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The Use of Social Media to Advance Sports Marketing:
The Atlantic Hockey Conference

Erin Claybaugh
M.S. Media Arts and Technology
Rochester Institute of Technology

*A Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master of Science degree
in Media Arts and Technology
Rochester Institute of Technology*

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Abstract

Social media has rapidly changed the world of communications, becoming a popular area of interest to many researchers. Sports marketing has also drastically developed and gained recognition within academia. This project evaluated the use of social media by Atlantic Hockey teams through an investigation of their social media strategies and the effectiveness of their channels. With only a small focus on the Atlantic hockey conference and the widespread growth of college hockey nationally over the years, this study was proposed out of personal interest and found necessary.

Research was conducted through a series of interviews with social media coordinators of Atlantic hockey teams and additional Division 1 hockey teams who gained success using their social media and with their marketing campaigns. A survey was developed and distributed to understand the preferences social media users have when they interact with messaging from Atlantic Hockey teams. Findings indicated that Atlantic Hockey teams still have difficulties with social media strategies and thoughtful marketing campaigns that contribute to generating a higher revenue. Keeping budget, time and resources in mind, a clear and concise strategy recommendation that the Atlantic hockey conference can use to grow and strengthen the fan base and increase engagement can be developed. Furthermore, the findings can be implemented by collegiate hockey teams all across the NCAA that are in need of growing their social media presence.

Introduction

Digital technology has and will continue to have profound influence on the sports industry. Sports remain a top economic powerhouse, regardless of how the industries around it have been influenced. Not only have athletic events become a global phenomenon but they have become more diversified with growth in fan bases. Simpler technological innovations on social media can help drive fan engagement on a massive scale (Iyengar, 2017). Along with the advancements in technology has come a need for more strategic marketing using social media platforms. However, some sports marketers can go through challenges when it comes to an increase in competition and the battle for consumers.

A challenge that many Atlantic division college hockey teams face with social media marketing is developing an intimate connection with fans and how to properly penetrate a crowded market. Understanding a team's brand requires the need to analyze the use of social media marketing and acknowledging similar schools that have successfully implemented effective strategies achieved that outcome (Alalwan, 2016). Research on social media is continually increasing due to the vast technological improvements that have occurred. Internet services and mobile devices are ever expanding on their capabilities, marketers must effectively keep up with strategies that increase their engagement and adopt strategies that maintain a strong fan base.

Social media is one of the most important tools not only for teams, but for fans and athletes as well (Cowart, 2017). Social media allows fans to find news quick and efficiently, see photos and videos, behind-the-scene peeks at their favorite teams and athletes, and much more. One of the greatest benefits has been the ability to increase engagement and create meaningful

connections between fans and their teams. With new and stronger connections to their teams, greater loyalty is often created and can lead to more profits for those organizations that are successful. The new era of social media offers an innovative way for teams to generate revenue for their programs, and it provides brand exposure, fan interactions and increased event awareness at a much lower and sustainable cost.

Statement of Problem

Markets are frequently evolving and result in changes to consumer preferences such as trends, tastes, and points of interests (Hoyle, 2002). Effective marketing strategies aim to drive website traffic, increase engagement/interaction rates, and increase ticket sales. The NCAA has sixty division I hockey teams as of 2019; many of these teams have a successful following on their social medias, with some reaching 81,000 Twitter followers. A common theme amongst Atlantic hockey teams is that they all have under 10,000 followers on both Instagram and Twitter, leaving them trailing far behind other teams in the NCAA. The Atlantic hockey division suffers from a lack of social media presence. This results in a weak fan base and also translates into a lower interaction and engagement rates when compared to other schools who a higher social media presence. This affects attendance rates.

Literature Review

My literature review identified several relevant articles for this research. The majority of resources have been retrieved from the Rochester Institute of Technology Library Database. Articles were found by using keywording and relate to social media, sports marketing, collegiate hockey, and collegiate athletics.

Social Media

There has been a rise in the use of social media in athletics developing into the most common ways for organizations to interact with their consumers. Teams are able to show what is going on behind the scenes before and after games and this allows fans to get a glimpse at the lives of their favorite athletes. Social media is a cost-effective way for organizations to market themselves and reach current and potential fans all over the world.

Each platform is designed with their own unique features that sets them apart from competition to make them popular among consumers. Mike DiLorenzo, director of social media marketing and strategy for the NHL said, "Social networks aren't about web sites. They're about the experiences" (Hanna 2011, p. 268). Fans are reaching for intimacy and engagement with the organizations, which is often glossed over as social media strategies can aim to focus more on money rather than genuine relationships that are being created.

"The most successful organizations in the social media space appear to focus less on their promotional bottom line and more on being active, relatable, and truthful. This is all in an effort to facilitate a community-like environment where organizations and consumers seamlessly exist" (Armstrong 2014, p. 150). Creating customized social media strategies can help organizations recognize and follow the specific needs of the consumer. A specialized marketing plan will provide customers with the information that they are seeking rather than irrelevant news that they

are less likely to interact with. Customers will feel more valued, leading to higher loyalty, and increased sales (Putz 2019). Social media offers the team a platform to receive immediate feedback and ideas that can then be implemented in the future for products, campaigns, or sales.

Many teams like to use comedy on social media which has been gaining more popularity amongst fans recently. A study was conducted on the LA Kings of the National Hockey League to see this specific strategy. They wanted to focus on becoming a personality and bringing the media they were producing to life for the consumer. Brand animation via social media provides an organization the opportunity to increase interactivity with social media users, as well as other teams across the league, journalists, and more (Armstrong 2014, p. 158). One of the biggest takeaways is focusing on creating something that is much more than a post but rather shares content that consumers can relate to, make connections with and feel as if they have specifically been focused on.

Importance of Fans

Fans are just as important as the players and without their participation, the sports industry would not be nearly as successful as it currently is. Understanding what influences consumers' attendance, sports consumption, and social media interaction will help sports marketers in their strategic planning. There are key aspects to take into consideration when analyzing hockey fans, such as location of events, economics, benefits of attending rather than watching at home amongst others. Attendance can also be broken down into categories such as stimulation, visual pleasure, entertainment, social connections or an escape from reality.

A study was conducted by Mauricio Ferreira, a student at the University of San Francisco, on attributes that influence students' decisions to attend college sporting events. A key determinant for attending sporting events on campus was nearly all sport specific and based

on the student's preference of athletics. Things such a popularity of the sport, degree of physical contact (violence, speed, and action) and pre-game/in-game entertainment all played apart when deciding which event to spectate (Ferreira 2004, p. 207). Hockey was amongst popular sports because of the nature of the game; however, it lacks in-game entertainment compared to sports like basketball and that might be turning fans away.

Social connectedness is among the most frequently cited reasons for following a favorite team (Wang, 2006). This allows fans to communicate with each other and join a community that aligns with their interest. Relationships are often created by recognition of team merchandise in a public setting where two people can bond over shared similar ties. Social media is aiming to create that bond virtually and potentially lead to in-person meetups at games. Fans also correspond a game with emotional experiences such as going to one as a child, the first time their team won a championship and other pleasant memories. Seasons help to rekindle a bond year after year in hopes of a better outcome than the last if the team did not have a record setting year, on the other hand, they also boost loyalty when a team has captured a title.

Social Media Effectiveness

Social media marketing is an ongoing research topic and it is gaining more popularity in academia. Commonly, companies are advised to use specific software (i.e. Hootsuite) that can measure the analytics of each post. It is important to measure both qualitative data, such as engagement, as it is important to measure quantitative numbers of followers or "fans" an organization has. "Advertisers are focused on driving engagement and communicating with customers through social media to keep them loyal, building the brand personality and ultimately building sales over time" (Cray 2012, p. 50). While there is not a particular answer for the most

effective way to measure effectiveness, measurement tools are becoming more precise and advanced to help create better experiences for consumers.

Research Objectives

It is inevitable that interactive social media channels are altering sports marketing. Along with an evolving market comes a change in consumer preferences that is important for teams to understand and utilize. This research aims to understand the social media preferences of those who identified as fans or as potential fans, with hopes to use that information to create higher interaction and engagement rates that lead to better fan loyalty and increased revenue. It also focuses on understanding the current strategies that may need to be updated to better suit consumer preferences. The specific research questions that were explored are listed below.

Research Question(s)

RQ 1: What social media strategies are used by Atlantic Hockey teams?

RQ 2: What types of social media posts are Atlantic Hockey fans most interested in viewing?

Methodology

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with eight employees of different Division 1 Hockey teams, consisting of the Atlantic Hockey league, Big Ten, and National Collegiate Hockey Conference. The structured interviews were held via phone call or email and were based around a precise set of questions that were given to all participants. Participants were encouraged to give as much information as they felt comfortable sharing and gave flexibility and openness on the topics.

This tactic allowed interviewees a chance to express their perspectives, as well as giving real world examples of their experiences. Their insightfulness to real-life situations helped better understand strategies that were considered successful versus ones that were deemed unsuccessful. At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked for consent before questions were asked. The interviews took place via phone call as notes were taken for later review.

Survey Sample

I created the survey that was approved by The Human Subjects Research Office at Rochester Institute of Technology. The survey was distributed to undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in the College of Art and Design at Rochester Institute of Technology. It was also distributed through social media platforms such as Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram for additional responses.

Due to the minimal research on college hockey, the sample size was focused on statistics based off of the National Hockey League. According to *TheAtlantic.Com*, 68% of NHL fans are male and 32% are female. The largest age range of hockey fans is 35-54-year old's (35%), followed by 55 and up (29%), and lastly 18-34-year old's (28%) (Thompson, 2014). One

important thing to note is that the most popular age group for majority of social platforms is between 25-34, due to the fact that they grew up during the rise of the Internet (Greenwood 2020). However, when focusing on college athletics, it is also important to include the college-aged demographic. The statistics create a logical reason for this group to be primarily focused on for the survey.

Survey Method

The online survey was created using Qualtrics, a web-based survey tool. It was designed to be completed in 3 minutes on average by participants. The survey consisted of 22 questions that ranged from multiple choice, open-ended and matrix questions. The survey was active for a duration of 2 weeks and received 172 responses. A \$50 Amazon gift card was used as an incentive for respondents to participate in the survey, if they chose to enter their email address at the end of the survey. When the survey was concluded, one winner was chosen to receive the gift card. The winner of the survey raffle was Jack King.

Survey Questions

The first portion of the survey focused on the demographics of participants, such as age, gender and if they are athletes. The primary social media platform was asked to understand where most respondents are retrieving their content from. After that, the questions were more specified to finding out participants interest in hockey, if they have attended college hockey games, and if they are aware of the Atlantic Hockey league. These questions were important to determine how known the league is amongst social media users.

Following questions determined the most likely time participants will be on active on social media and their thoughts on if social media creates better connections between fans and athletes, if they find communication via social media effective and so on. Lastly, the questions

determined what kinds of media fans most are interested in viewing (live updates, team news, etc.), as well as what they think is missing, what types of media they would rather see and how likely they are to attend a college hockey game.

Interview Results

Personal Interview Questions

Social Media channels

- What are your goals and overall purpose for using social media?
- Who is your target audience?
- What social media channels are currently used?

Social Media Strategy

- Goals and objectives
 - How many posts per day?
 - How often you use photos, gifs, videos?
 - Which kind posts do you find get more interaction than others?
 - Is there a schedule created for online postings of games and events coming up?
(What software do you use)
- Marketing strategies during winning and losing streaks – how do you change your channel to suit either of these?
- In the past season, which campaigns do you believe were very successful?
 - What made them successful?
 - On the other hand, what was a campaign that didn't quite go as expected?
- During the off-season how often do you try to post compared to during the season?
- Is there a particular channel that your more relaxed/comedic on compared to one that is more serious?

Additional

- What areas of your media do you see as your strong suits?
- What areas do you think could use some improvement?
- Do you have any additional comments you would like to make?

Purpose of Social Media

Each team had similar answers when asked about their goals and purpose for using social media. Majority of interviewees stated their social is for gameday information, marketing opportunities, informing fans regardless of location and to reach different audiences. It is also a place where team achievements and awards can be easily shared with fans, parents and give players the recognition that they deserve. Niagara University shared that their purpose for using social media is to reach recruits that are playing junior hockey and their parents. This allows them to show off the program's strengths and the organization as a whole.

Social Media Channels

Across all eight teams that were interviewed, the main social media channels utilized were Twitter and Instagram. Every team stated that they have a Facebook page, with the exception of Niagara University, however, it does not get much attention when it comes to posting content. A few teams claimed to use Snapchat, but they have phased out of that since it has similar effects as Instagram stories. Recently, Tik Tok has become a major channel that professional teams are starting to use, and teams like Michigan, Minnesota and Holy Cross Universities have shown interest in using Tik Tok to reach the younger demographics.

While most teams are not posting regularly on Facebook, they are utilizing the platform to run advertisements for the games, season tickets, and playoffs. When asked about comparison of channels and if one platform is more easy-going than others, Twitter was the unanimous pick amongst all teams. It is stated to be more relaxed, light-hearted, allow comedic relief and creates the relatable relationship that social media managers aim to create.

Social Media Strategy

It was found that all teams try to post once a day during the season, with game days having numerous posts. During the off season, it often turns to one post or only posting when relevant new things happen, such as a player winning an award, information on season tickets, schedule releases, or to welcome incoming freshman students. There is significant interest in planning more content for the summer months that could include player highlights or memorable moments from the previous season.

Posts that contain any sort of media such as gifs, videos or photos were found to have higher interaction and engagement rates than the ones that contain only copy. Most of the Atlantic teams that were interviewed have stated the lack of resources for their program which can make it hard to produce more graphics and videos on a regular basis. Michigan, Minnesota and Denver believe that their use of media is what boosts their online presences and grabs the attention of consumers when they are scrolling.

Winning streaks are an opportunity for the organizations to take something good and run with it. Streaks allow for capitalization on something positive team performance and generate larger amounts of ticket sales, being that most fans prefer to seem a team that is doing well. The reverse effect of losing streaks can be a challenge to get casual fans back into the arena. During these times, the organizations look to find any positives and focus on that. Often, this is when they aim to highlight individual player abilities or statistics, for instance a player who is about to break a goal scoring record, one that is reaching 100 games played or a first goal.

Improvements

Due to a lack of resources, the Atlantic Hockey teams that participated in the surveys felt like their media could improve in many areas. A major one was video production/editing since

they do not have adequate equipment or employees to complete the job. A few also mentioned difficult transitional periods whether it was a new coach, social media manager or other related position that hindered the efficiency of posting content regularly due to lack of communication. Lastly, offseason content was a key improvement amongst all organizations. While there are still posts going out on social, they found it can be hard to keep fans engaged and interacting with what is being posted.

Additional and Unique Strategies

Niagara University captured a heartfelt relationship with a young boy, Jack, who has a disease that creates a weakened immune system. Since Jack's immune system is not as strong as the typical seven-year-old, he tries to stay very active and involved in sports, hockey being one of them. The team invited Jack to become a member of their family where he signed a letter of intent, received his own jersey, gave speeches in the locker room, toured of the facilities, took part in press conferences and even skated with the team during a scrimmage.

The team invited Jack to drop the puck at one of their games, which they won. He was believed to be good luck, so it became a tradition. The team went on a seven-game winning streak. While not traditional media, Jack's becoming a special part of this team, fans became very interested in him. Posts about his participation and experiences created a tight bond throughout the Niagara University Hockey community. His presence was something everyone looked forward to and gave hockey social media a bigger purpose than just a game day update. Many other teams in Division 1 hockey have honorary team members that become a major part of the team like any other player.

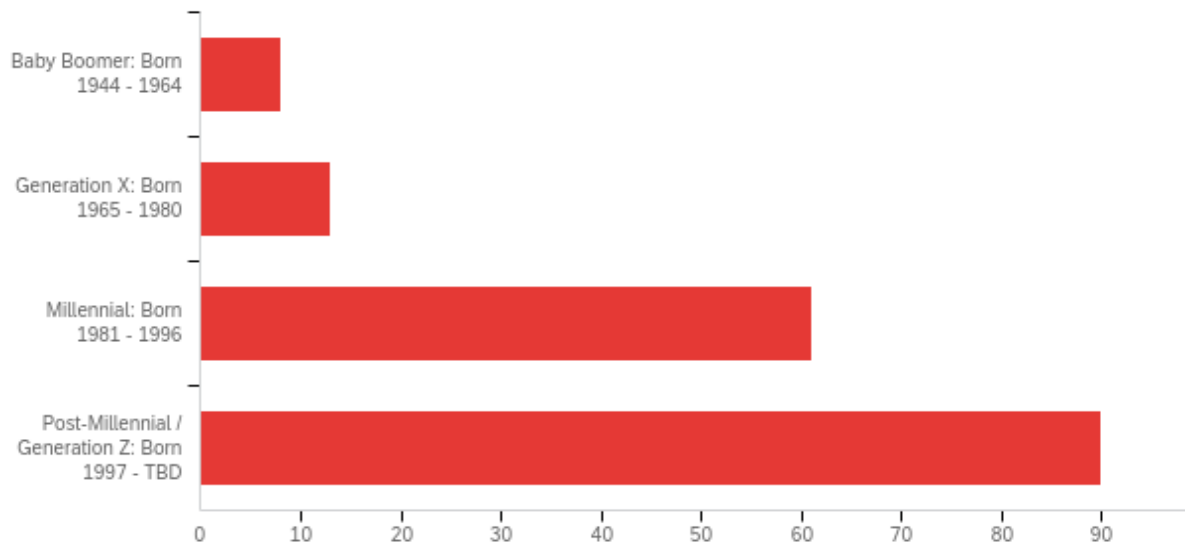
Survey Results

Survey Results

The survey results were provided by Qualtrics at RIT. Qualtrics was used to collect data for this two-week survey that was distributed and taken by 172 respondents. When the survey was finished, Qualtrics analyzed the data that is seen below:

Demographics

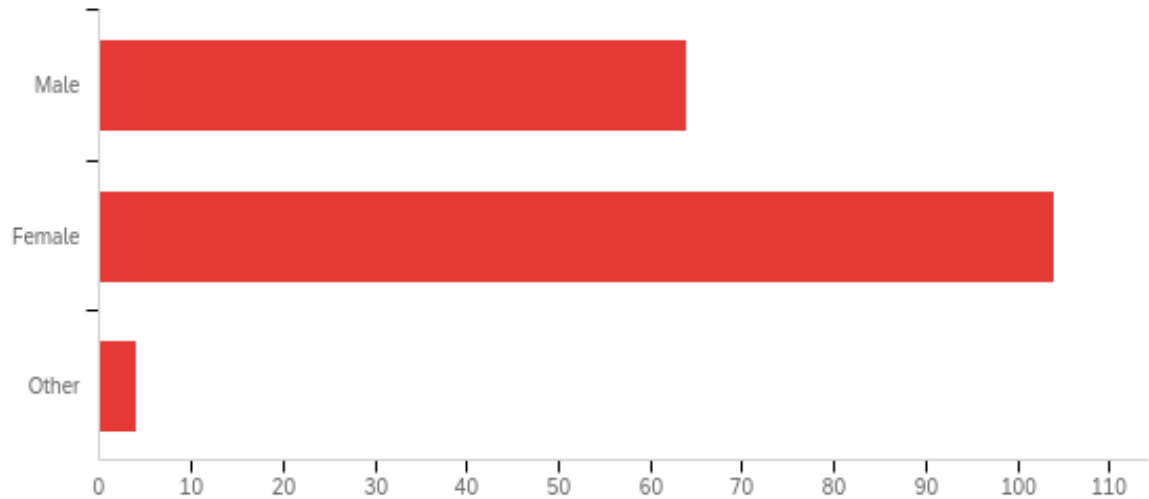
Q1 - When were you born?



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	When were you born?	1.00	4.00	3.35	0.81	0.66	172

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Baby Boomer: Born 1944 - 1964	4.65%	8
2	Generation X: Born 1965 - 1980	7.56%	13
3	Millennial: Born 1981 - 1996	35.47%	61
4	Post-Millennial / Generation Z: Born 1997 - TBD	52.33%	90
	Total	100%	172

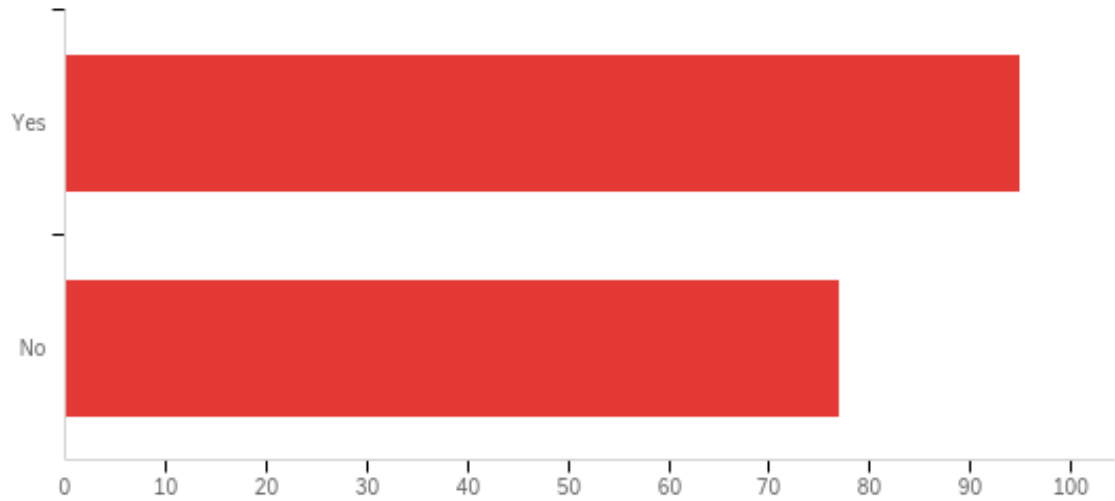
Q2 - What is your gender?



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	What is your gender?	1.00	3.00	1.65	0.52	0.27	172

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Male	37.21%	64
2	Female	60.47%	104
3	Other	2.33%	4
	Total	100%	172

Q3 - Do you participate in sports?

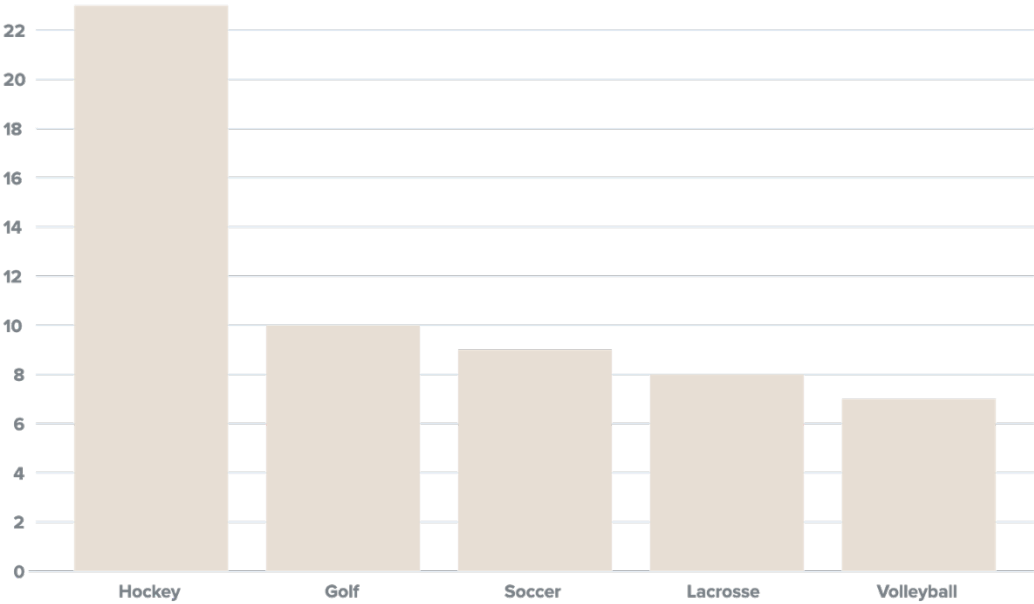


#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Do you participate in sports?	1.00	2.00	1.45	0.50	0.25	172

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	55.23%	95
2	No	44.77%	77
	Total	100%	172

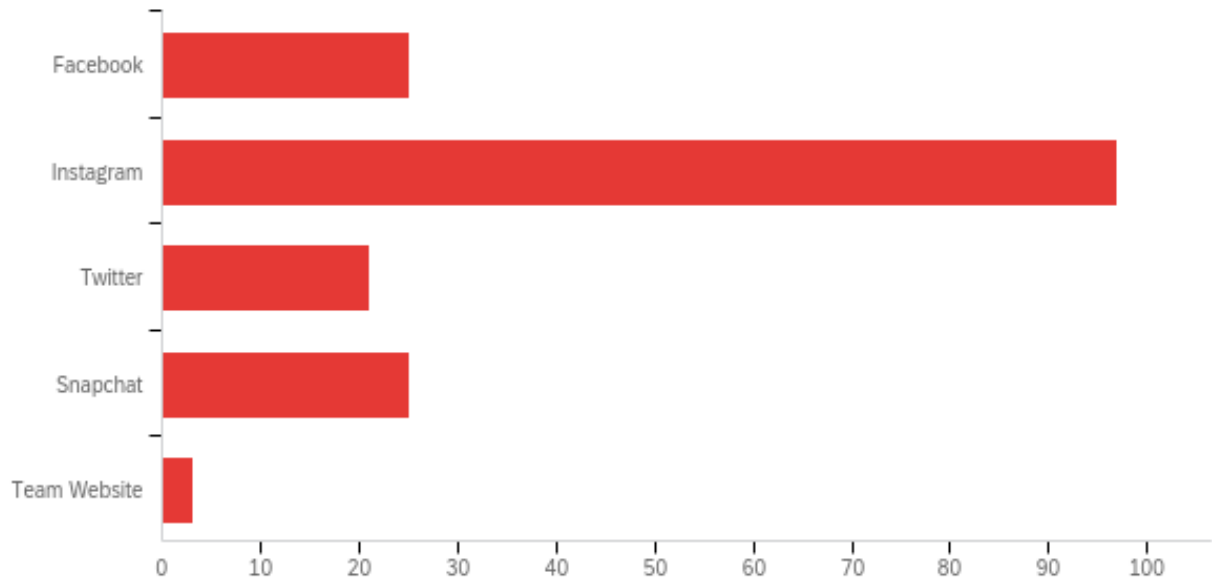
Q4 - If you answered yes to the previous question, which ones?

Popular Sports Played by Respondents



Preference of Social Media Channel

Q5 - What is your primary social media platform?

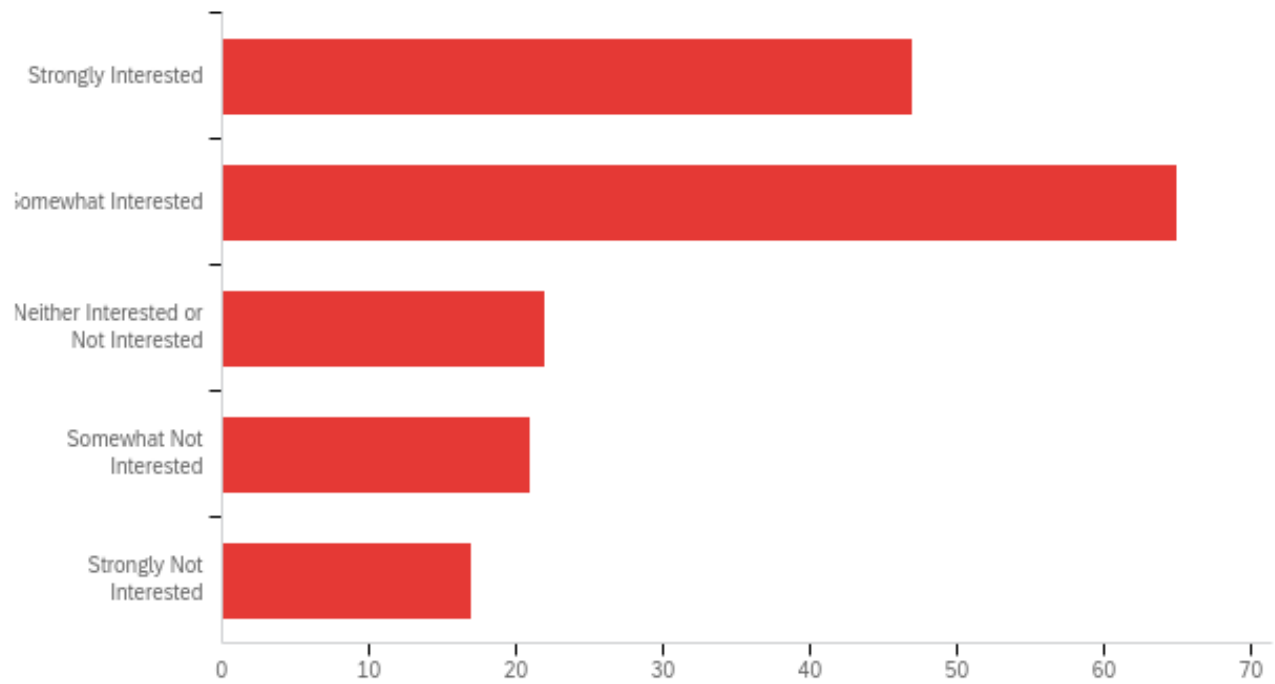


#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	What is your primary social media platform?	1.00	5.00	2.32	0.95	0.91	171

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Facebook	14.62%	25
2	Instagram	56.73%	97
3	Twitter	12.28%	21
4	Snapchat	14.62%	25
5	Team Website	1.75%	3
	Total	100%	171

Interest in Hockey / Awareness of Atlantic Hockey

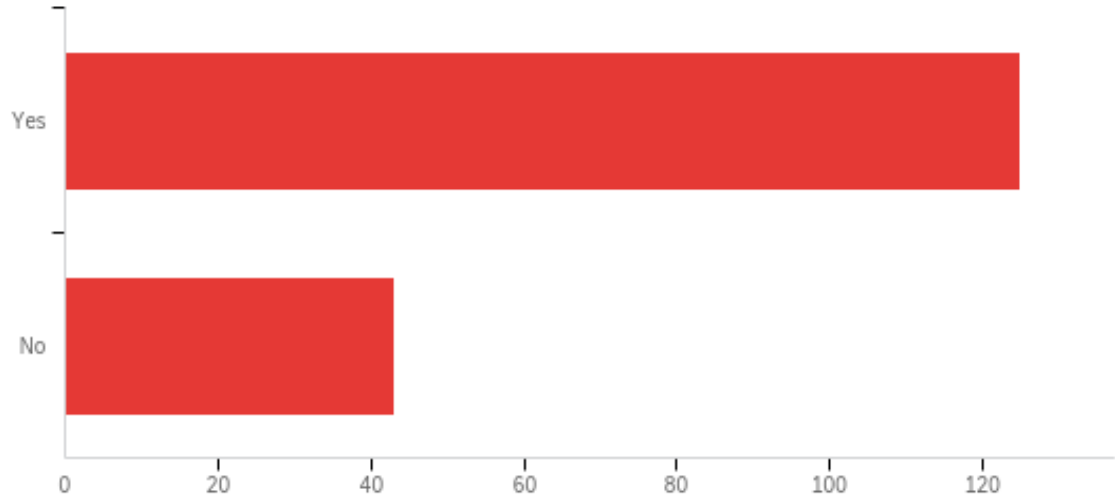
Q6 - How much does hockey interest you?



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Rate the statement above	1.00	5.00	2.40	1.27	1.62	172

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Strongly Interested	27.33%	47
2	Somewhat Interested	37.79%	65
3	Neither Interested or Not Interested	12.79%	22
4	Somewhat Not Interested	12.21%	21
5	Strongly Not Interested	9.88%	17
	Total	100%	172

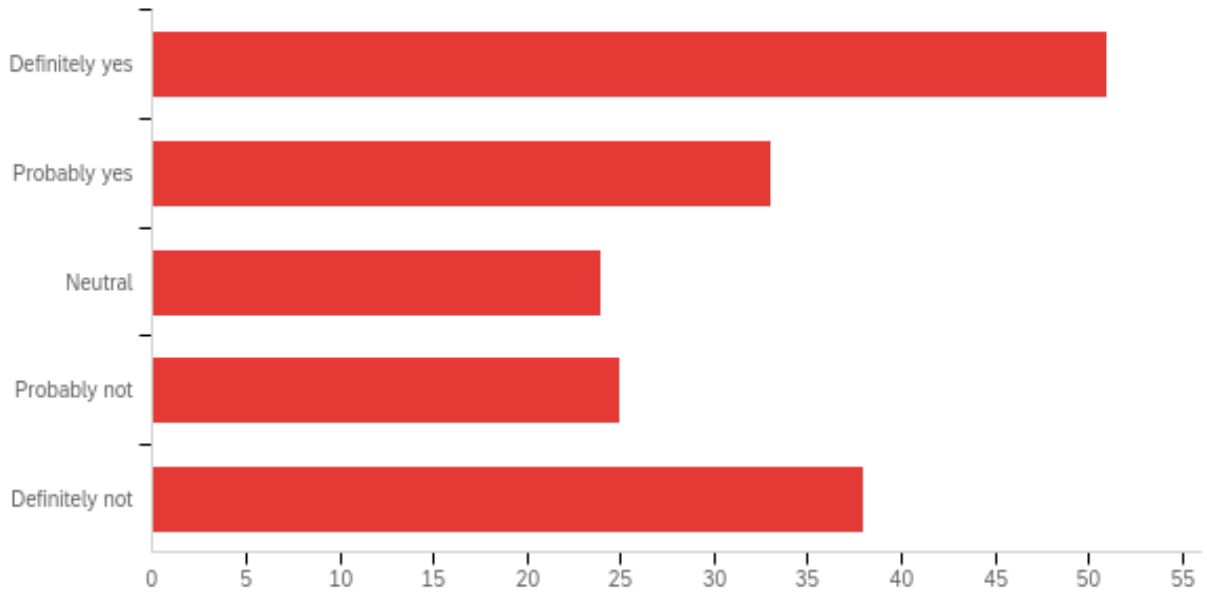
Q7 - Have you attended college hockey games?



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Have you attended college hockey games?	1.00	2.00	1.26	0.44	0.19	168

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	74.40%	125
2	No	25.60%	43
	Total	100%	168

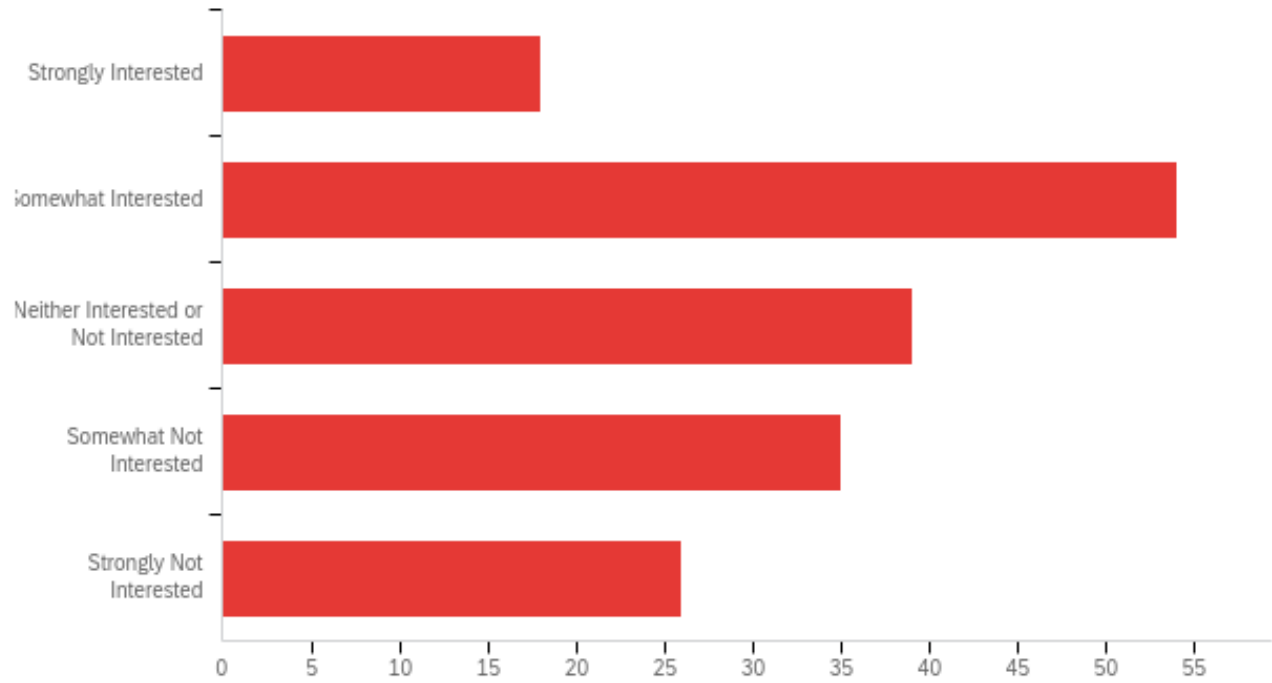
**Q8 - Do you have knowledge about the NCAA Division 1 Atlantic Hockey Association?
(Team Examples: RIT, Robert Morris, AIC, Mercyhurst, Air For)**



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Rate the statement above	1.00	5.00	2.80	1.54	2.38	171

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Definitely yes	29.82%	51
2	Probably yes	19.30%	33
3	Neutral	14.04%	24
4	Probably not	14.62%	25
5	Definitely not	22.22%	38
	Total	100%	171

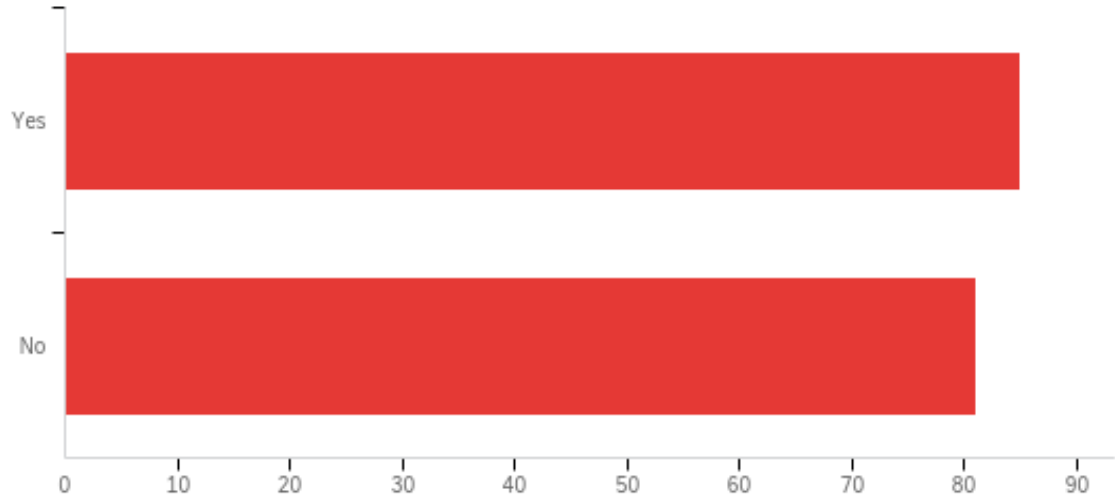
Q9 - How much does Atlantic Hockey interest you?



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Rate the statement above	1.00	5.00	2.98	1.24	1.54	172

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Strongly Interested	10.47%	18
2	Somewhat Interested	31.40%	54
3	Neither Interested or Not Interested	22.67%	39
4	Somewhat Not Interested	20.35%	35
5	Strongly Not Interested	15.12%	26
	Total	100%	172

Q10 - Are you aware that Atlantic Hockey teams have social media?

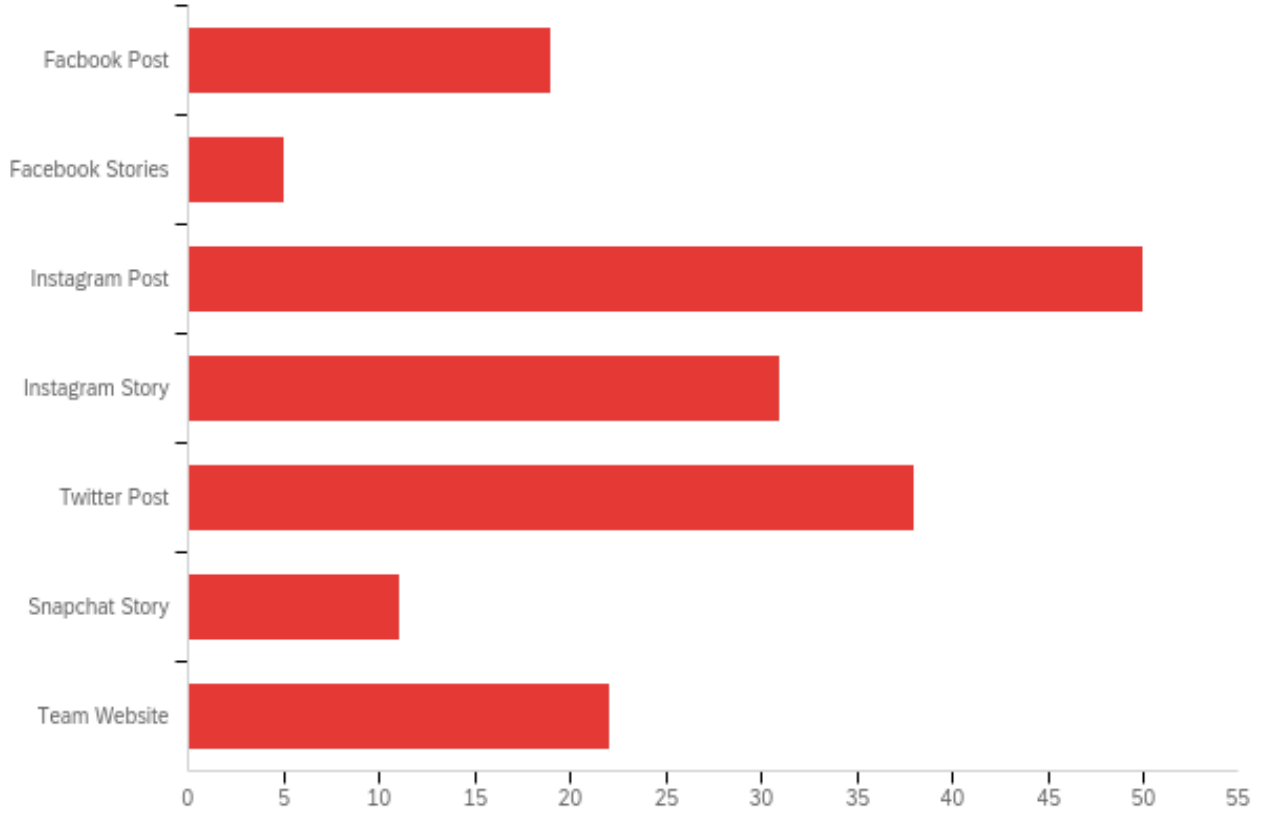


#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Are you aware that Atlantic Hockey teams have social media?	1.00	2.00	1.49	0.50	0.25	166

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	51.20%	85
2	No	48.80%	81
	Total	100%	166

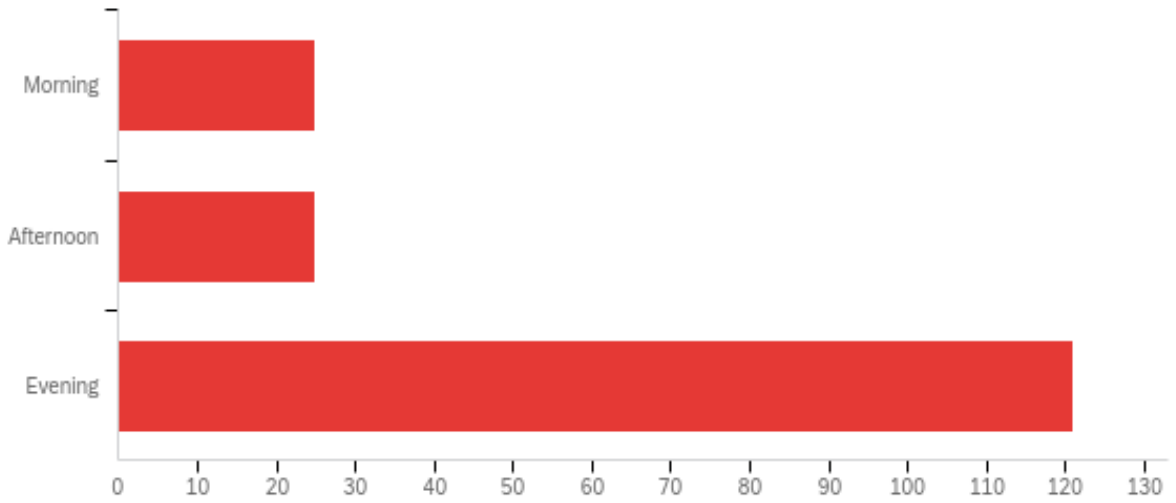
Social Media Use Regarding Atlantic Hockey

Q11 - What types of social media content do you discover news about Atlantic Hockey?
(Select all that apply)



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Facebook Post	10.80%	19
2	Facebook Stories	2.84%	5
3	Instagram Post	28.41%	50
4	Instagram Story	17.61%	31
5	Twitter Post	21.59%	38
6	Snapchat Story	6.25%	11
7	Team Website	12.50%	22
	Total	100%	176

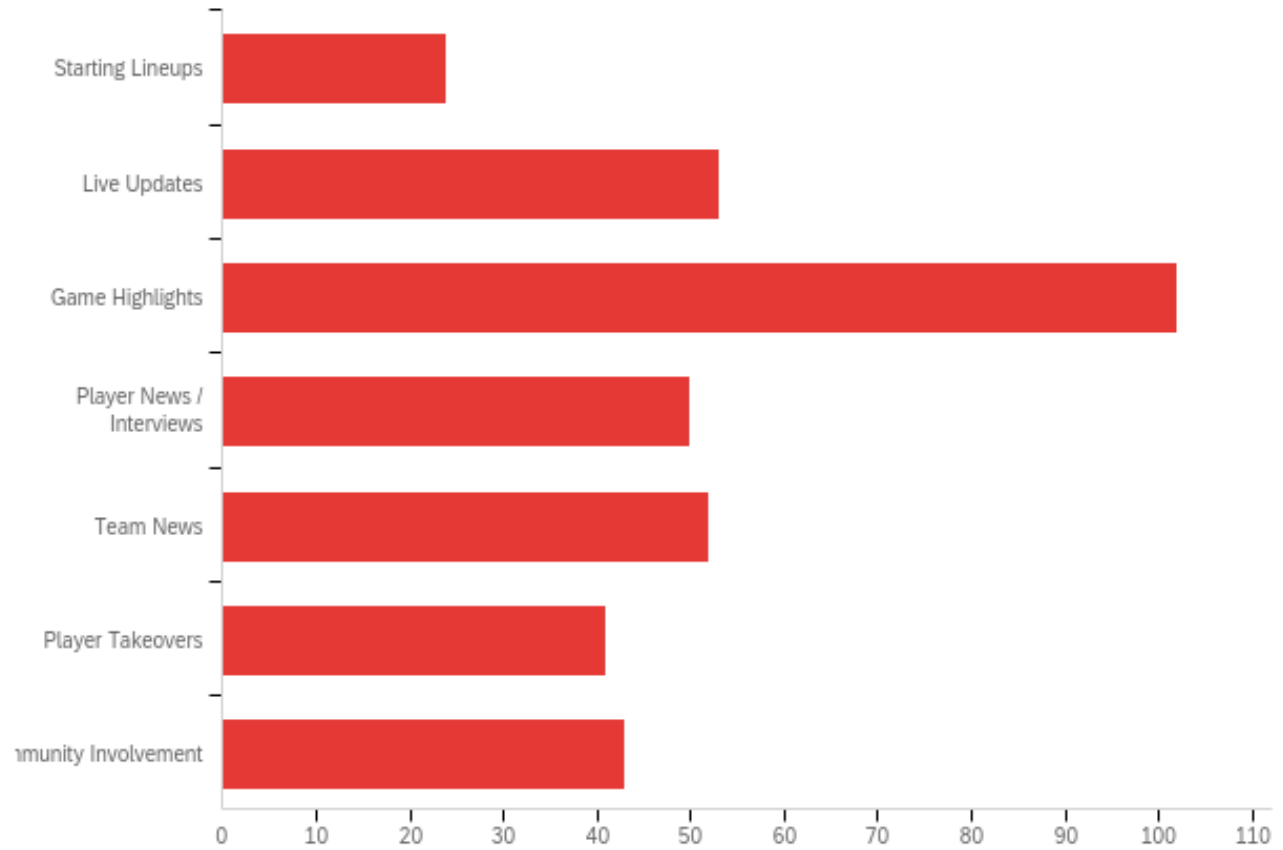
Q12 - What time of the day are you most likely to be on social media?



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	What time of the day are you most likely to be on social media?	1.00	3.00	2.56	0.73	0.54	171

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Morning	14.62%	25
2	Afternoon	14.62%	25
3	Evening	70.76%	121
	Total	100%	171

Q13 - What specific content are you most interested in seeing? (Select the following)



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Starting Lineups	6.58%	24
2	Live Updates	14.52%	53
3	Game Highlights	27.95%	102
4	Player News / Interviews	13.70%	50
5	Team News	14.25%	52
6	Player Takeovers	11.23%	41
7	Community Involvement	11.78%	43
	Total	100%	365

Q14 - Is there media missing that you would like to see more of? (Ex: more post-game interviews)

Real players' lives

Best of.... shots, defense, fights

Player gear, gear tech, the minutiae

More content displaying player personalities

Team family

Routines

Highlight personal stories

More about the players and their personalities/favorite things

The interviews are fun and build more incentive to have team loyalty. People aren't just a position or number anymore.

A look into the lives of the players during the season and post-season

Explanation of tactics/training

More trash talks or players' review

Player interviews & photos

More season highlights for each player

Fun facts about players

Fans

Contests

What the players do to get ready for game day

"Behind the glass" inside look at the team

Post-game interviews, getting to know the players more online

Updates on players in Professional leagues

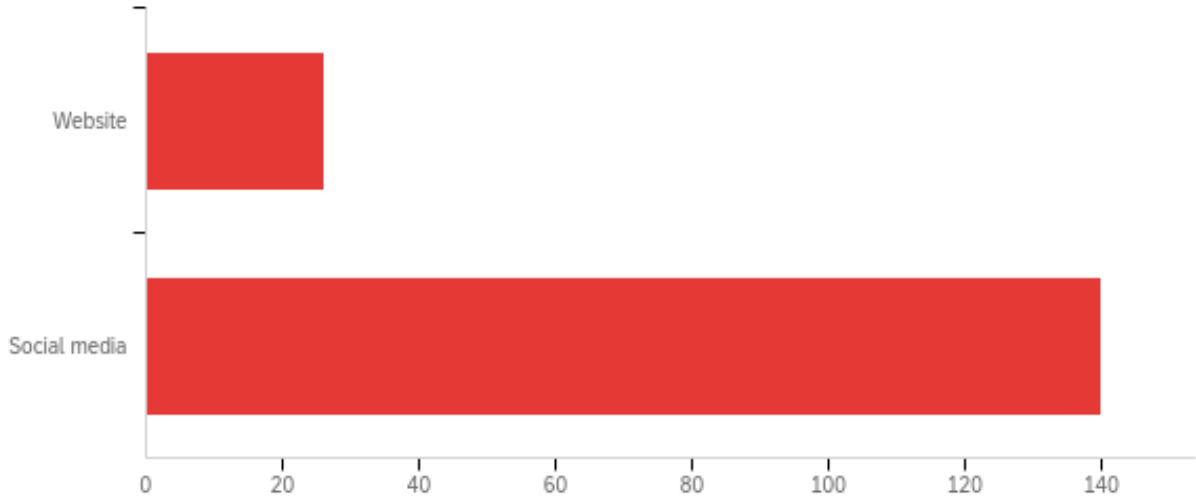
Videos of sewer ball before games

More personal stuff to get to know the players

More videos

More fan polls or giveaways

Q15 - Are you more likely to check the team's website or social media for updates?

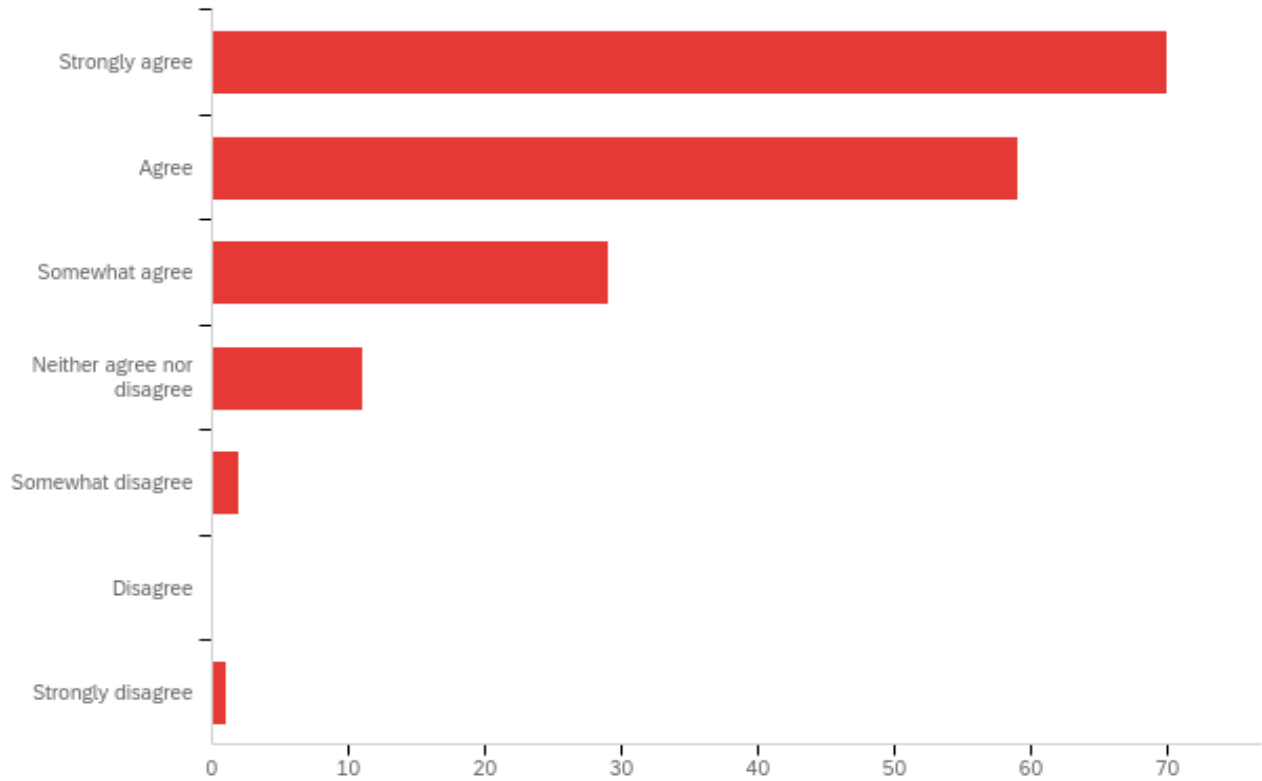


#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Are you more likely to check the team's website or social media for updates?	1.00	2.00	1.84	0.36	0.13	166

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Website	15.66%	26
2	Social media	84.34%	140
	Total	100%	166

Feelings Towards Social Media

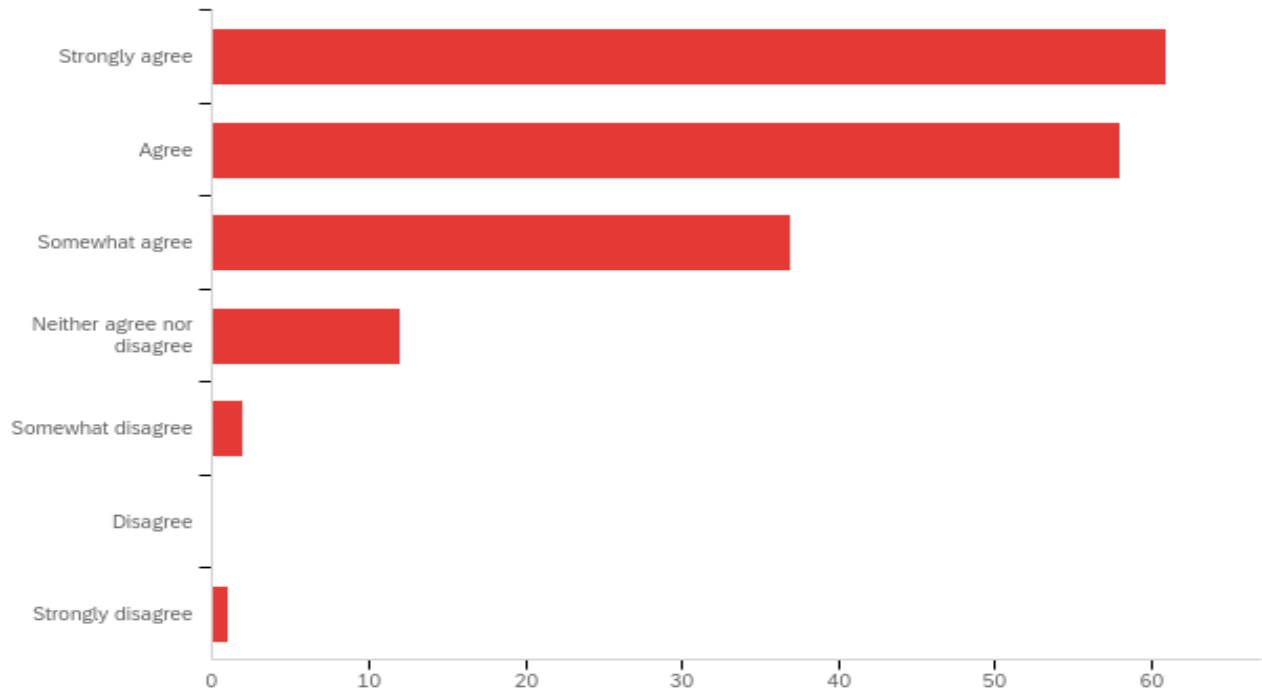
Q16 - Social media helps develop better connections between athletes and fans



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Rate the statement above	1.00	7.00	1.95	1.04	1.08	172

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Strongly agree	40.70%	70
2	Agree	34.30%	59
3	Somewhat agree	16.86%	29
4	Neither agree nor disagree	6.40%	11
5	Somewhat disagree	1.16%	2
6	Disagree	0.00%	0
7	Strongly disagree	0.58%	1
	Total	100%	172

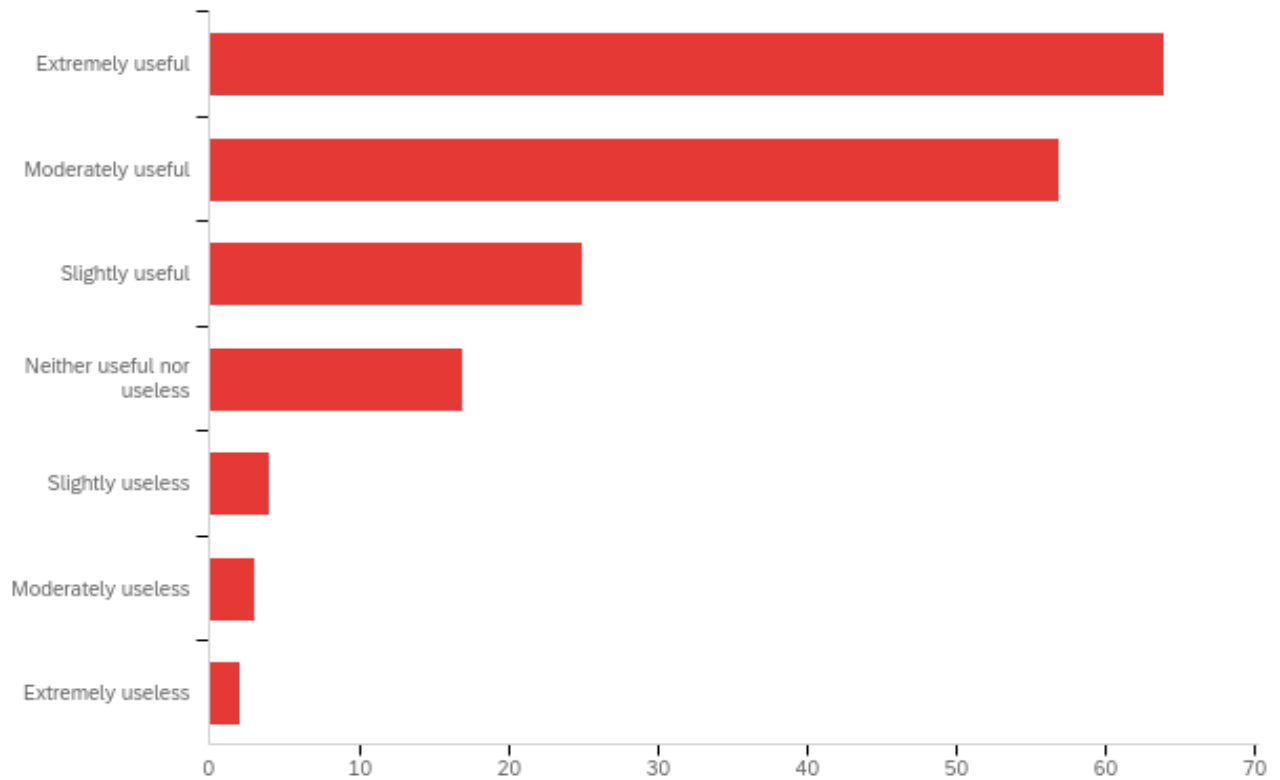
Q17 - Social media enables better communication between fans and athletic teams



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Rate the statement above	1.00	7.00	2.06	1.05	1.10	171

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Strongly agree	35.67%	61
2	Agree	33.92%	58
3	Somewhat agree	21.64%	37
4	Neither agree nor disagree	7.02%	12
5	Somewhat disagree	1.17%	2
6	Disagree	0.00%	0
7	Strongly disagree	0.58%	1
	Total	100%	171

Q18 - I find communication via social media useful and effective

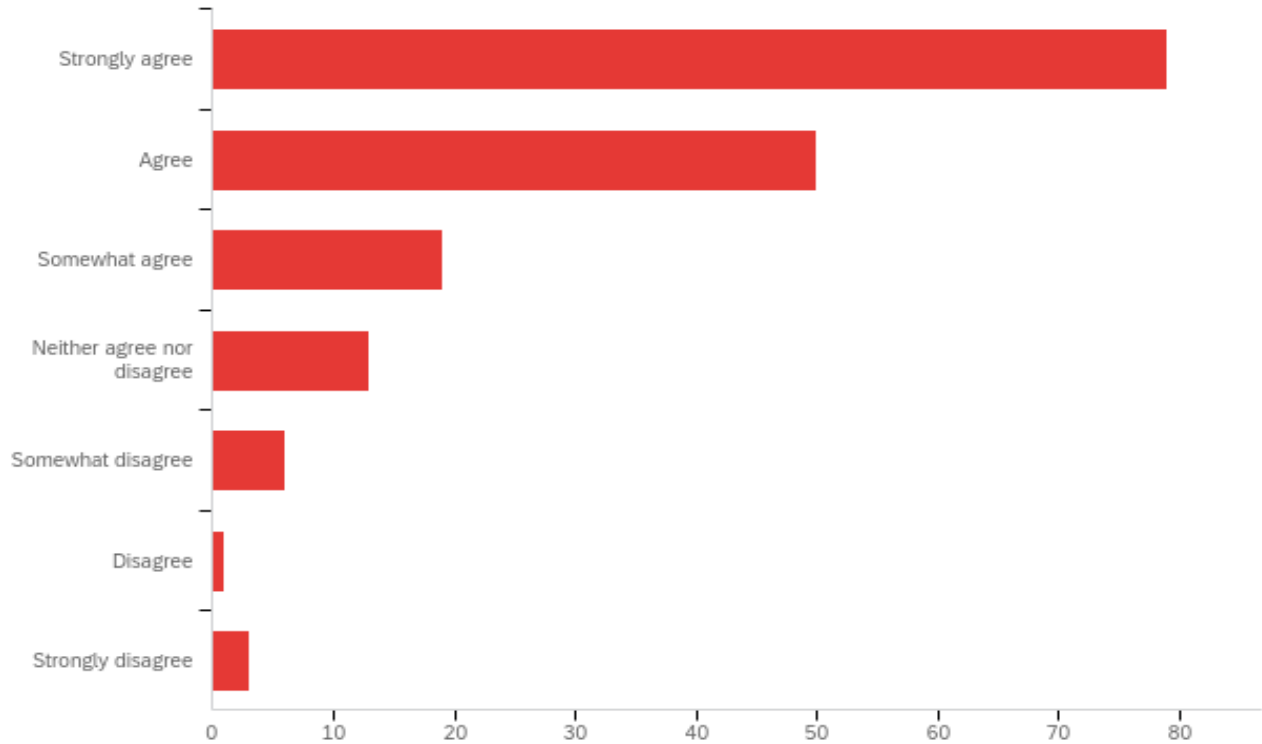


#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Rate the statement above	1.00	7.00	2.17	1.29	1.66	172

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Extremely useful	37.21%	64
2	Moderately useful	33.14%	57
3	Slightly useful	14.53%	25
4	Neither useful nor useless	9.88%	17
5	Slightly useless	2.33%	4
6	Moderately useless	1.74%	3
7	Extremely useless	1.16%	2
	Total	100%	172

Visual Content Preference

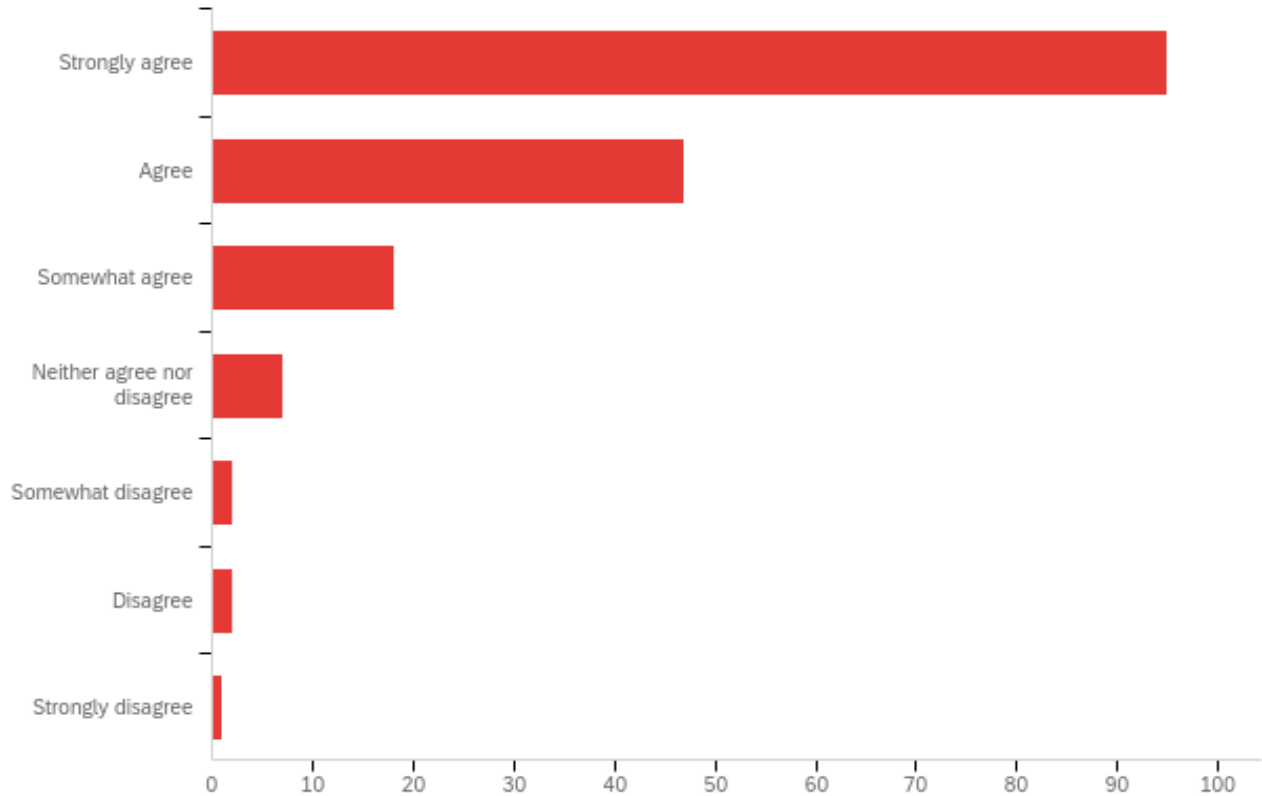
Q19 - I prefer to see images, gifs and videos rather than just text



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Rate the above statement	1.00	7.00	2.02	1.31	1.72	171

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Strongly agree	46.20%	79
2	Agree	29.24%	50
3	Somewhat agree	11.11%	19
4	Neither agree nor disagree	7.60%	13
5	Somewhat disagree	3.51%	6
6	Disagree	0.58%	1
7	Strongly disagree	1.75%	3
	Total	100%	171

Q20 - Visual graphics are important to me

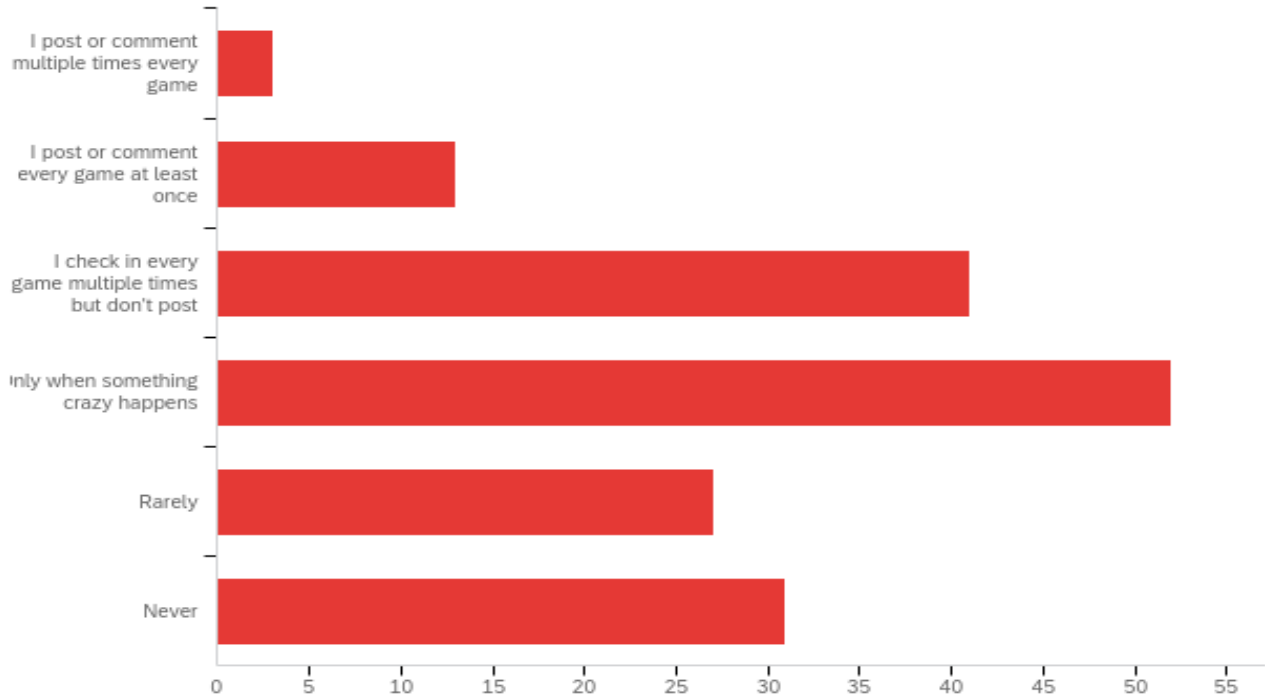


#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Rate the statement above	1.00	7.00	1.74	1.09	1.19	172

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Strongly agree	55.23%	95
2	Agree	27.33%	47
3	Somewhat agree	10.47%	18
4	Neither agree nor disagree	4.07%	7
5	Somewhat disagree	1.16%	2
6	Disagree	1.16%	2
7	Strongly disagree	0.58%	1
	Total	100%	172

Importance of Social Media During Games

Q21 - How often do you use social media while watching a sporting event?



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	How often do you use social media while watching a sporting event?	1.00	7.00	4.73	1.67	2.79	168

#	Answer	%	Count
1	I post or comment multiple times every game	1.80%	3
2	I post or comment every game at least once	7.78%	13
3	I check in every game multiple times but don't post	24.55%	41
5	Only when something crazy happens	31.14%	52
6	Rarely	16.17%	27
7	Never	18.56%	31
	Total	100%	167

Likelihood of Attending a Game

Q22 - How likely are you to attend a college hockey game?

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Rate the statement above	0.00	10.00	4.58	3.59	12.86	162

Analysis

Social Media Strategy

Many organizations have similar social media strategies. One major difference in comparison of Atlantic Hockey to leagues such as the NCHC and Big Ten is the availability of resources. Survey respondents stated that they prefer to see social media posts with media such as gifs, images, and videos, however with a lack of resources hinders the ability for Atlantic teams to do that. Content across channels varies in nature, with most focusing on Twitter as a resource for live updates, press releases, and active discussions. Instagram is used more for graphics, player awards and behind-the-scenes stories that the athletes are willing to share.

Social media is used for both information and entertainment point which is captured by all organizations. When Atlantic teams were asked which platform, they found the most efficient for their marketing strategies, Twitter was the unanimous answer. In contrast, NCHC and Big Ten teams believed that their Instagram pages were more influential and gained more popularity due to the nature of the content yielding consumers to stop and participate in engagement.

Social Media Effectiveness

Hootsuite is a common software that organizations use to track their activity across social media channels; however, they also use the analytic tools that are available via Twitter, Instagram and Facebook to track engagement and interactions of their media. Effectiveness varied across organizations as some measured it by game attendance in comparison to those who measure it by activity on their social channels.

Research findings shared that when people follow a sports team on social media, their willingness to spend money on tickets and merchandise is likely to increase. This response may then suggest that there is a direct link between social media activity, such as followers, and game

attendance, thus proposing that ice hockey clubs should measure both social media activity and game attendance when it comes to looking at the effectiveness of their social media strategies (Eagleman, 2013).

Key Takeaways

Through the span of this research, it has been found that fans want to feel as if they are creating relationships with their teams that will further on develop into loyalty. Trust can help organizations gain more popularity on their social media channels and lead to higher revenue. The survey results show that people are interested in hockey and more specifically Atlantic Hockey. 125 respondents out of 172 have been to college hockey games. When asked about the likelihood of attending a college hockey game, on a scale of 1-10, the mean response was 4.58.

Respondents indicated that they are checking social media during sporting events, meaning that live updates continue to be a useful resource when fans are not able to be at the event in person. Participants indicated that they want to have access into the player's lives and see more of their personalities, what they do to prepare for games, life after college, fun facts, personal stories and such. Consumers are striving to have more life-like connections with athletes through social media because they realize that they are much more than just the sport, but people that are role models.

Demographics

A majority of the survey respondents belong to the Post-Millennial/Generation Z group (52%), followed by Millennials (35%), Generation X (7%), and Baby Boomers (4%). Most respondents are female (60%), followed by males (37%), and other (2%). Out of the 172 respondents, 95 indicated that they play sports, with majority participating in hockey, lacrosse or volleyball. Out of the total respondents, 51 indicated they know of the Atlantic Hockey league,

33 indicated that they are aware of the league, 24 respondents were neutral, and 63 respondents are not aware of the league. The diversity of the audience this survey was able to capture allowed for a broad range of perspectives and insights on what social media content would be most interesting to current or prospective fans. It also allowed for a further understanding of social media preferences and meanings the content has to viewers.

Research Question Results

RQ 1: What social media strategies are used by Atlantic Hockey teams?

Essentially, Atlantic Hockey teams focus their activities on Twitter and Instagram as their primary social channels. While they aim to post once a day, game days will have much more content going out such as lineups, pre-game statistics, live updates, and post-game highlights. The most common purpose for social media is to interact and engage with fans, drive ticket sales, and to give important news and updates (Meng, 2015). However, some teams utilize their social media to showcase the program to recruits. The general target audience ranges from youth athletes, college students, locals in the area of the team and alumni of the universities. Hootsuite was determined to be the most common software to measure analytics for the content that is being posted.

The use of photos, gifs, videos and other media are extremely important when trying to grab the viewers' attention. Using the team color that stands out the most (such as orange for RIT) is more likely to be noticed than black and white. Higher interaction and engagement rates come from the posts that contain media or graphics of any kind because they are eye catching in nature. Robert Morris University found that fans love when players take over the social for a day because it gives them a behind-the-scenes look at the day in the life of a student athlete.

During games, the social media managers do their best to interact with fan comments and questions because it helps create a trust-worthy relationship between the consumer and organization. Tweet deck and Twitter Media Studio were mentioned as valuable tools to plan media for upcoming games. If the information is available, the team's try their best to schedule content in advance, so it is easier to control live updates during the games. Winning streaks allow for a major opportunity to increase ticket sales and pack the arena with more fans. While losing streaks can be difficult on posting content, that allows for a time to highlight the positives of the team, appreciate the players and their accomplishments.

Most teams have their own unique catchphrase that they like to use for the season and create a bond with the fans over their common goal. Unique content is what helps these teams stand out amongst other athletics in the area, especially when it comes to the advertisements that are being put out. One of the more successful campaigns ran by Holy Cross found that ads with multiple forms of media, such as a graphic, video, and then additional graphics did much better than ads with only text or the same graphic reused.

RQ 2: What types of social media posts are Atlantic Hockey fans most interested in viewing?

The survey found that Instagram is the primary social media platform respondents (56%), followed by Snapchat and Facebook (14%), Twitter (12%) and the team's website (1%). With this information, it can help social media managers reach more fans via Instagram rather than Twitter, which seems to be their prime focus for game updates. 74% of respondents have attended college hockey games, showing that there is a market to continue growth within that demographic. However, 36% of participants have no

known knowledge of the Atlantic Hockey Association, meaning that marketers will have to find a way to reach that particular group of people to raise awareness. 41% indicated that they are somewhat or strongly interested in Atlantic Hockey, showing that new potential fans can be reached. Results were extremely close when participants were asked if they knew that Atlantic Hockey teams had social media channels (51% yes, 48% no).

Following a pattern, Instagram posts (28%) are the most common social media posts where fans have found out information, Twitter posts were also common (21%), with Instagram stories (17%) playing a big factor as well for information retrieving. An overwhelming number of respondents stated that they are most likely to be on social media during the evening (70%). Social media (84%) is also the common way that participants receive team update versus checking the team's website (15%).

In terms of content preferences, 75% prefer to see gifs, images and videos rather than just text with only 3% disagreeing. 82% believe that visual graphics are important when they are viewing social media content. Lastly, on a scale of 1-10, a mean of 4.58 was found for likeliness of respondents to attend a college hockey game.

Observations

In my own personal observations as a hockey fan, I have always connected to accounts that make me feel as if I am a part of their family. Growing up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the Pittsburgh Penguins have influenced my preference of hockey content. They are a team that focuses on connecting fans to the players and making it a personal experience even though it is reaching millions of people.

As the NHL was put on hold due to COVID-19, the Penguins had to take that time and keep fans entertained and engaged even when hockey games were not occurring. Numerous videos of players at home were posted that showed they were in it together like everyone else. When the season finally returned, the Penguins looked to comedy as relief. Their first game back was against long time in-state rival, the Philadelphia Flyers. They posted that they never thought they would be so excited to be playing the Flyers, which I found hilarious.

The Seattle Kraken, the newest member of the National Hockey League, also has found a way to use comedy to drive followers and increase a non-existent engagement. While they will not be participating until the 2021 season, they are responding to fans and establishing relationships early on to create loyalty.

When reviewing the social accounts of Atlantic Hockey teams, I noticed that they do not have a cohesive brand and missed match graphics. Establishing consistency would help with better brand recognition and potentially help content stand out on social media timelines. I have also noticed a lack of input from players themselves, which is something many people said they were interested in seeing. I believe allowing players' contribution to content would be a unique way to help establish player/fan relationships.

Implications and Conclusions

Conclusion

There are many different purposes of using social media as a sports marketer that have both advantages and challenges. Often these managers struggle to find the correct balance of new media and traditional media to reach fans of all ages. Continual development of technologies is what social media managers must adapt to in order to stay on-top of current market trends and penetrate the market to its fullest potential.

It has been found that most teams find their media to be informal and created to enlighten the consumers day. While these social media channels contain important information such as schedules, player updates and any last-minute game changes, the managers also focus on making it an interactive experience so fans can feel real-life connections with the players. Respondents of the survey found Instagram to be the most effective communication channel. Majority of respondents have heard of hockey but are unaware of the Atlantic Hockey social media channels. With the findings, there are particular changes that AHC can implement in the future for better results.

Study Limitations

Many limitations of this study that occurred from May 2020 until July 2020, were in relation to the COVID-19 Pandemic. All surveys and interviews had to be conducted virtually due to health restrictions and government mandated guidelines. During this difficult time, it is possible that those who were contacted for interviews were unable to participate amongst the stress they were already facing. If permitted more time, an interview with every Atlantic Hockey team would have been conducted for better understanding of the league's social media strategies. Due to time restrictions, the survey was not able to run longer than the allotted amount of time

which could have potentially reduced the number of respondents. The survey was also denied access to the university wide email message center because it is being used for emergency messages at this time.

Future Research

The limitations of this study offer future opportunities to understand deeper meanings of social media use in relation to fan engagement, interaction, creating athlete-fan relationships and the development of loyalty in order to drive revenue sales. It would be interesting to see athletes' point of views on how social media channels are ran and what content they feel could make the team's online presence flourish. It would also be worth expanding the study to higher level playing such as the East Coast Hockey League or the American Hockey League, that still are not quite at NHL level of recognition but have a strong and loyal fan base. Similar research amongst other collegiate athletics would also be helpful in understanding how the use of social media can advance sports marketing.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Survey

Hockey Social Media Preferences

Q1 When were you born?

- Baby Boomer: Born 1944 - 1964 (1)
 - Generation X: Born 1965 - 1980 (2)
 - Millennial: Born 1981 - 1996 (3)
 - Post-Millennial / Generation Z: Born 1997 - TBD (4)
-

Q2 What is your gender?

- Male (1)
 - Female (2)
 - Other (3)
-

Q3 Do you participate in sports?

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
-

Q4 If you answered yes to the previous question, which ones?

Q5 What is your primary social media platform?

- Facebook (1)
 - Instagram (2)
 - Twitter (3)
 - Snapchat (4)
 - Team Website (5)
-

Q6 How much does hockey interest you?

	Strongly Interested (1)	Somewhat Interested (2)	Neither Interested or Not Interested (3)	Somewhat Not Interested (4)	Strongly Not Interested (5)
Rate the statement above (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q7 Have you attended college hockey games?

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
-

Q8 Do you have knowledge about the NCAA Division 1 Atlantic Hockey Association? (Team Examples: RIT, Robert Morris, AIC, Mercyhurst, Air For)

	Definitely yes (1)	Probably yes (2)	Neutral (3)	Probably not (4)	Definitely not (5)
Rate the statement above (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q9 How much does Atlantic Hockey interest you?

	Strongly Interested (1)	Somewhat Interested (2)	Neither Interested or Not Interested (3)	Somewhat Not Interested (4)	Strongly Not Interested (5)
Rate the statement above (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q10 Are you aware that Atlantic Hockey teams have social media?

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
-

Q11 What types of social media content do you discover news about Atlantic Hockey? (Select all that apply)

- Facebook Post (1)
 - Facebook Stories (2)
 - Instagram Post (3)
 - Instagram Story (4)
 - Twitter Post (5)
 - Snapchat Story (6)
 - Team Website (7)
 - None of the above (8)
-

Q12 What time of the day are you most likely to be on social media?

- Morning (1)
 - Afternoon (2)
 - Evening (3)
-

Q13 What specific content are you most interested in seeing? (Select the following)

- Starting Lineups (1)
 - Live Updates (2)
 - Game Highlights (3)
 - Player News / Interviews (4)
 - Team News (5)
 - Player Takeovers (6)
 - Community Involvement (7)
-

Q14 Is there media missing that you would like to see more of? (Ex: more post game interviews)

Q15 Are you more likely to check the team's website or social media for updates?

- Website (1)
 - Social media (2)
-

Q22 Social media helps develop better connections between athletes and fans

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Somewhat agree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat disagree (5)	Disagree (6)	Strongly disagree (7)
Rate the statement above (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q18 Social media enables better communication between fans and athletic teams

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Somewhat agree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat disagree (5)	Disagree (6)	Strongly disagree (7)
Rate the statement above (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q19 I find communication via social media useful and effective

	Extremely useful (1)	Moderately useful (2)	Slightly useful (3)	Neither useful nor useless (4)	Slightly useless (5)	Moderately useless (6)	Extremely useless (7)
Rate the statement above (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q20 I prefer to see images, gifs and videos rather than just text

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Somewhat agree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat disagree (5)	Disagree (6)	Strongly disagree (7)
Rate the above statement (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q21 Visual graphics are important to me

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Somewhat agree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat disagree (5)	Disagree (6)	Strongly disagree (7)
Rate the statement above (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q22 How often do you use social media while watching a sporting event?

- I post or comment multiple times every game (1)
 - I post or comment every game at least once (2)
 - I check in every game multiple times but don't post (3)
 - Only when something crazy happens (5)
 - Rarely (6)
 - Never (7)
-

Q16 How likely are you to attend a college hockey game?

Extremely likely Moderately likely Slightly likely Neither likely nor unlikely Slightly unlikely Moderately unlikely Extremely unlikely

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Rate the statement above ()	
-----------------------------	--

Q23 Please enter you email for a chance to be selected for the \$50.00 Amazon gift card

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Social Media channels

- What are your goals and overall purpose for using social media?
- Who is your target audience?
- What social media channels are currently used?

Social Media Strategy

- Goals and objectives
 - How many posts per day?
 - How often you use photos, gifs, videos?
 - Which kind posts do you find get more interaction than others?
 - How often do you try to engage with fan comments?
 - Is there a schedule created for online postings of games and events coming up?
(What software do you use)
- Marketing strategies during winning and losing streaks – how do you change your channel to suit either of these?
- In the past season, which campaigns do you believe were very successful?
 - What made them successful?
 - On the other hand, what was a campaign that didn't quite go as expected?
- During the off-season how often do you try to post compared to during the season?
- Is there a particular channel that your more relaxed/comedic on compared to one that is more serious?

Additional

- What areas of your media do you see as your strong suits?
- What areas do you think could use some improvement?
- Do you have any additional comments you would like to make?