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Perceptions on Implementing a Comprehensive Athletic Website and Online Streaming Service for Kentucky High Schools

Cover Page Footnote

We would like to thank Mrs. Karen Doran for editing the paper.

Perceptions on Implementing a Comprehensive Athletic Website and Online Streaming Service for Kentucky High Schools

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Abstract - Student participation in interscholastic athletics reached record levels in 2019-20 for the third consecutive year in Kentucky (KHSAA, 2020). Sport marketers have strongly advocated social media as a powerful and effective tool to promote sporting events at all levels. However, existing studies rarely focus on the trend for promoting interscholastic sports through social media platforms. This study examined the potential of an interactive website and online streaming service focusing on interscholastic sports may provide to high schools in Kentucky. After evaluating more than 102 high school athletic websites, the authors found schools were in need to improve the current website by replacing outdated and insufficient contents and empty links. Features such as players' biographies, statistics, photo galleries, archives, records, video highlights and advertisements for local businesses and sponsors were ideal website contents. Based on the interview responses of 16 athletic administrators, the authors concluded the development of a live-streaming platform and interactive website would benefit various stakeholders (i.e., parents, students, sponsors, administrators, and collegiate coaches/recruiters) in many ways. Strategies, challenges, and recommendations for maintaining the website with streaming features were further discussed and made.

Keywords - Athletic website, interscholastic sports, online streaming,

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners – This study highlighted the importance and practicality of establishing a permanent job (or intern) position for handling the school district's athletic website, social media, and online digital platforms. In addition, the authors reiterated the benefits of utilizing various aforementioned platforms to promote female sports and less popular sport programs (such as tennis, wrestling, and swimming) and boost the online sales for apparels.

Introduction

Student participation in interscholastic athletics reached record levels in 2019-20 for the third consecutive year in Kentucky at a total of 107,166 rostered participants (KHSAA, 2020). Evidently, interscholastic sports have become a “big business” with ESPN and more media broadcasting live competitions. Interscholastic sports are viewed as a powerful tool to generate revenue for the schools and unite the community. Over 19,000 high schools provided sports playing opportunities for nearly eight million students (Gardner, 2012). For this reason, more high schools recognize the importance of developing effective marketing schemes to promote their athletic program, showcase their student-athletes for recruiting purposes, and attract local businesses for collaboration. Undoubtedly, the operation of interscholastic sports has become more

commercialized while mimicking the practices of professional and collegiate sports. At the professional and collegiate level, sport marketers often advocate the use of social media and the internet as an effective means for promoting sporting events or informing the clients (Attwood, 2013; Mulcahy, 2019). However, there are not many existing studies devoted to promotional trends for interscholastic sports through social media and internet platforms (Gardner, 2012). In this study, the authors plan to examine the marketability of a proposed interactive website with potential online streaming capability for Kentucky high school athletics. The proposed website will provide fans with an opportunity to view live competitions and statistics from anywhere. With the service offered by this interactive website, the high schools can expose their talented athletes for recognition and foster business collaboration and community relations through this interactive platform with their community. In order to justify the need and potential of this proposed website, the authors took two different research approaches to examine the potential of an interactive website and online streaming service may provide. First, the authors attempted to evaluate more than 100 existing high school athletic websites in Kentucky to identify the needs for improving the current website. Furthermore, the authors collected numerous in-state high school athletic directors' insights and opinions on their expectations on the contents and features of an ideal athletic website and their preference toward the streaming service through direct interviews, written survey, and secondary sources. Hopefully, the findings can help compose an ideal plan for delivering a comprehensive athletic website with streaming feature for all member schools of the Kentucky High School Athletic Association (KHSAA).

Literature Review

The popularity and financial aspect of interscholastic athletics

It is undeniable that interscholastic sports have turned into a big business. There are more fans attending high school sporting events than collegiate or professional events. According to the announcement of National Federation of High School Associations (NFHS) in 2011, high school sporting event attendance exceeded 500 million people across all sports. Basketball (both boys' and girls' teams combined) and football were the two most attended sports with 170 million and 166 million, respectively (Chau, 2017). More encouragingly, the overall attendance of all sports is expected to rise in the years to come. Ticket sales for football and basketball practically dictate the survival of many high school athletic programs (Palka, 2009). It is not uncommon to see a powerful and popular football program generates more than \$100,000 in revenues per season. A well-attended football game can bring in a great amount of money that represents 10% of an athletic department's annual budget (Kolenich, 2018).

In general, the revenue sources for high school sports are very similar to college sports. Revenues generally came from ticket sales, sponsorships, advertisement, naming rights for stadiums, and broadcasting fees (Koba, 2012). It is not a surprise that companies and broadcasting agencies are actively involved in high school sports to enhance business opportunities. The number of people who attend high school is three times the number of college attendees (Koba, 2012). For this reason, companies are very eager to engage in sponsorship and naming right deals, because they recognize how much exposure high school sports across the country are receiving (Chau, 2017). Businesses at the local and national level can benefit from interscholastic sponsorship programs by giving back to the community and increasing their brand awareness and sales (Dayton, 2007; Forsyth, 2000). Broadcasting agencies love to televise the high school sports

because a high volume of fans can identify themselves with the young athletes as they too have played high school sports in the past (Koba, 2012). With a strong fan base and enormous popularity, high school sports are an ideal market to reach various stakeholders in all types of the demographics (Chau, 2017).

Online marketing for interscholastic sports

In order to advertise various products and services to more fans, attract more media coverage, and increase onsite event attendance, each high school athletic program must operate with a well-rounded strategic marketing plan and effective promotional tools. Traditionally, local companies rely on radio or television broadcasting and newspaper to spread their names and retain awareness (Chau, 2017; Forsyth, 2000). Today, it seems like a standard norm for all levels of sport organizations to adopt online platforms to conduct marketing related activities. Evidently, many high school websites have changed from a once glorified bulletin board to a crucial marketing platform for schools and districts (Mitchell, 2019). Official athletic websites are the most imminent domain that offer the first impression about the school's and district's brand to people. The Internet serves as a venue for an organization to promote athletics departments by disseminating information to viewers of their websites. A report of Pew Research showed that 52% of U.S. adult users of the internet specifically go online to learn about sport scores and sport information (Pew Research, 2019). That being said, there is no doubt that having an online platform to market athletics holds value. As a huge part of the school and community culture, athletic websites often feature athletics news, schedules, rosters, scores, as well as videos and live tweets that serve students, parents, school staffs and all other community members (Carlson et al., 2003; Mitchell, 2019). Recommendations for improving or operating a well-communicated website often include: (1) maintaining a truly mobile-first design; (2) importing purposeful contents to communicate a school's brand; (3) creating navigation patterns that lead visitors to the most vital information; (4) offering unique brand identity, contents, and consistent navigation experience; and responding to inquiries and questions in a promptly fashion with courtesy (Carlson et al., 2003; Chung, 2007; Eason, 2007; Mitchell, 2019).

More interscholastic athletic websites are trying to extend their content to all grades (or schools) and all sports teams by integrating social media pages the websites. Due to the massive interest of the public toward the athletics and sports, sports marketers of all levels are advertising their organizations and affiliated sponsors through social media. The interest and need for allowing the capability to video-stream the interscholastic sports events has also increased rapidly. Since starting its service nearly seven years ago in 2013, the National Federation of High Schools Association Network (NFHS Network) had video-streamed more than 230,000 events online, with 80,000 sport-specific events alone in 2018 (Modrovsky, 2019). The video-streaming business will continue to grow as more students participate in high school sports, more fans show their desire to watch the games, and more local businesses invest in sponsorship to build goodwill (Koba, 2012; Milner, 2019).

General Trends in Athletic Websites and Video-streaming Service

Although high school administrators may understand the rationale and benefits of utilizing online platforms (such as official websites, social media and streaming features) to promote their program and community partners, it is not easy to execute the marketing tasks from a practical standpoint. The authors introduced a few renowned examples of existing agencies dedicated to providing

marketing, online content delivery, and streaming services for high schools in the following paragraphs. Home Team Marketing (HTM) is a marketing firm that boasts its large-scale partnership with more than 60% of 18,000 high school schools in the nation. The firm contributes \$50M annually to its partner schools and provides services such as digital solutions, management of ticket sales (through a software program called Ticket Roar) and development of sponsorship networks.

More than 200,000 schools across the country use the free-of-charge communication platform, MaxPreps (under CBS Interactive) to delivery their athletic contents and information. The firm makes its money through corporate advertising and sponsorship, licensing data to other media outlets, and sales of photos. VNN is another agency that helps more than 2000 partner schools for their web contents. The company employs 63 team members and claims to function like ESPN.com specifically for interscholastic sports. It aims to make local communities rally around their high school teams by making information and communication more accessible.

NFHS Network began its stream service in 2013. Currently, the agency partners with more than 3,000 schools across the nation. NFHS Network would sell \$5,000 worth of camera equipment (two Pixellot camera systems) to the partner school and guarantee to cover eight main sports online. In general, the subscription fee for sports events is \$9.99 per month or \$70 per year. In addition, NFHS Network also helps its partner schools with digital ticketing management and establishment of eSports tournaments (Modrovsky, 2019).

Purpose of the study

The increase of student participation, fan attendance, media exposure, and sponsorship deals have made interscholastic athletics a potential lucrative money making machine. Sport marketers strongly advocate the use of website, social media, and streaming services to promote sporting events and attract sponsorships (Attwood, 2013). However, current existing studies rarely focus on the marketing trends and practices of interscholastic sports on the internet platforms. Most of the studies related to athletic websites' contents were focusing on the collegiate athletics and gender inequality of content coverages (Cooper, 2009; Cooper and Cooper, 2009; Mayo and Rosenthal, 2010; Smith, 2007). This study examined the current status of online platform of interscholastic sports and potential for introducing a streaming service for high school athletics to provide fans with live competitions and statistics from anywhere. It is assumed with this service, the high schools can expose their talented athletes for recognition and build an interactive platform with their community. The authors further sought for the inputs from interviewed athletic directors (ADs) concerning this potential business idea.

Methodology

To examine the potential need for developing an effective interactive online platform (including an athletic website with streaming feature) for marketing high school athletics, the authors took two different research approaches to generate the information. The authors evaluated the current status of more than 100 Kentucky high schools' athletic websites and identified the existing features and shortcomings of these websites. The authors' ultimate goal was to introduce a comprehensive athletic website model (with streaming feature) to all Kentucky high schools, so schools could replace their existing inadequate websites for better services. One hundred and two schools' official website were reviewed and analyzed by the authors within a three-week period in

September 2019. The sample schools were identified in two ways. The authors strategically chose to include all fifteen schools of KHSAA 16th region, which are in the eastern region of Kentucky. The socioeconomic status of residents in this region were considered to be at low or moderate level (compared to national average). The rest of the 87 schools were selected through a stratified sampling method from 293 affiliated members of the Kentucky High School Athletic Association (KHSAA). Schools in this group had a greater average enrollment size than the 16th region schools. Many of them were located in big metropolitan areas of Lexington and Louisville, or other county-seat cities. Under a standard evaluation process, each school's official athletic website was reviewed for the availability of seven specific components: (1) rosters of players and coaches including their biographies, (2) photos of sport teams, (3) video highlights, (4) season statistics and archives/records, (5) links to official social media pages (such as Facebook and Twitter), (6) polls for issues and questions, and (7) marketing features designated for apparel sales, contribution (donation), list of sponsors and advertisement.

The second phase of study took place from October 2019 to February 2020. The authors communicated with 20 athletic directors to solicit qualitative responses on topics related to their expectations on contents and features of an ideal athletic website and their preference toward the streaming service. All fifteen ADs of the 16th region were given a 10 to 15-minutes phone interview for comments. Five ADs from other than the 16th region responded to the qualitative survey questions by emails. The interview questions covered three major topics. First, the ADs got to share their perceptions and expectations about what an ideal interactive athletic website should include and be able to offer. Secondly, ADs shared the strategies and challenges for managing the existing website and their various concerns (i.e., staffing, cost, and sponsorship availabilities) on moving toward a new interactive website. Finally, ADs addressed their willingness to implement the streaming service for the events and discuss their expectations on how the service might benefit their program.

Findings

The authors reviewed and performed a content analysis on 102 selected athletic websites. There were eight schools which did not have an official athletic website featuring their athletic program. About 25% of the schools' websites' contents and framework were powered by the aforementioned commercial firms such as VNN, MaxPreps, and Big Team. Another 44% of schools ($n = 45$) directly used the system provided by the KHSAA to disseminate athletic information. There was about one-third of the schools that independently ran their own athletic website. In general, it was fair to conclude no consistent format or displayed patterns existed among all the reviewed websites. Discrepancies on amount of information were found among various schools' websites. Even if schools utilized the website framework provided by those commercial firms, inadequate content and missing information (i.e., empty webpage with an Error 404 message) were found in many of those websites. Numerous schools still had their athletic webpage linked to official school or district website. Table 1 showed the results of identified ideal features embedded in reviewed athletic websites. Of ten observed criteria (features of contents or service links), event schedules are the most consistently posted items that were found in 60.2% of websites. Photos/Pictures were the second common item found in 43% of websites. Only 30% of schools posted two prevalent social media links (Facebook and Twitter pages) on their official athletic website. The majority of websites did not contain complete rosters or biographies of players, highlight of video clips, and historical records or relevant statistics. Those websites did not actively promote their community

sponsors or allow their fans to purchase athletic apparel, tickets or other spirited items online, either.

Table 1. Results of Web Content Analyses (n = 98)

Feature	Availability	
	Yes	No
Biography	20.4%	79.6%
Schedule	60.2%	39.8%
Video-highlights	16.3%	83.7%
Photos/Pictures	42.9%	57.1%
Facebook	29.6%	70.4%
Twitter	33.7%	66.3%
Sponsors	20.4%	79.6%
Online Sales	26.5%	73.5%
Polls	18.4%	81.6%
Records/Archives	24.5%	75.5%

The authors purposefully compared the difference of website contents and features between the schools of the 16th region and other schools. The result of this comparison was displayed in Table 2. Besides the schedule and photos, which were more commonly found in all websites, websites of 16th region schools ($n = 15$) significantly lacked six essential features ($p < .01$), such as video-highlights, Facebook link, Twitter link, sponsors page, polls, and records/archives, when compared to large schools or city schools ($n = 87$).

Table 2. Comparison in Availability of Web Contents

Feature	Region	Frequency count
Video-highlight	16.00	0%
	Others	19.8%**
Facebook	16.00	6.7%
	Others	34.9%**
Twitter	16.00	6.7%
	Others	39.5%**
Sponsors	16.00	0%
	Others	25.6%**
Polls	16.00	0%
	Others	20.9%**
Records/Archives	16.00	13.3%
	Others	29.1%**

** $p < .01$

Interview responses from athletic directors

Based on the results of the interview responses, ADs expressed that stories/news, schedules, rosters, scores and statistics, video highlights and live tweets were the essential features of an official athletic website. In addition, some ADs suggest several following contents were also important and should to be included in the website. The ADs’ suggestions include: (1) mission and the history of school, (2) separate and exclusive contents for each sport/program, (3) sports medicine and risk management information, and (4) policies and regulations (i.e., transfer rules, eligibility rules, and sportsmanship like conducts, etc.) imposed by the athletic association and district.

Nearly all ADs recognized the importance and impact of the use of social media. However, the practices of utilizing social media for promoting athletic events varied drastically among all interviewees. A couple of schools aggressively used live tweets to send out promo-code for game time promotions and onsite entertainments during the competitions. These schools used a text alert system through the Remind App to text game schedule and score updates to fans. Apparently, more schools still relied on Facebook to communicate with their fans and passively posted the game schedules and sports news on it. Although more than 75% of schools had social media pages to feature athletic information, they were often on a separate link or covered a handful of individual teams. There was no coordinated effort by the athletic departments to provide centralized messages or contents. Except for two schools, no athletic-related social media page utilized this platform to advertise or promote their sponsors.

In terms of management of the website content, the coaches usually run and monitor the social media pages for their individual teams. Some schools allowed the booster club members to manage the social media pages; however, they had to adhere to the school's guidelines to operate. In the majority of the cases, the schools did have a designated individual to maintain their athletics website. The ADs were the primary person to handle the contents of the official website. Sometimes, the principal and assistant principal would help manage the website contents. Since those individuals were extremely busy with their administrative duties, office assistant, district technology coordinator, or public relations staff at central office would also step up to update athletic websites. Several ADs addressed the need for additional manpower to help them update videos, pictures, and news. Three ADs indicated their move to a commercial design web template was an attempt to combat this issue and connected the website with all social media platforms. This would make all the announced information sent out simultaneously through all outlets in sync. Nevertheless, they all fell behind on this task. An AD stated at his school, there was an athletic department staff member who was hired to manage each of the social media pages and websites.

A quarter of ADs mentioned that online streaming of games was something they had been debating. Interestingly, a local cable broadcasting service had a contract with schools to cover four counties' (Elliott, Menifee, Morgan, and Wolfe) games on television. To minimize the impact of live broadcasting on the attendance, the cable company had a deal with schools to air a 30-minute highlight of the games, along with halftime entertainment and interviews with coaches and players. The ADs were concerned about the potential financial profit of the streaming service as the new deal might not be better than the one with the local cable company. ADs also worried the live streaming service would affect the fans' motivation to attend the live events. A couple of ADs mentioned the use of streaming service provided by NFHS Network. No direct information related to the royalty fee paid by the NFHS Network was addressed. However, these ADs referred to two \$1500 student scholarships available for athletes to apply while partnering with the NFHS Network, but they did not like the financial rewards only being given to limited certain individuals. Overall, most of the ADs were in favor of option of streaming their events online. They believed the service would allow many family members and friends who could not attend the games to stay engaged and supportive. However, there were some issues that caused the ADs to hold their reservations in launching a streaming service. Those problems include: (1) the poor internet or Wi-Fi service quality for fans in the eastern Kentucky region, (2) lack of personnel to film all of the events to handle all the demands, and (3) unpredictability about the quality of streaming service and revenue. An AD specifically pointed out the need of training courses to educate school administrators about the program and production process. Students can also learn about the process of producing video projects. Furthermore, streaming services should extend to offer more educational courses and subjects online as well.

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Features such as players' biographies, statistics, photo galleries, archives, records, video highlights, and advertisements for local businesses and sponsors were recognized as ideal website contents based on the interview responses of 16 athletic administrators. These findings coincided with the concepts suggested by the past literature (Carlson et al., 2003; Mitchell, 2019). Apparently, less than 40% of all schools' official athletic websites featured interactive social media websites (according to Table 2). This finding reflected that there is still room for improvement to expand the features of most schools' official website. The overall responses from interviewed ADs

suggested the development of a live-streaming platform and interactive website would benefit various stakeholders (i.e., parents, students, sponsors, administrators, and collegiate coaches/recruiters) in many ways. Past literature has stated creating an athletic website with streaming capability can: (1) increase awareness of program; (2) attract fans; (3) expose talented athletes; and (4) improve the overall aesthetic look of the site and school image (Chau, 2017; Eason, 2007; Koba, 2012; Milner, 2019). The main issues derived from the findings were two-fold: (1) lack of evidence on the maximum efficiency of various website features and services, and (2) lack of support in managing web content. These two issues often go hand-in-hand together. When ADs struggled with their time and effort to upload news, photos, and video clips, then the website content would become insufficient and outdated. The framework designed by the commercial agencies (i.e., VNN and MaxPreps, etc.) was supposed to make things easier and more profitable for the athletic programs. However, it revealed more shortcoming of the website service. Less than 27% of the schools attempted to sell their spirited products and apparel online. Community sponsors were either not well-recognized or did not offer links on the official athletic website for people to connect with. ADs would remain confidential or shun away by not discussing the actual revenue generated while using commercially-designed websites. Three ADs complained their predecessors had negotiated the deals and adopted the systems, which left them no clue about how profits were shared or how additional support could be demanded. More grass-root marketing efforts and development of relationships with local businesses still needs to be done personally by school coaches and administrators.

The authors believe that well-planned in-house operations of online platforms for districts' athletic programs can help balance the equal exposure of both male and female athletics. Evidently, past many studies showed male sports teams and athletes received more coverage than female teams and athletes (Butler and Sagas, 2006; Cooper, 2009; Cooper and Cooper, 2009; Whisenant and Pedersen, 2004). If schools maintain all types of media coverage of their athletics in-house, the designated personnel can monitor both quality and quantity of coverage to avoid the issue of inequality of gender coverage. As social media taking the main promotional stage, more female athletic programs had used social media and live streaming platform to attract recognition and promote their programs and events (Chen et al, 2016; Kim and Kim, 2020). All types of web-enabled technical developments and electronic marketing services should be essentially equipped to help increase numbers of fan attendance, build fan loyalty and the educational institution's reputation, boost apparel sales, recruit top athletes, and raise funds (Smith, 2007). Using the web-enabled technologies to promote high school athletics can influence the students' and community fans' social and psychological motivation, thus promote the consumption of sports on smartphones (Chan-Olmsted and Xiao, 2019). Kim and Kim, 2020).

There are mysteries remaining on how these commercial agencies made profits. There was no transparency on how commercial agencies provide technical support to improve contents or manpower to build sponsorship deals. Although it may be unfair to question whether or not many of these commercial agencies have overstated their success and quality of service, the small sampling of schools within the eastern Kentucky region clearly do not reveal the complete benefit reaped by partnering with these agencies. Furthermore, social media sites of each school's athletic program still operate individually. There was no effort being done to coordinate all these webpages under one hub which would create a unique identity.

Due to the aforementioned issues and shortcomings, the authors attempted to remind the ADs about the potential of financial incentives for operating an interactive website with a streaming

system. If things work accordingly, an interactive platform could allow remote fans to view competitions, network with each other, attract local businesses and sponsors, and display schools' athletic talents. There would be many positive advantages for all the schools affiliated in the state athletic federation to support and adopt a unified system to maintain website contents. Strategies could be further developed to secure donations and business sponsorships. Then professional staffs can be hired to promote streaming services and sell personal and group subscriptions. By centralizing the social media, streaming platform, and official athletic website, more concerted promotional information and ideas can be delivered through various channels. With more member schools working with the same system (whether it is developed in-house or outsourced), the cost can also be driven down.

At this moment, no school within the observed region has provided a comprehensive athletic website like our proposed model. The authors believe there would be an ample business opportunity for the state federation to start developing such a website. The athletic website is the primary location that informs and engages all types of stakeholders in the local community. The authors made an analogy by relating that adopting a website service system to purchasing an insurance policy. The system offered by the commercial agencies to the surveyed schools is like an expensive privatized insurance handed out to the low-income individuals. These clients would not be able to fully utilize the benefits covered by that insurance. Therefore, the idea for creating alternative affordable insurance options has frequently been advocated and discussed in our society. The authors' vision of a statewide website system for all member schools to adopt will be like championing an economical health insurance for all. This means all schools could adopt the website template to manage the contents and marketing activities with a reasonable price, adequate technical and logistical support. More importantly, the development of the website service can be further magnified by branching the service into the marketing and fundraising components later. Since March of 2020, the novel coronavirus (CORVID-19) pandemic had impacted all levels of sports severely. As a result, many sport industries and organizations have been extensively relying on digital contents to maintain engagement with consumers and fans (Euromonitor International, 2020). The resume of high school fall sports with live spectators is still a huge uncertainty. In case the high school federation does not allow the mass audience to attend the live competitions, the establishment of the livestreaming will be a vital and needy service for the avid interscholastic fans.

In order to make an interactive website function at its maximum capacity, there must be experienced and dedicated staff to handle athletic information, photos, statistics, and videos. The authors also believe the districts and schools can develop permanent positions, such as a director of external relations, to conduct sponsorship sales and promotional duties (i.e., selling advertising banner, radio commercials, and sponsorship exchanges). Kolenich (2018) stated these activities had helped schools collect \$250 to \$1,500 per case. Many universities sport management students can also be hired as interns or part-time staff to assist this individual for collaborative community projects and streaming production. ADs have stated the price tag for the individual subscription can fall in the range of \$5.00 to \$9.00 per month. The authors believe additional future studies should be conducted to investigate the potential number of subscriptions and sponsorship opportunities. Then, a more accurate estimation of marketing related revenue can be made. This estimation is vital because it would help the administrators determine whether to continuously renew the local cable's broadcasting contract or not.

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