder, a dating app, and the @ATLHawks Twitter feed is a model of how to remain edgy without pandering on Twitter (Busbee, 2015).

Another team that appears to have found a digital voice that properly represents their fan base and followers is the Los Angeles Kings of the National Hockey League (NHL). While the Kings experienced great success on-ice during the early 2010s,

winning two Stanley Cup titles during a four-year span, the organization has taken a specific approach to differentiate their hockey operations with their digital content. After winning a Western Conference playoff series against the St. Louis Blues, the Kings sent out a tweet reading "Bring it on" to the Phoenix Coyotes, their next opponent. While not every team has the bravado to interact in such a bold fashion and some of the players themselves admitted they would not be so brash, Michael Altieri, Kings' Vice President of Communications and Content prefers that kind of activity: "We encourage a sense of humor, and, most of all, we encourage interaction. Whether it's Twitter or the team website, the goal has to be engagement" (Botta, 2012). These experiences, like the one the Kings provided their followers, arise when digital media teams and marketers are able to incorporate engagement and creativity into the company's overall marketing communications strategy through the interconnectedness of online social media combined with traditional media. In one month of playoff action, the Kings saw their Twitter following increase by 37,777 users – the most of the remaining playoff teams at the time (Botta, 2012).

Often, teams are going to be less successful in regard to their win-loss record, so social media platforms must find ways to engage with fans even when the team is not performing well on their specific field. During the 2014 NFL season, the Oakland Raiders started the season losing their first eight games. At the midway mark, the Raiders tweeted out a season in review stating, "A 0-8 record isn't good, but many positives have come out of the first half of the season." Within seconds, fans reacted. One responded that the only positive thing about the season was their blood alcohol content. Someone

else remarked, "This is cute." Another simple said, "Nope" (Shpigel, 2014). When a team is struggling on the field, fans often find team Twitter accounts as the best location to vent both their frustration and their disappointment. Kevin Griffin, the Cleveland Browns' Vice President for Fan Experience and Marketing, said teams cannot sugarcoat their situations. "You [have] to be very, very conscious that you [aren't] trying to make it look better than it actually was. People can see right through you. There's a level of credibility that you have to maintain" (Shpigel, 2014).

While not every team will be able to emulate the Hawks' and Kings' model and experience the same results, this does show that if a team can figure out what connects best, they will see their numbers grow and followers remain loyal to their product.

One way teams can figure out what resonates with their fans is through the usage of seven-piece honeycomb of social media that looks to understand what factors into a user's online identity. To better understand the complexity of social media and the reasons why individuals use these platforms, Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silverstre (2011) created a honeycomb structure (see Figure 1). Using seven fundamental blocks, the honeycomb can be used to explain how businesses can understand the functional traits of different social media activities, and illustrates the fundamental implications that each block presents as they seek to understand the engagement needs of their social media users.
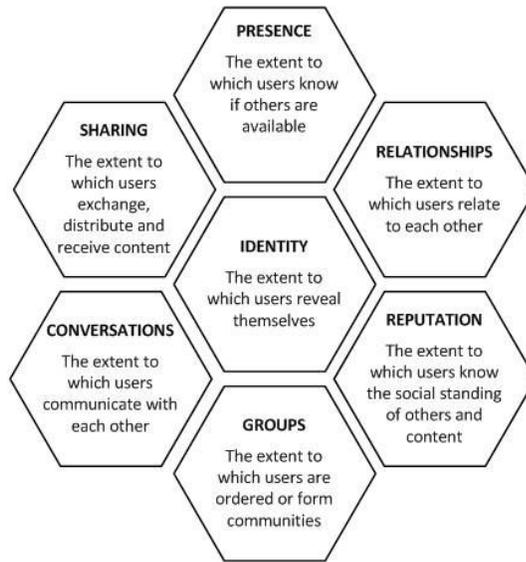
Figure 1: Honeycomb of Social Media

The foundational middle block of the honeycomb is *identity*. Identity is defined as what the social media users want their activity to portray about their image (Kietzmann et. al., 2011). Trail, Anderson, and Fink (2000) define fan identification as an orientation of the self in regard to objects including a person or group that results in feelings or sentiments of attachment. For example, when wanting to connect with a sports franchise that is successful on the field, a social media user may continually share, comment, "like," and retweet informational content that they want to share. Conversely, if a social media user is continually frustrated with their favorite team's performances, they may do the same but as a way to express frustration. Also, users want to associate with what is considered quality content. Quality content in the social media realm needs to be authentic, exclusive information in varying forms, whether text, pictures, videos, or other

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media, that is posted with appropriate length and frequency, and provides value to stakeholders. Social media is cluttered with content, therefore quality content allows for a given team's message to stand out from other visible content on social media feeds (Wysocki, 2012).

Surrounding identity in the honeycomb of social media are presence, relationships, reputation, groups, conversations, and sharing. *Presence* represents the extent to which users can know if other users are accessible. It includes knowing where others are, in the virtual world and/or the real world, and whether they are available (Kietzmann et. al., 2011). For Twitter, social media users can promote their availability through tweets. Furthermore, presence allows for the personalization of availability. Integrating the real world and virtual availability, the New England Patriots, for example, tweet out photos of the players and staff boarding team planes for away games (Silverman, 2014). This gives the team a virtual "presence" while depicting the team's real world activity. Tomlinson (2010) uses a term called "telepresence" to explain the desires for many on social media to "keep in touch" without physically being in touch. Tele - , meaning "at a distance," is the pivotal prefix here, opening the possibility of real-time "presence at a distance," as a readily available method of interaction for social actors who form and maintain meaningful relationship through media systems, including websites, bulletin boards, social networking services, chat rooms, and online games and spaces.

Relationships represent the extent to which users can be related to other users. To 'relate' means that two or more users have some form of association that leads them to

converse, share objects of sociality, meet, or simply just list each other as a friend or fan. Consequently, how users of a social media platform are connected often determines the what-and-how of information exchange (Kietzmann et. al., 2011). When social media users decide to follow a Twitter account, they are doing so to gain something beneficial out of the relationship. For example, the San Francisco 49ers used "Cyber Monday" – a relatively new online shopping day that follows Black Friday - sales in December 2014 to build on current relationships with followers and create possible new ones. Tweeting out a special Cyber Monday code to get 25% off all team merchandise, the 49ers' hope was to maintain strong relationships with their followers. These relationships, though, are unique in that they may not be emblematic of that way each users build relationships during face-to-face interactions. During their study of Twitter and relationships, Huberman, Romero, and Wu (2009) found a link between two Twitter users that did not imply an interaction between them and that indeed most of the relationships found in Twitter were "meaningless" from an interaction point of view. What this can mean is that while users may create relational bonds over social media, depending on reasoning for linking up, they may soon replace these relationships with completely different users on a different subject, which in this case can be a tweet.

Reputation is the extent to which users can identify the standing of others, including themselves, in a social media setting (Kietzmann et. al., 2011). In the age of growing online consumption, a company's reputation can often hinge on the presentation of their content on social media platforms. Today, a company's reputation can be ruined in a matter of minutes, as disgruntled customers or even competitors can broadcast

defamatory information instantaneously across the world via social media, often under the guise of anonymity (Dennis, 2013). However, if used correctly, a company's reputation can also be enhanced by sound social media activity. For example, the Philadelphia Eagles are widely regarded as having some of the best social media platforms of any NFL team, especially their Twitter account, and this claim is backed up during this thesis. With more than 500,000 followers, the team's Twitter account provides a variety of content into their daily posts, ranging from standard football coverage, to cheerleader appearances, to having actors Bradley Cooper and Will Smith provide voiceovers for weekly video series and special content. The team uses #EaglesNation often in an attempt to bring the fan base together as one. The Seattle Seahawks took a similar approach after defeating the Denver Broncos 43-8 in Super Bowl XLVIII. After the game, the team's Twitter account sent special 'Thank You' graphics to celebrity fans that had remained actively engaged with their content throughout the season.

Groups represent the extent to which users can form communities and subcommunities (Kietzmann et. al., 2011). While the formation of groups are more fundamental to Google+ and Facebook, there are examples of Twitter groups spawning from team Twitter accounts as fans look to share specific interests. The Washington Redskins has a fan group that has created #SkinsTweetTeam from their original mutual interest of Redskins content on Twitter. Every day, a group member tweets out #SkinsTweetTeam to start a conversation. In instances like these, teams must realize that consumer-to-consumer interaction holds great power and can have a direct impact on

how fans view teams and the content they produce. User generated content has become

the norm, and individuals can now interact and generate and share multimedia content

seamlessly. Technology changes, together with decreasing costs, have allowed the

Internet to become participatory, conversational, social, and decentralized, with

individuals having their own websites, hosting blogs, and connecting through social sites

through a variety of devices including net books, smart phones, and game consoles

(Weinberg, 2009).

   Conversations represent the extent to which users communicate with other users

in a social media setting (Kietzmann et. al., 2011). There are many examples of engaging

conversations between social media users and Twitter. In 2006, Twitter founders Jack

Dorsey, Noah Glass, Biz Stone, and Evan Williams incorporated the usage of hastags to

gather information instantly and see what people are most talking about in regions and (#)

throughout the world. According to the platform's website, people use the hashtag

symbol (#) before a relevant keyword or phrase (no spaces) in their tweet to categorize

those tweets and help them show more easily in Twitter Search ("About Twitter,"

2014). Clicking on a hashtagged word in any message shows you all other tweets marked

with that keyword. Hashtags can occur anywhere in the tweet, whether it be at the

beginning, middle, or end. Hashtagged words that become very popular are often

"Trending Topics," which are seen on the sidebar of Twitter.com and can further

discussion. There are many examples of NFL teams both coining hashtags and joining in

on already created hashtags. In November 2014, the city of Buffalo was hammered with

record snow totals, completely shutting down the city for days. The Buffalo Bills, who

were vying for a playoff spot, were unable to conduct normal weekly activities such as practices, team meetings, and press conferences with the media. Those around the area began using the hashtags #snowvember and #buffalosnow. The Bills' Twitter account began doing the same, tweeting out pictures of Ralph Wilson Stadium, the Bills' home stadium, covered in snow. On November 20, for example, they tweeted out a photo gallery with "There's a stadium somewhere in there. #BuffaloSnow." Originally scheduled to host a game against the New York Jets at the stadium, the game was eventually moved to Detroit with a special Monday night start time. Even while in Michigan, the team's Twitter used the hashtags to continue conversations with Bills fans back in Buffalo.

The Green Bay Packers, meanwhile, use #PackersRollCall during their game day content schedule, soliciting conversation from Packers fans across the globe. Other teams, such as the Redskins and Tennessee Titans, use a team specific hashtag on most of their tweets. The Redskins include #HTTR (Hail to the Redskins) while the Titans incorporate #TitanUp in their posts. Another method of creating conversations is through game specific hashtags that use team initials together. For example, when the Chicago Bears hosted the Cowboys on "Thursday Night Football" on December 4, 2014, both teams used #DALvsCHI to generate fan conversation.

Twitter conversations do not necessarily require hashtags associated with them to solicit worldwide discussion. During the 2014 season, New York Giants rookie wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr. made one of the most memorable plays in NFL history with a full-extended, behind the head reception for a touchdown while another player was

falling by his knees. Instantly, the main conversation on Twitter was reaction to Beckham Jr.'s play. Teammate Victor Cruz received nearly 22,000 retweets to his "That's the best catch I've ever seen" tweet, while ESPN NFL reporter Adam Schefter tweeted out to his three million followers, "So we will see Odell Beckham Jr. at the ESPYs...and he can use those same hands to accept the Play of the Year award." Others outside of football like NBA superstar LeBron James and Washington Nationals outfielder Bryce Harper also reacted with their own responses via Twitter (Salomone, 2014).

Sharing represents the extent to which users exchange, distribute, and receive content (Kietzmann et. al., 2011). Twitter's sharing method is through retweets. When social media users want to share content, they retweet it. It will then appear on their profile. In recent years, the shift in fan interest in terms of retweeting has swayed towards photos and videos, and fan consumption of photos has increased 80% (Lieppman, 2014).

Social Media Marketing and Public Relations

Social media has interjected itself into everyday communication, becoming central to organizational messaging in the process. Twitter seems poised to have a large impact on sports communication because of the interactivity it offers to both fans and athletes and its rapid uptake by the sports industry (Sanderson, 2012; Sanderson, 2013). Furthermore, social media has changed the way that public relations is practiced. As Robert J. Key (2005) explains, "public relations in the digital age requires understanding how your key constituents are gathering and sharing information and then influencing them at key points. Doing so requires strategies that embrace the digital age" (p. 19). Through social media, companies are in search for more long-term relationship building

rather than a "once-off" sale relationship or one-way communication (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012). Social media has also allowed for the rise of communal marketing, which refers to a marketing practice that incorporates public involvement in the development of an advertising/marketing campaign. A communal advertising campaign invites consumers to share their ideas or express their articulation of what the brand means to them through their own personal stories, using print media, film or audio, or a combination of different media. The resulting consumer generated content is then incorporated into the campaign. This form of marketing is often conducted by NFL teams during the offseason, as they look to align their content to the interests of the consumer.

For example, the New York Giants used the offseason before the start of the 2013 season to revamp their photo gallery content planning. While most social media users are attracted to some sort of video or photo attachment to tweets, the Giants' photo gallery consumption was in the bottom quartile of the league. Through a marketing plan that collected feedback from the team's social media users, the Giants' analysis of their photo gallery content was 90% "Gameday, 6% "Other," 2% "Top-10," and 1% "Training Camp" and "Minicamp" respectively. During the 2013 season, the Giants had 17 different photo gallery categories, ranging from a weekly "Know Your Opponent" series to daily "Practice" photos. As a result, the Giants saw a 342% increase in photo traffic, a 348% increase in photo engagement, and a 47% increase in page consumption (Lieppman, 2014). The Giants would then tweet out these galleries with a specific number of photos included so that the social media user knows instantly how many photos can be seen.

Some sports organizations are using their followers' support as a way to promote their product through a specialized hashtag for a particular event. During September 2014, Chip Ganassi Racing of NASCAR's premier circuit, the Sprint Cup, hosted a "Digibash" – which was created to gain the team and its drivers more brand exposure -- that was dominated by millennials. Chip Ganassi Racing struggles to contend with larger, wealthier, and more established teams like Rick Hendricks Racing and Joe Gibbs Racing both on the track and in net value, as they were the eighth most valuable ($62 million) NASCAR team in 2014 (Smith, 2015). Therefore, as a way to interact with younger audiences, the "Digibash" featured appearances from three of the team's drivers and a special concert by "The Voice" season 3 winner Cassadee Pope. Throughout the event, attendees were encouraged to use #SoundGarage with any social media posts. The result was more than 42 million social media impressions, roughly seven times the comparable reach among millennials in a typical race week, and was a top trending topic on Twitter in the Charlotte area for two days (Fisher, 2015).

The Boston Red Sox, meanwhile, have connected with specific fan groups through social media. Over the last three seasons, the Red Sox have created a Mom's Club composed of popular New England parent bloggers who are invited to special events at Fenway Park, as well as participate in specially created gatherings such as "FenwaYoga" (Fisher, 2015). Another larger influencer in the social media interaction and marketing of the team's product are "super fans." "Super fans," according to Catalyst Public Relations managing partner Bret Werner, are regular people who run a social media site based on specific teams or athletes. He continues, "From a marketing

perspective, the super fan is truly the white space right now. I think the sports fan is looking for different tone and voice in this medium, with entertainment or maybe even a gossipy feel. The super fans seem to be able to provide that, whereas the traditional outlets might struggle a little to create that feeling of camaraderie" (Fisher, 2015).

While there are not as many examples of team public relations problems when it comes to Twitter, at least yet, there are several with professional athletes. Professional athletes use Twitter to provide unfiltered messages with fans that, unless they were attending an event where face-to-face interaction is a possibility, they could not previously achieve prior to the advent of social media. Rather than sanitized, impersonal communications about the latest game filtered through the team's public relations department, professional athletes' tweets tend to be more direct and address topics beyond sports (Hambrick et. al., 2010). Hambrick et. al.'s study was to find out what professional athletes most tweet about through six different categories: interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content, fanship, and promotional. The interactivity with fans and diversion categories contained 62% of tweets, confirming that professional athletes use the social media platform to connect with their fans. For example, NHL goalie Martin Havalat hosted a question-and-answer with fans on Twitter one day, answering a series of questions ranging from personal activities to his goals for an upcoming season. Hambrick et al. (2010, p. 455) furthered the importance of fan interaction writing, "this accessibility to teams, and, more important, to players, is an important antecedent to the development of team identification." Furthermore, in a study conducted in 2012, it was found that athletes promote both social and parasocial

relationships relatively equally on Twitter and that professionals are more willing to discuss their personal lives (Frederick et. al., 2012).

NFL players, meanwhile, are among the most active professional athletes on social media along with PGA Tour participants (Pegoraro, 2010). During her study, she found that some of the greatest amounts of athlete-fan interaction came from NFL players, as former NFL safety Kerry Rhodes (83%) and Arizona Cardinals wide receiver Larry Fitzgerald (72%) dedicated a majority of their social activity in response to fan tweets. This interaction both with fans and in overall tweets, though, does not always go as planned. During training camp before the 2009 season, San Diego Chargers cornerback Antonio Cromartie was fined $2,500 for a tweet that questioned whether the "nasty food" they were being served was a source of their struggles on the field. "Man we have 2 have the most nasty food of any team. Damn can we upgrade 4 str8 years the same ish maybe that's y we can't we the SB [Super Bowl] we need" he tweeted out before deleting it ("NFL Star Complains," 2009). He would later say that his tweet was taken out of context: "I just thought it was harmless. It was just me talking about the food and stuff. I took it as a joke. But other people took it as a different kind of way" ("Chargers," 2009).

During a 2009 regular season game, Washington Redskins rookie linebacker Robert Henson got in trouble for a Twitter exchange with a fan following a closely contested home game with the St. Louis Rams in which fans were booing the Redskins. In response, Henson tweeted the following:

All you fake half hearted Skins fan can .. I won't go there but I dislike you very

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strongly, don't come to Fed Ex to boo dim wits!!" He would then post a series of

tweets that read: "No I didn't play but I still made more than you in a year and

you'd switch spots with me in a second ... The question is who are you to say you

know what's best for the team and you work 9 to 5 at Mcdonalds. You don't

wanna follow me anymore then fine but we play for you and win lose or draw we

represent you!! My guy on the Rams said they never got booed even when they

didn't win a game." He would later apologize for his actions on Twitter. "I

understand the weight that my words carried, and, you know, how I offended

some fans." He would add that he was apologizing "not because I'm scared, but

just because it was the right thing to do. And I sincerely apologize to all the fans. I

hope to have a long, prosperous career here, and I don't want anybody booing me

or just being negative towards me ("Redskins Rookie Sorry," 2009).

Larry Johnson was one of the top running backs in the NFL during his time with

the Kansas City Chiefs, rushing for more than 6,000 yards and scoring seven touchdowns

in seven seasons with the team. But, while he had become one of the best players in

franchise history, he was struggling during the 2009 season, rushing for just 377 yards in

seven games. Frustrated with his performance, Johnson released a string of negative

tweets about head coach Todd Haley, and in response to fans, included the usage of a

homophobic slur. The Chiefs instantly barred Johnson from participating in any team

activities while they investigated the situation (Van Grove, 2009b). While suspended, a

group of Chiefs fans joined together to create a petition to remove Johnson from the team

just 75 yards away from setting the franchise's record for career rushing yards. When

comparing Johnson to some of the franchise's greatest players, the petition stated, "the players were role models for us as we grew up, and the names we share with our children as they grow up. With that being said, one name that I hope is never mentioned amongst those great Chief names is Larry Johnson" (Van Grove, 2009a). The Chiefs would soon release Johnson from the team, and in a statement release by his agent, the running back had "a lot of feelings going on right now. It's analogous to breaking up with a girlfriend. Maybe you saw it coming, but it still hurts when it happens" ("Chiefs Release Larry Johnson," 2009).

On May 2, 2011, news broke that Osama bin Laden, al-Qadea leader and notorious terrorist, had been confirmed dead, killed by United States soldiers. Bin Laden had been linked to the terrorist attacks that took place on September 11, 2011, where commercial airplanes were hijacked and then flown into World Trade Centers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. A third plane that was hijacked, meanwhile, was taken down my passenger resistance in Stonycreek, Pennsylvania. While the country rejoiced in the news of bin Laden's death, Pittsburgh Steelers running back Rashard Mendenhall had a different reaction from many, tweeting out on May 3, "What kind of person celebrates death? It's amazing how people can HATE a man they have never even heard speak. We've only heard one side..." ("Rashard Mendenhall Doesn't Hold Back," 2011). He would then add his thoughts on what happened on September 11, 2011, tweeting out the following: "We'll never know what really happened. I just have a hard time believing a plane could take a skyscraper down demolition style" ("Rashard Mendenhall Doesn't Hold Back," 2011). Steelers President

Art Rooney II would release a statement shortly after Mendenhall's Twitter tirade, which was eventually deleted, stating, "I have not spoken with Rashard so it is hard to explain or even comprehend what he meant with his recent Twitter comments. The entire Steelers' organization is very proud of the job our military personnel have done and we can only hope this leads to our troops coming home soon" (Wilbur, 2014). Mendenhall's activity would prove costly, as sponsor Champion would sever ties with him three days after his first tweet about bin Laden. In a statement, Champion said, "While we respect Mr. Mendenhall's right to express sincere thoughts regarding potentially controversial topics, we no longer believe that Mr. Mendenhall can appropriately represent Champion and we have notified Mr. Mendenhall that we are ending our business relationship" ("Apparel Company Dumps Mendenhall," 2011).

Robert Griffin III burst onto the scene as a college player for Baylor University during the 2011 season, leading the school to one of its best finishes in school history and winning the Heisman Trophy. Forfeiting his final season of eligibility, Griffin III would enter the 2012 NFL Draft, eventually being selected by the Washington Redskins with the second-overall pick. From his beginnings as a professional athlete, Griffin III used social media as a way to engage with his fans and followers. During February 2015, Griffin III posted a video on his Instagram account of him singing to Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" while in the car. This led to a back and forth discussion between the quarterback and other Instagram users where some questioned his dedication to getting better after two mediocre seasons. "This is why you will be cut after next year in Washington. Why you weren't even mentioned as the future. You are a 'QB'. Act like

one," Instagram user @cperezrn began (Keim, 2015). Griffin III responded with, "If giving back to the community and training for football at the same time is frowned upon.....then what would you say I do Sir? Not give back or Train? Honest Question." And then, "Oh wait...and should I not enjoy a classic song with others who Love MJ? I'm just asking for your wisdom here." Just a few weeks later, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick was involved in a social media debate with a fan, this time on Twitter. After completing a workout, Kaepernick tweeted out to his 728,000 Twitter followers, "1000 abs…. arm workout….. 10 min straight on the jump rope…. 2 hour study session in February….. that's what we call a recovery day!" @battman_returns replied to the tweet with, "@Kaepernick7 @49ers ab workout won't help you find the open receiver #study." Kaepernick quickly responded with a series of three tweets, with the first reading, "@battman_returns are you illiterate or just ignorant? Read the tweet again better yet give me your breakdown of every defensive coverage." The second: "@battman_returns I want every players responsibility on every coverage if you can't do it mind your damn business clown!" And the third and final one: "@battman_returns you got 8 followers bruh your own family don't even want to know what you doin! Get better at life!" (McSpadden, 2015). Both players have a strong social media presence that impacts their marketability, but they also contribute greater amounts of revenue for their teams than the "average" player. In an article by *Forbes*, Griffin III and Kaepernick have high levels of WPA (Wins Probability Added) and RAR (Revenue Above Replacement), a formula built to see how much money a particular player can bring in for a team over a concrete baseline. As the article states, "Robert Griffin's social media presence is one

reason the model ranked him as the seventh most valuable quarterback in 2013. He had the 29th highest WPA, but had a 5.1 RAR and contributed $31.7 million in value. As far as bang for the buck, no one tops [Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell] Wilson and Colin Kaepernick, who each contributed more than $35 million in value while earning less than $850,000 from their respective teams" (Badenhausen, 2014). While there was not fallout similar to Johnson or Mendenhall's cases, the retorts used by Griffin III and Kaepernick, both of whom are frequent social media users, were tweeted out to protect their public image.

Many journalists, who now use social media to solicit their information, wrote articles based on their exchanges. This form of journalism can be described as "scandal hunting" and can lead to false or incomplete information being released to a larger audience. Karmichael Hunt, a professional rugby player, told Read and Koch (2009), that "most of the time their information (journalists) is coming second-hand – through a middle man. The journalists and reporters give their take on what we had to say and definitely, I think, sometimes things get presented differently to how you were thinking them. It's not malicious, it is just people sometimes hear things differently." This can also include bloggers, a new form of journalist who may not have access to a team or player, but provides their own analysis based off of mostly opinion. New media producers, and especially bloggers, may operate with different standards and practices than those in traditional sports media, and survey research suggests bloggers see themselves as filling a void left by traditional sports journalists in the form of commentary and analysis (Hardin et. al., 2009).

Quality Content in Social Media

One goal for NFL teams on Twitter is to provide quality content that will attract users to current posts that will resonate enough to bring them back again. Quality content in social media can be defined as authentic, exclusive information in varying forms, whether it be text, pictures, video, or anything else, that is posted with appropriate length and frequency, and gives value to stakeholders. Wysocki (2012) writes that "social media is cluttered with content. Therefore quality content allows for a given team's message to stand out from all other visible content on [a] social media feed." Furthermore, while tweets only allow for 140 characters per message, proper grammar is important when providing quality content. If a tweet has spelling errors, issues with capitalization, and uneven flow social media users may be less inclined to engage with content (Agichtein et. al., 2008). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) also found through research that if organizations want to provide followers with quality social media interaction, they must be active, interesting, humble, play by their own rules, and honest. Robert Wynne of *Forbes* wrote a series of rules that those working in the digital media and public relations sectors should abide by in order to ensure a successful social media strategy and that quality content is provided. Among them are "Be Brief. Don't Be Boring," "Be Newsworthy," and "Avoid Facebook." For example, if a team has a press release ready, Wynne recommends that it should not be released in its entirety, as it runs the risk of being tuned out quickly. Instead, in an attempt to provide followers with quality and newsworthy content, he believes teams should tailor the message in a human way."

Given the recent geometric growth of Twitter, it is not surprising to find that there

are a limited number of academic studies pertaining to not only the impact of social

media on long-term interaction, but how, if, and why followers continually seek

information from a consistent source. While there have been several content analyses that

have examined what athletes are saying on Twitter, and to what extent they are

interacting with their fans and followers, no quantitative studies have looked at why

Twitter users follow official NFL team twitter accounts and what content they are

producing generates the most engagement. This research seeks to add to the nascent

literature base that is out there by examining what followers of official NFL team Twitter

accounts are most attracted to through a content analysis.

Chapter Three: Research Methods

Statement of Problem

NFL teams, like other professional sports teams and other organizations outside of the sports realm that utilize social media daily, are looking to ensure the content they publish is resonating not only with current members of their fan bases that follow them on Twitter, but attracting new followers as well. As social media continues to grow and teams increase emphasis on digital media strategy, they need to understand what can motivate short-term and long-term interaction. While a platform like Instagram allows users to "like" a photo and comment, sharing of content is fairly limited. For Twitter, though, sharing is more visible, as users can spread a tweet from another user on their own timeline. The hope for NFL teams is that when a tweet is retweeted by another user, it can reach a greater audience. For example, a user may be a loyal fan of the Arizona Cardinals, but the majority of users that follower him or her may be just casual fans or not fans at all, and they may not even be following the team's Twitter account. However, if that fan retweets something from the team that may be off the field or community content that followers are interested in, that may grow not only the overall number of retweets, but quite possibly the total number of followers as well.

The purpose of this study was to better understand what motivates Twitter users to follow official NFL team accounts, and what keeps them engaged with the content.

With Twitter being a relatively new communication tool for teams, many organizations are still trying to figure out what content being presented best resonates with followers. While an outsiders' perspective may view an NFL team's Twitter account as a resource to which they can promote football content, it can also be used to create an image that the teams' best want to represent them, such as one that's fully engaged with the local community or one that prides itself on a family atmosphere.

Population

While Twitter is an open social media network that has few limitations in terms of usage, certain age groups use the platform more than others. According to a study conducted by AdWeek.com in January 2015, 45 % of Twitter users are in the 18- to 34-year old range, while ages 55 and up make up less than 14% of the platform's total population. Twitter also has the third largest amount of users (52.9 million) behind Instagram (60.3 million) and Facebook (156.5 million) ("Infographic," 2015). The Pew Research Center, meanwhile, found that 33 percent of 13-to-17 year olds use Twitter – fourth Facebook, Instagram, and the newest social media fad, Snapchat ("Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat," 2015). In terms of football fan base demographics, the sport continues to be the most popular in the United States. In a study conducted by Harris Interactive, more than 35 % of adults said that professional football was their favorite sport ("As American," 2014). Harris Interactive also found that those who live in rural areas (44%), people with a child under 18 (42%), and Easterners (39%) are more likely to say professional football is their favorite sport, while those with a post graduate degree (24%), Echo Boomers (31%), and Liberals (31%) are less likely to do so ("As

American," 2014). And while the NFL has widely been regarded as having a male-dominated fan base, the female portion of the population was the fastest growing from 2009-2013, as viewership jumped from 18% to 26% (Chermi, 2014). Female viewers may have also been the primary reason why the NFL did not see ratings drops in 2012 and 2013, as the female audience grew 3% while the male audience dropped 2% (Chermi, 2014). The Pew Research Center, meanwhile, found that 24% of adult males online have a Twitter account to just 21% of adult females (Duggan & Brennan, 2014).

Looking at NFL teams in terms of users across the country, Twitter released an interactive map in October 2014 that showed concentrations of where followers reside. The Dallas Cowboys appeared most on the map, including the state of Texas where the Houston Texans also call home. Twitter wrote that, "The @DallasCowboys' stadium may be in Arlington, Texas, but their fan base spreads across the entire country. It dominates almost all of the counties in Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Arkansas, and is strong from coast to coast. Compared to its rivals the @HoustonTexans, you can see how pervasive the Cowboys' presence is except in the counties around the Texans' home stadium in Houston" (Rogers, 2014). This is not surprising considering the Cowboys' Twitter following is the highest among all 32 NFL teams.

Instrumentation

During a designated two-week period from February 21, 2015 to March 7, 2015, data was collected and computed through multiple regression analysis. The multiple regression analysis looked at variables that quantified the impact of various simultaneous influences upon a single dependent variable. In this case, the dependent variable was the

retweets collected and organized from the five content categories, while the independent

variable was the total number of Twitter followers for the eight selected teams. When the

regression analysis was run, the variables were associated only with the teams the content

came from, not comparing results of individual content categories across teams. Through

the regression analysis, this study was able to find what content social media users were

most engaged with on a team-by-team basis.

Demographics

Specific demographic information was not collected for this study, as it was a

non-experimental case. Instead of seeking data from specific demographics to explore

what may be most attractive, this study looked at all followers of a team's official Twitter

account. This allowed for the study to collect data from all users and presented a stronger

case as to why the entire following of an NFL team's Twitter account is more or less

attracted to one of the designated content categories.

Participants

The participants in the case study were the Twitter users who interacted with the

official NFL team Twitter accounts for the following teams: Dallas Cowboys, Houston

Texans, Indianapolis Colts, Jacksonville Jaguars, New York Giants, Philadelphia Eagles,

Tennessee Titans, and Washington Redskins. The Colts, Texans, Jaguars, and Titans

make up the American Football Conference (AFC) South Division, while the Cowboys,

Giants, Eagles, and Redskins compete in the National Football Conference (NFC) East

Division. This is a purposeful sampling to provide a wide variety of followings,

geographical locations, and establishments, as the teams in the NFC East are some of the

longest standing members of the league, while all four of the AFC South teams have either been formed or relocated within the last 30 years.

Procedures and Data Collection

Instead of looking at the impact of on-field performance and its relevancy to why Twitter users are inclined to follow specific teams this study analyzed the consumption of different content throughout a designated two-week period during the offseason. This is done due to the fact that some teams consistently win (New England Patriots) or have a large fan base (Dallas Cowboys), but not all 32 teams have these luxuries. This two-week period came right a few weeks after the conclusion of the 2015 Super Bowl, meaning that all teams were on "equal ground" looking ahead to free agency and the NFL Draft. During the season, teams are facing different situations on-field that can directly impact their social media engagement. While analysis can be done on the correlation between both retweets and followers and favorites and followers, this research study focused on tendencies to retweet content as they are more visible form of content interest. The study also did not compare on-field performance between teams, as some have built consistent winners while others struggle to, at the very least, remain in playoff contention year after year. This study rather looked at how selected NFL teams use their Twitter accounts and what content they provide to followers.

Content was organized by the following five categories: on the field, off the field, community, sponsored and exclusive. Omitted from this study was a cheerleaders content category, as not every NFL has a cheerleading squad. The New York Giants are one of six teams that do not.

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On-field content designated any tweets that present football stories, written content on players and coaches examining the team's performance on the field and how they are preparing for the upcoming season, injury rehab, references to historical moments, and statistical information relevant to games played.

The off the field content collected all tweets that covered how players, coaches, and personnel spend their time away from football. For example, if a player went to go see a live concert or sporting event, and the team has content it can tweet out, that fell into this category.

Community content involved any tweets that featured either team-based charitable efforts or the actions of player-specific foundations. The NFL has several organizations they are linked to better the community, such as Fuel Up to Play 60, American Cancer Society, and a partnership with USAA to present Salute to Service. Teams also have their own charitable foundations, and some players have their own foundations that support both local communities and hometowns.

Sponsored content featured all tweets that either tag an outside company's Twitter handle or includes their logo on an image. The Dallas Cowboys, for example, provide a weekly video series with one of their writers entitled "#AskTheBoys." Soliciting fan responses through Twitter prior to the show being released in a later tweet, the video series is presented by DraftKings. While sponsored tweets can contain content from other categories, they remained in the sponsored category to provide more variety in the study.

Exclusive content included anything that the team has access to that other media outlets cannot obtain. The Redskins, for example, tweet photos of free agents they have

signed as soon as they have completed their contracts. On April 1, 2014, the team signed free agent wide receiver DeSean Jackson to a contract. When it was official, the team tweeted a photo with Jackson signing his contract. To continue on their ability to provide their followers with access outside media outlets do not possess, in the background of that photo was a picture of U.S. Marines sleeping while stationed overseas and their dog alongside covered by a Redskins blanket. Pursuing the content, the Redskins were able to make contact with both the photographer and one of the Marines, and eventually had them at their team headquarters where they were provided a tour by high ranking executives. During their time there, the Redskins' digital media team was the only media outlet present.

Table 2: Number Of Followers For Sampled NFL Twitter Accounts

NFL Team	Total Twitter Followers
Dallas Cowboys	1,015,474
Houston Texans	478,213
Indianapolis Colts	321,773
Jacksonville Jaguars	160,931
New York Giants	673,747
Philadelphia Eagles	593,333
Tennessee Titans	216,345
Washington Redskins	372,491

The Colts (*Indianapolis QuickFacts*, n.d.), Jaguars (*Jacksonville QuickFacts*, n.d.), and Titans (*Nashville QuickFacts*, n.d.) all represent areas with less than one million residents, while the Cowboys (*Dallas QuickFacts*, n.d.), Giants (*New York City*, n.d.), Eagles (*Philadelphia QuickFacts*, n.d.), and Redskins (*Washington, D.C.*

QuickFacts, n.d.) represent areas with more than one million residents. While the Colts' franchise was established in 1953, they relocated from Baltimore to Indianapolis in 1984 and have just one Super Bowl (the NFL's championship) victory since their move. The Titans' franchise also relocated from Houston, Texas, before moving to Nashville, Tennessee, in 1997. While they appeared in the Super Bowl following the 1999 season, they experienced six losing seasons in 11 years between 2004 and 2014. The Jaguars and Texans, meanwhile, are two of the most recent expansion teams in the NFL, as they combine for just 34 years of NFL play and neither has made a Super Bowl appearance. The Jaguars got off to a strong start early on during their play in the NFL, but have not made the playoffs since 2007. The Texans have also struggled to find success on the field since their creation in 2002, appearing in the playoffs just twice. They also finished with the worst record in the NFL (2-14) during the 2013 season.

The NFC East features some of the league's oldest and most successful franchises. The Cowboys, established in 1960, are one of just three teams in the league with at least five Super Bowl victories. They are currently the fifth-most valuable sports franchise in the world, valued at $2.3 billion (Badenhausen, 2014). In 2009, the Cowboys moved into AT&T Stadium, which cost $1.2 billion to build ("Cowboys Stadium," 2013). The Giants, meanwhile, currently have four Super Bowl victories to their credit, winning two in the last decade. As of 2014, they rank as the tenth-most valuable sports franchise in the world, worth a little more than $1.5 billion. They also represent an area with more than 16 million residents. While the Eagles have not won a Super Bowl since their creation in 1933, they have remained one of the most consistent teams in the NFL,

especially during the rise of Internet usage and social media. Since 2001, they have won seven division titles and won at least one playoff game in six seasons. The Redskin franchise was founded in 1932 in Boston before moving to Washington, D.C., before the start of the 1937 season. They have appeared in five Super Bowls, winning three. Since 1997, they have called FedExField home, which remains one of the largest venues in the NFL despite recent downsizing. While their value has dropped slightly over the years, they still are the ninth-most valuable sports franchise in the world, worth $1.7 billion (Badenhausen, 2014).

Research Questions

Research Question 1: Will there be a specific content category that users are more attracted to for NFL teams' official Twitter accounts?

Research Question 2: Do teams that have a lower winning percentages tweet more frequently?

Research Question 3: Does tweet frequency have an impact on retweet frequency?

Research Question 4: Does being in a specific conference impact retweet frequency?

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Twitter users will retweet "off-field" content most frequently.

Hypothesis 2: Winning percentage will have a negative impact on tweet frequency, as teams with a lower winning percentage will have a higher tweet frequency.

Hypothesis 3: Tweet frequency will have a negative impact on retweet frequency, as teams that tweet more often will have a lower retweet frequency.

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Hypothesis 4: The NFC East will have a greater retweet frequency than the AFC South.

Chapter Four: Results

During the designated two-week period, noticeable trends, some of which were not predicted, resulted. Below are the four research questions analyzed through quantitative methods. Again, while there were some trends, social media is still in a stage where there are not a lot of connections based on content, but market size and recent team success do have direct impacts.

Research Question 1: Will there be a specific content category that users are more attracted to for NFL teams' official Twitter accounts?

During the two-week period, 749 tweets from the purposeful sampling were collected, with the Washington Redskins having the highest number of tweets produced (145) and the Dallas Cowboys having the fewest tweets produced (54). In total, here is the number of tweets for all eight teams analyzed and presented below:

Table 3: Total Tweets Per Team February 21, 2015-March 7, 2015

Team	Total Tweets
Jacksonville Jaguars	119
Tennessee Titans	69
Indianapolis Colts	103
Houston Texans	123
New York Giants	63
Washington Redskins	145
Philadelphia Eagles	73
Dallas Cowboys	54

Overall, the Eagles had the highest number of average retweets (160.89) during the two-week period with the Cowboys having the second highest retweet average (159.74).

Table 4: Average Number Of Retweets Per Team February 21, 2015-March 7, 2015

Variable	M	SD
Jaguars	32.06	75.141
Colts	121.77	486.698
Texans	51.12	88.062

Titans	25.46	39.433
Redskins	49.14	87.417
Eagles	160.89	325.998
Cowboys	159.74	312.172
Giants	49.48	74.180

In terms of most retweets on an individual tweet, the Colts had the best producing tweet with a thank you message to longtime wide receiver Reggie Wayne after it was announced that he would not be returning to the team after 14 years of service. On March 6, at 7:31 a.m. the team tweeted "Reggie is one of the greatest men to ever wear the horseshoe" #ThankYou87." It received a total of 4,712 retweets. The eight teams accumulated 88 tweets with at least 100 retweets, with the Dallas Cowboys receiving the most number of tweets with more than 1,000 (3).

Looking at the highest retweeted tweets for each team, five teams had an "on-field" tweet with the highest retweet frequency, with three having "off-field" content serving as the highest retweeted items. The Jaguars, Titans, and Colts, meanwhile, had tweets around long-standing members of their teams representing the highest retweet frequency. The Texans' and Redskins' highest retweet frequency revolved around a social media phenomenon where a photo of a dress circulated around the Internet with some seeing a blue and black dress, while others saw it as white and gold. The case sparked millions of responses – many of which were split on the colors. This came down

to the fact that when light enters through the eye, "your brain figures out what color light is bouncing off the thing your eyes are looking at, and essentially subtracts that color from the 'real' color of the object" (Rogers, 2015). The Texans tweet of "It's Deep Steel Blue" received 632 retweets, while the Redskins' tweet of "We see burgundy and gold…" accumulated 935 retweets. The Cowboys' and Eagles' highest retweet frequency circulated around roster moves, as Dallas' tweet on All-Pro wide receiver Dez Bryant receiving a new contract terms got 1,644 retweets, with Philadelphia's release announcement of cornerback Cary Williams – who had struggled during his tenure with the team and became a target for frustrated fans – drew 2,322 retweets. Finally, the Giants' tweet providing an update on tight end Larry Donnell's status after he was on a plane that crashed off a snowy runway received the team's highest retweet frequency during the two-week period with 504.

Table 5: Highest Retweeted Tweets Per Team February 21, 2015-March 7, 2015

Team	Content Category	Total Retweets
Jacksonville Jaguars	"On-Field"	709
Tennessee Titans	"On-Field"	221
Indianapolis Colts	"On-Field"	4,712
Houston Texans	"Off-Field"	632
New York Giants	"Off-Field"	504
Washington Redskins	"Off-Field"	935

| Philadelphia Eagles | "On-Field" | 2,322 |
| Dallas Cowboys | "On-Field" | 1,644 |

Based on categorical breakdowns of the purposeful sampling, "off-field" had the highest retweet frequency (105.85) with sponsor (20.68) having the lowest.

Table 6: Average Number Of Retweets Per Content Category, Overall, February 21, 2015-March 7, 2015

Category	*N*	M	SD
Community	36	25.28	21.378
Exclusive	11	49	56.217
Off Field	126	105.85	202.756
On Field	532	73.91	261.535
Sponsor	44	20.68	24.404

In a team-by-team breakdown, six of the eight teams, on average, had "off-field" content as their highest retweeted frequency category.

Table 7: Average Number Of Retweets Per Content Category, Jaguars February 21,

2015-March 7, 2015

Category	N	M	SD
Community	2	6	4.243
Off Field	12	52	95.040
On-Field	85	35.12	80.681
Sponsor	20	9.70	12.909

Tweets falling into the "off-field" category, on average, received a higher retweet frequency (52) in comparison to the "on-field" (35.12), "sponsor" (9.70) and "community" (6) categories for the Jaguars. The Jaguars did not have any tweets fall into the "exclusive" category. Based on the difference in means in the Jaguars' categorical retweet frequency, a one-way ANOVA was run. The results of the analysis were not significant when using categorical breakdown as a factor for retweet frequency $F(50, 69)$ = .534, $p = 0.989$

Table 8: Average Number Of Retweets Per Content Category, Colts, February 21, 2015-

March 7, 2015

Category	N	M	SD
Community	4	43	12.028

Exclusive	2	12.5	3.536
Off Field	31	92.48	225.694
On-Field	66	143.61	588.687

On average, tweets falling into the "on-field" category received a higher retweet frequency (143.6) in comparison to the "off-field" (92.48), "community" (9.70) and "exclusive" (12.5) categories for the Colts. The Colts did not have any tweets fall into the "sponsor" category. Based on the difference in means in the Colts' categorical retweet frequency, a one-way ANOVA was run. The results of the analysis were not significant when using categorical breakdown as a factor for retweet frequency $F(58, 44) = 1.010$, $p = 0.491$

Table 9: Average Number Of Retweets Per Content Category, Texans, February 21, 2015-March 7, 2015

Category	N	M	SD
Community	9	22.89	11.385
Exclusive	8	61.38	62.136
Off Field	12	173.75	222.428
On-Field	86	39.38	43.751
Sponsor	8	14.88	6.402

For the Texans, tweets falling into the "off-field" category, on average, received a higher retweet frequency (173.75) in comparison to the "on-field" (39.38), "community" (22.89), "exclusive" (61.38) and "sponsor (14.88) categories. Based on the difference in means in the Texans' categorical retweet frequency, a one-way ANOVA was run. The results of the analysis were not significant when using categorical breakdown as a factor for retweet frequency $F(64, 58) = .679$, $p = 0.934$

Table 10: Average Number Of Retweets Per Content Category, Titans, February 21, 2015-March 7, 2015

Category	N	M	SD
Community	6	9.83	6.463
Exclusive	1	23	--
Off Field	9	10.33	5.701
On-Field	51	30.69	44.670
Sponsor	2	8.50	0.707

On average, tweets falling into the "on-field" category received a higher retweet frequency (30.69) in comparison to the "off-field" (10.33), "community" (9.83), "exclusive" (23) and "sponsor (8.50) categories for the Titans. Based on the difference in means in the Titans' categorical retweet frequency, a one-way ANOVA was run. The results of the analysis were not significant when using categorical breakdown as a factor

for retweet frequency $F(33, 35) = .412$, $p = 0.994$

Table 11: Average Number Of Retweets Per Content Category, Redskins, February 21, 2015-March 7, 2015

Category	N	M	SD
Community	10	21.40	12.465
Off Field	44	69.55	143.709
On-Field	84	43.42	45.332
Sponsor	7	29.29	19.771

For the Redskins, tweets falling into the "off-field" category, on average, received a higher retweet frequency (69.55) in comparison to the "on-field" (43.42), "community" (21.40) and "sponsor" (29.29) categories. The Redskins did not have any tweets fall into the "exclusive" category. Based on the difference in means in the Redskins' categorical retweet frequency, a one-way ANOVA was run. The results of the analysis were not significant when using categorical breakdown as a factor for retweet frequency $F(66, 78) = 1.273$, $p = 0.152$

Table 12: Average Number Of Retweets Per Content Category, Eagles, February 21,

2015-March 7, 2015

Category	N	M	SD
Community	3	22	16.523
Off Field	12	178.25	183.913
On-Field	58	164.48	355.827

On average, tweets falling into the "off-field" category received a higher retweet

frequency (178.25) in comparison to the "on-field" (166.48) and "community" (22)

categories for the Eagles. The Eagles did not have any tweets fall into the "exclusive" or

"sponsored" categories. Based on the difference in means in the Eagles' categorical

retweet frequency, a one-way ANOVA was run. The results of the analysis were not

significant when using categorical breakdown as a factor for retweet frequency $F(58, 14)$

$= .819, p = 0.714$

Table 13: Average Number Of Retweets Per Content Category, Cowboys, February 21,

2015-March 7, 2015

Category	N	M	SD
Community	2	90.50	13.435
Off Field	3	601.33	502.638
On-Field	44	143.39	305.137

Sponsor	5	66.40	38.279

Tweets falling into the "off-field" category, on average, received a higher retweet frequency (601.33) in comparison to the "on-field" (143.39), "community" (22) and "sponsor" (66.40) categories for the Cowboys. The Cowboys did not have any tweets fall into the "exclusive" category. Based on the difference in means in the Cowboys' categorical retweet frequency, a one-way ANOVA was run. The results of the analysis were not significant when using categorical breakdown as a factor for retweet frequency $F(45, 8) = .707$, $p = 0.784$

Table 14: Average Number Of Retweets Per Content Category, Giants, February 21, 2015-March 7, 2015

Category	N	M	SD
Off Field	3	221.67	250.951
On-Field	58	41.53	46.081
Sponsor	2	21.50	0.707

The "off-field" category, on average, received a higher retweet frequency (221.67) in comparison to the "on-field" (41.53) and "sponsor" (21.5) categories for the Giants. The Giants did not have any tweets fall into the "community" and "exclusive" categories. Based on the difference in means in the Giants' categorical retweet frequency,

a one-way ANOVA was run. The results of the analysis were not significant when using

categorical breakdown as a factor for retweet frequency $F(42, 20) = 1.349$, $p = 0.238$

Research Question 2: Do teams that have a higher winning percentage tweet more

frequently?

For this study, winning percentages from the 2014 NFL season were collected for

the purposeful sampling. Based on the difference in winning percentages during the 2014

NFL regular season, a bivariate correlation test was run. The results of the bivariate

correlation test are significant when using winning percentage as a factor with retweet

frequency $r = .170$, however, the correlation is very weak.

Table 15: 2014 Winning Percentage And Total Tweets

Team	Winning Percentage	Total No. Of Tweets
Jacksonville Jaguars	.188	119
Tennessee Titans	.125	69
Indianapolis Colts	.688	103
Houston Texans	.563	123
New York Giants	.375	63
Washington Redskins	.250	145
Philadelphia Eagles	.625	73
Dallas Cowboys	.750	54

Research Question 3: Does tweet frequency have an impact on retweet frequency?

For this study, a "retweet efficiency model" was created to determine if a higher tweet frequency results in a greater retweet frequency. Based on the difference in total tweets and total retweets, a bivariate correlation test was run. The results of the bivariate correlation test are significant when using winning percentage as a factor with retweet frequency $r = .894$

Table 16: Retweet Efficiency Model, February 21, 2015-March 7, 2015

Team	Total No. Of Tweets	Total No. Of Retweets	Retweet Efficiency
Jacksonville Jaguars	119	3,815	32.06
Tennessee Titans	69	1,757	25.46
Indianapolis Colts	103	12,542	121.77
Houston Texans	123	6,288	51.12
New York Giants	63	3,117	49.48
Washington Redskins	145	7,126	49.14
Philadelphia Eagles	73	11,745	160.89
Dallas Cowboys	54	8,626	159.74

Research Question 4: Does being in a specific conference impact retweet frequency?

The NFC East as a division had, on average, a higher retweet average than the AFC South. NFC East teams presented mean scores of 91.39 retweets on all tweets and AFC South teams presented mean scores of 58.94 retweets on all tweets. Despite the

AFC South producing more tweets during the sample period, the NFC East, as a conference, outperformed their counterparts on a tweet-by-tweet standard for retweets. Based on the difference in means in conference, an independent samples *t*-test was run. The results of the independent samples *t*-test was significant when using conference as a factor with retweet frequency $t(748)$, $p < 0.01$

Table 17: Average Number Of Retweets Per Conference

Variable	N	M	SD
AFC South	414	58.94	253.101
NFC East	335	91.39	213.511

In its current stage, one of constant and continual growth, social media, and more importantly for this study, Twitter, has little in terms of statistical trends. As seen in research question 1, while "off-field" and "on-field" content were, on average, the most retweeted categories for the purposeful sampling, results for all tests were not significant. There was, however, trends in the impact winning percentage and conference placement have on teams. Teams with worse records tend to tweet more, perhaps in an attempt to deflect attention from their on-field product, while the NFC East had a significantly higher retweet frequency than the AFC South. While teams from the AFC South can certainly have their moments of high retweet frequency, based on history and market size, NFC East teams are most established members of their community. In turn, those four teams are engrained into the civic pride of citizens located in those communities.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

This research, although conducted during the early stages of Twitter's boom, provided some results of note. First, "off-field" content had not only the collective highest retweet frequency across the purposeful sampling, but six of the eight teams included in the study had "off-field" content as their most frequently retweeted category. This is despite the fact that eight of 10 highest retweeted tweets fell into the "on-field" category. Furthermore, teams with a lower winning percentage, on average, tweeted more frequently as opposed to teams that had a higher winning percentage. This may due to the fact that teams with a lower winning percentage are trying to find any means necessary to deflect attention from the on-field product. This research was aided by a "retweet frequency model" that determined if tweeting more often had a negative impact on retweet frequency. The results concluded that tweet frequency does have an impact on retweet frequency, as teams that tweeted less frequently tended to have a higher tweet frequency. Twitter users may be turned off by an account that is tweeting constantly, as it can "clog" their timeline of information, some of which may not be of any interest. Finally, based on the purposeful sampling, the NFC East, on average, has a higher retweet frequency than the AFC South. While the Indianapolis Colts are one of the most popular teams in the AFC, based on Twitter following, population of home cities, and overall media coverage, the NFC East teams are four of the most established teams in the

NFL. While the Jaguars, for example, may have a good season on the field, the attention they receive from the city and fan base is probably little in comparison to what the NFC East teams experience year in and year out, good season or not.

Limitations

My research study had several limitations. This study was limited by its small sample size in terms of number of tweets for certain categories (community and exclusive), the number of teams used, and the time frame in which it was conducted. While there were more than 500 on-field tweets analyzed, other categories like community and exclusive had less than 40. While these tweets were added and utilized during the two-week sample period, more tweets for future studies could result in a stronger final analysis. The purposeful sampling of teams from the NFC East and AFC South was to get a variety of established teams with newer teams, teams that are successful on the field and those that struggle, and both large and small markets. However, some of the league's top teams from both an on-field product stance (Green Bay Packers, New England Patriots, and Pittsburgh Steelers) and with strong social media followings were not used. While teams such as the Dallas Cowboys and Washington Redskins have similar historical success, they may not necessarily mimic the same possible results that those teams would receive. Furthermore, the time frame used to conduct the study was a two-week window when there's little to no news for any of the teams. While this was purposefully selected to provide grounds for "equal footing," the NFL's most engaging time of year is during the season. In those months, teams tend to

tweet at a higher frequency with more retweets and responses.

Future Studies

For reference for future studies, there are multitudes of different analyses that can be conducted not only on professional sports teams' Twitter accounts, but what makes these specific accounts a "go-to" for users. First, this study looked solely at content categories and which received the highest number of retweets on average. This study, however, did not look at whether or not these tweets are viewed in a positive or negative light. For example, during the NBA's Western Conference quarterfinals in April 2014, the Houston Rockets were well on their way to defeating their in-state rival Dallas Mavericks. As the clock ticked down on the Rockets' soon-to-be series clinching victory, their Twitter account posted emojis of a gun pointed at a horse's head with the caption: "Shhhh. Just close your eyes. It will all be over soon." While the tweet received more than 7,000 retweets, many of the responses to the actual tweet were negative and fans were retweeting in almost a shock of the situation ("Fair or Foul," 2014). The Rockets deleted the tweet shortly after.

This study also looked at five different content categories: on-field, off the field, community, exclusive and sponsored. While these categories originally appeared to be the best breakdown, there are several more categories that could be added. Instead of having an umbrella "on-field" category, it can be broken down into current team news, game previews, historical, and player interviews. Furthermore, this study looked at a fixed two-week time period that supposedly places teams on "equal ground" as the previous season just ended and the next season has yet to begin. However, while teams

provide engaging content year-round, similar studies can open themselves up to an in-depth look at in-season studies. The content categories that were used for their study can be applied to an in-season study as well.

Also, while this study looked just at purposeful sample of eight different NFL teams, a Twitter content analysis can be extended to comparing content of different sports teams across different leagues. For example, the NFC East–Dallas Cowboys, New York Giants, Philadelphia Eagles, and Washington Redskins–was one of the divisions that was analyzed during this study. While the Redskins have struggled on the field in recent seasons, their fans may also be fans of the Washington Nationals, Washington Capitals, Washington Wizards, and D.C. United in baseball, hockey, basketball, and soccer respectively. These teams have seen recent improvements in on-field performance. A future study can look at teams within a city and compare their tweets.

Social media's evolution is a continual process, as new platforms are popping up yearly and older, more established platforms are looking to keep up to date with the latest cutting edge technology provided. Eventually, similar analytical studies may be able to branch out to other platforms as well like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. While Instagram is a picture-heavy platform, future studies may be able to look at different posts and analyze the possible strengths of particular content categories for this specific platforms. Snapchat, meanwhile, is a platform that allows for users to send photos or videos to either specific users or everyone their connected with in their "story." Snapchats range from one to ten seconds, and users can elect to skip over content at any given moment during the selected range. A content analysis could be used to see if there

are any correlations between content and time spent on a particular photo or video.

Sports media and marketing are two of the most competitive realms for professional sports teams, as they are in constant search of new ways of keeping loyal fans and generating new ones. Recently, sports teams are gaining publicity and exposure for their marketing plans through social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. While each platform provides similar and different content for the masses, Twitter is regarded as the news source and central online marketing hub. Twitter's impact continues to grow by the day and for all professional sports franchises, it is important to know exactly what fans are looking for on this platform. Whether that is providing more on-field content or behind the scenes content, once professional sports franchises know what pleases their fans, then they will see mission statements achieved. For teams that continually face difficult on-field success may need to provide more creative content to keep their fan bases engaged. This can be very difficult, though, as they must remain a respectable voice for the fan base while also finding content that will keep them actively involved with their social media platforms. "The hardest part of the job is tempering out desire to be the voice of our fans and be a little edgy with a voice that is also brand-focused and appropriate. Have there been bumps in the road? Of course. But those are inevitable if you're trying to straddle that line," said Max Rappaport, web content coordinator for a Philadelphia 76ers team that has been among the worst in the professional sports over the last two seasons (Peebles, 2015).

As this study argued, predicting social media success is not an exact science, but if teams can find out certain content areas that their fans are more interested in, that

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they'll experience greater success with their social media content. While limitations, such as positive and negative impacts, were not accounted for in this study, retweet totals can create a picture of what is engaging for Twitter users. This study also took into account only eight of the NFL's 32 teams, and larger studies could create different and unique results. Future studies must take into account the variety of choices Twitter users have and the freedoms they have to retweet content on a singular basis. These studies must also understand that users can retweet content without following the team, so they must be willing to accept possible spikes in retweeted content if something unique and popular to a wider audience.

Social media is a rising that over time will, perhaps quickly, become a more researched academic topic. It has in many ways overtaken traditional media forms such as television, radio, and print publications and newspapers as the primary source for how people receive their news. This holds true for NFL teams, as their Twitter following continues a rapid growth as all age groups add the social media to their daily news checking routines. This study attempted to find possible statistical trends based on content and conference breakdowns while also factoring in winning percentage during a time period for the league's offseason. While the research showed that winning percentage and a team's conference alignment can correlate to retweet frequency, there were not enough significant results to merit a statistical trend for categorized content. Future studies may be able to prove whether or not there can be trends based on content categories on Twitter.

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