

College Football Coaches and Social Media: A Qualitative Content Analysis of SEC Football
Program Facebook Fan Pages

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CHAPTER 1: PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Introduction

The role that sports and sports teams play in modern American culture is tremendous. As a result, public relations professionals involved in sports face a growing and difficult challenge. With the massive amount of money generated by sports and sports teams, the large fan bases expect nothing short of victory from their teams. Sports teams, as organizations, face no bigger problem than the failure to achieve victory. Losing games on the field, on the court, or in the rink can often equate to immense monetary losses for the organization. These losses can come as a result of reduced ticket sales, attendance at games, endorsements, team apparel, and more. One result of the importance of sports to a community is an increased pressure to succeed on the members of a sports organization. The athletes, team president, athletic director, or head coach are a few of the members of a sports team who are under great pressure from their community to achieve success. “But, to whom much is given, much is also expected. And that is particularly true in coaching” (Vince Dooley as cited in Banhart, 2008, p. 87). In the modern sports world, a team’s success or failure directly affects the paychecks, fundraising, or job security of the members of the organization.

The Enormity of College Football

To put it simply, public relations is important in college football because of money. Researching this area of public relations is vital because college football in America is so huge. To give some context, the total revenue for the athletics department at the University of Texas was more than \$165 million in 2014 (“NCAA Finances,” n.d.). Five of the top ten athletic departments in total revenue are located in the American South, and four of these five are members of the Southeastern Conference (SEC). The four SEC schools are Alabama,

Florida, Louisiana State University (LSU) and Tennessee (“NCAA Finances,” n.d.). With so many college athletic departments accumulating total revenues nearly \$100 million dollars and some even higher, there certainly is no debate as to the importance of researching the public relations side of this business.

The salaries of today’s college football head coaches also provide evidence of the importance of further research for the public relations side of college football. In 2014, seventy-two college football head coaches earned over one million dollars each (“NCAA Salaries,” n.d.). Five of the top ten paid coaches work in the American South, four of those coach in the SEC, and the highest paid coach is Nick Saban, who will earn over 7 million dollars in 2014 (“NCAA Salaries,” n.d.). College football is truly an enormous business with potentially crucial considerations for the research and study of public relations.

Effects of Negative Fan Perceptions

Due to the monetary size of college football, the perception of the fan in regard to how their team is performing can have huge consequences. Different perceptions by the fans of a sports organization can potentially directly affect the monetary gains or losses of that organization. However, negative consequences of poor performance by a sports team are not limited only to monetary issues. A common result of a team’s poor performance and negative fan perceptions is the firing of the team’s head coach. Many times, the sports organization will decide that the best answer to solve the program’s woes is to part ways with the head coach and replace him or her. Often times, this will even include the organization voiding a current contract they have with the head coach and spending large amounts of money to buy out the contract and replace the head coach. There is certainly an increasing pressure and

emphasis on public relations in sports not only for the organization itself, but also for the head coach.

Consequently, the important question for public relations professionals in sports concerns what steps to take to most effectively relate to the public and fans of a sports team that endures a tough loss or a long period of consistent losing. Public relations professionals can use this information to improve the status of the organization, and also to provide increased head coach job security. Any head coach of a large sports team would be wise to use the tools available to him or her through the public relations department, such as creating a Facebook page to establish a method for two-way communication between the fans and the head coach or athletic department.

The Role of the Internet and Social Media

Currently, there is limited scholarly communication research regarding social networking and media sites such as Facebook as they relate to sports. However, that does not negate the fact that social media websites have become popular fora for discussing and obtaining news and sports information. As a result of the popularity of using sites such as Facebook to discuss sports information, the fans of a sports team now have a public medium for communicating their beliefs and opinions about a sports organization. One of the most popular forms of a social media web page that fans use is a team's Facebook fan page. A Facebook fan page is an online site where sports organizations can post public announcements to be viewed by the fans. Facebook also allows for people who own a Facebook account to make public comments on the fan page. This social medium allows for fans to almost instantly communicate their beliefs, thoughts, and opinions about a sports

organization in public. This is a common scenario for major sports organizations all over the country.

Social Media Effects on Coaches

As the popularity of using such web pages has increased, so has the potential for fans to voice negative opinions about members of their sports team. Players, coaches, athletic directors, managers, and others are all potential targets of negative remarks via social media. Many times, negative opinions that the fans voice call for the firing of the head coach. For just about any sports team, the head coach is a figure head and the “face” of the team. This position can result in increased credit or blame for the results of the team’s performance. As these negative opinions about the coach are voiced, the public sentiment of a coach can potentially quickly change. Head coaches of sports teams that are struggling to win are often ridiculed on the Facebook fan pages. When there is a large outcry against the head coach of a team, the sports organization may feel increased pressure to fire the coach. Clearly, social media sites create a source of potential negativity that can severely affect members of the sports organization, particularly the head coach.

The Purpose of This Study

This study proposes to analyze and take an in-depth look at the relationship between sports organizations and social media web pages via Facebook. This study will examine the use of Facebook as a tool for fans to publicly voice their beliefs and opinions. By doing so, this study will further develop current research regarding the communication theories, diffusion of innovations, and the hero’s journey, by examining details regarding the use of the innovation of social media in the sports world. This study will examine how the use of social media compares between different fan groups. Understanding this comparison will

increase the existing communication research on social media and diffusion of innovations theory.

Finally, the overall focus of this study will be to conduct a qualitative content analysis of college football Facebook fan pages of SEC football teams. By qualitatively analyzing these fan pages, this study will show examples of different fan groups using social media to express their opinions of the head football coach. This study will analyze the opinions of SEC fans, and how those opinions are expressed to the public via Facebook.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Nick Saban on “60 Minutes”

College football plays an enormous role in modern American culture. This fact was evident in a recent episode of the very popular television show “60 Minutes” featuring an interview with University of Alabama Head Football Coach Nick Saban. The interview aired on November 3, 2013. Armen Keteyian interviewed Saban and made several comments showing just how important Nick Saban was to the culture in Alabama. “Today in Alabama, Saban is treated like a god” and, “He is worshipped by his rabid fan base” (Mihailovich, 2013) were two quotes from Keteyian that showed just how important Saban was to many people in Alabama. The University of Alabama Chancellor Robert Witt said, “Nick Saban is the best financial investment this University has ever made” (Mihailovich, 2013). These comments clearly indicated just how important of a figure Nick Saban and other head coaches can be in American culture.

The Magnitude of Sports

As sports continue to increase in popularity and in overall magnitude, understanding the public relations side of a program becomes increasingly essential because more people are watching and more money is at stake. Robert Washington and David Karen (2001) researched the relationship between sports and society. Several of the vast effects of our sports culture are discussed, but perhaps the most obvious are the monetary effects. According to Washington and Karen, “Sports, indeed, constitute a major part of the US economy: the expenditures in 1998 for commercial sports totaled \$17.7 billion. . . . These numbers don’t even include the payments made by television to air sporting events” (2001, p. 187).

College football is no stranger to large expenditures for television events as well as head coaching salaries. With such large amounts of money delegated to college football, there is utmost importance for effective public relations from the college or university and their football program.

Money is not the only issue of concern. According to Washington and Karen (2001), “Sports get a separate section in every major daily newspaper; they fill stadiums and arenas around the world on a regular basis as people root, often maniacally, for their home teams” (p. 188). As fans cheer on their favorite teams by watching at the stadium or on television, the fans associate themselves heavily with the team. The local college football program is a source of social and cultural identity for the fans. According to Washington and Karen, “Mediated sport has several consequences: it creates a pseudo-social relationship between viewer and athlete” (2001, p. 203). In the same fashion, fans are also creating this same false relationship with the leader of their beloved football program, the head coach. Through Facebook, the fans are increasingly connected with their program, and this false relationship becomes even stronger. Thus, the importance for understanding the effects of social media and how its use by the fans can directly affect the head coach is even greater. Only when public relations practitioners have a greater understanding of social media and sports can they begin to use it as a positive and effective tool.

In order to best understand and study issues regarding social media, the research explored diffusion of innovations theory. Using this communication theory helped to explain the adoption and use of social media by the different fan bases of sports teams around the country. Understanding how the innovation of adopting Facebook fan pages as a means of communication has evolved over time will clarify the causes, effects, and overall influence of

Facebook fan pages on sports communities. Definitions and elements of diffusion of innovations theory were researched through literature review as well as details of several previous studies regarding the theory. In addition, the literature review took an in-depth look at the link between diffusion of innovations theory and the elements of social media. Finally, the review of the literature contained what Reinard (2001) called, “working hypotheses,” which he defined as, “Suggestions that might be used to probe the area of inquiry, but they are not the highly detailed hypotheses that one often finds in quantitative studies” (p. 40). These working hypotheses consisted of predictions and potential effects on sports communities caused by the diffusion of Facebook fan pages.

The Economics of College Football

According to Byrd, Mixon, and Wright (2013), “Division I college football coaches have found a marked increase in base salary in recent years as TV contracts and media exposure have led to an exponential rise in college football popularity” (p. 224-25). College football is a very popular sport with millions of fans watching their team play every Saturday during the fall. With this being the case, a coach’s job is insecure and under speculation. Because of this, John Fizel, Elizabeth Gustafson, and Lawrence Hadley (1999) explained, “Coaches are typically signed to short-term contracts and are not covered by tenure and promotion rules” (p. 15). This showed that coaches are rarely promised their job for very long. They are reviewed on a weekly basis, and if the fans show disgust for the coach, then the coach’s job can immediately be in danger. Fizel et al. (1999) also explained, “Coaches, in general, and football coaches, in particular, are paid much more than professors” (p. 15). This fact makes the coach an important part of the finances of the school. If coaches are not producing consistently, then the athletic departments are quicker to fire them and find

somebody who produces. Keeping the coach is not just a question of a won and loss record, but an issue with the interest of the fan base as well. As the fans stay happy and keep attending the games, it is more likely a coach will keep his job.

Gustafson, Hadley, and Ruggiero (1999) explained that the owner of a professional team, or the athletic director of a college team, is in charge of the financial side of the organization. It is their job to make sure the team is attracting fans to create more income for the organization. Ultimately, if the team is unpopular, then the sporting event brings in far less money due to the low number of attendance. The athletic director of a college is also in charge of finding and hiring a coach that will lead the team to victory. According to Gustafson et al. (1999), “Owners pursue a dual objective that includes the financial success and the sports success of their business (team)” (p. 95). A reliable way to gauge the interest of a team’s fan base is by listening to what the fans are saying about the team. Before Facebook, it was more difficult to tell whether the fans had a positive opinion of the coach or organization. With the advent of Facebook, these conversations are happening where anyone can join or read them. If a fan base has negative opinions of the coach or organization, they voice this complaint on Facebook for others to see and comment on. This puts more pressure on the coach to keep the fans happy. It is vital for the coach to win and sustain the fan’s allegiance, or the financial side of the program is largely affected. If not, this would lead to an owner or athletic director needing to take action. Unfortunately, the action is typically in the form of a firing. In this way, the fans hold indirect influence on the job security of the coach.

Perhaps even more astounding than the economics of college football are the economics of just the Southeastern Conference (SEC) in the sport. The athletic budgets of the

twelve SEC schools in 2010 totaled higher than the gross domestic product (GDP) of 24 of the world's countries (Gibbs, 2010).

Another way to gauge the economic prosperity of the SEC is to look at the attendance. In 2008, over 6.3 million people attended a football game at an SEC stadium, which was the 28th straight year that the SEC has led all other conferences in this statistic (Samson et al., 2009). Also in 2008, six of the top ten schools for football game attendance came from the SEC. The head coaches in the SEC were also the most decorated and recognizable coaches. In 2008, the head coaches of SEC football teams had won more national titles than any other conference (Samson et al., 2009). Finally, the salaries of the coaches painted a clear picture of dominance for the SEC as, "Eight of the country's 24 highest-paid coaches work in the SEC, and no other league is close" (Samson et al., 2009, p. 28). Clearly, the SEC and their head coaches are the economic powerhouse of college football today.

Football Fandom

The rise of football fandom in America is greatly attributed to the relationship of sports and media technology over the past several years. There is perhaps no better example of this fact than the relationship between sports and the television. For decades now, television vastly increased the scope of sports. In the same manner, sports have created an even larger demand for televisions, advertisements, and sports media. According to Whannel (2009), "Of the various ways in which television has impacted upon social and cultural patterns, it can be argued that the impact on sport has been particularly dramatic" (p. 206).

Today, sports are one of the few events commonly viewed in group settings (Whannel, 2009). As Whannel (2009) observed, "If we live in an era of fragmentation, time

shift, and video-on-demand in which television viewing has ceased to be a shared collective and communal experience, major televised sporting events are the exception” (p. 205).

Indeed, sports are an entity in our culture that are often shared socially and the advent of Facebook continues to push these boundaries even further.

Television has a tremendous impact on sports. Large sporting events are now creating monetary revenues that are extremely high. The players as well as the coaches of today’s major sports are easily recognizable in our popular culture (Whannel, 2009). It is for this reason that the salaries of major college football coaches are in the millions, and only getting higher. Whannel (2009) described this phenomenon by saying, “Top sport performers have become major global celebrities with matching earning power” (p. 214). With this increase in revenues, the pressure and public outcry to win at all costs is enormous. As television changed the face of sports in the later twentieth century, it is now social media that continues to increase the pressures and overall enormity of sports.

The SEC is truly where football fans are the most fanatical and where football plays the biggest role in everyday life. Mike Slive, the commissioner of the SEC firmly believes that it was the passion of the fans that allowed the SEC to win seven recent national championships (Anderson, 2013). “The difference between being commissioner of the SEC and what the rest of us do is that in the SEC it’s a 24/7, 365-day-a-year job. The rest of us can take breaks. You can’t. The fans there are just different than anywhere else” (Slive as cited in Anderson, 2013, para. 1). In 2012, an average of over seventy-five thousand fans attended conference games, which was the highest in the country (Anderson, 2013).

Football in the South is truly a staple of the culture (Anderson, 2013). “In the South our youngsters learn early on that competition in sports, and football in particular, is

important to family, to towns, to regions. It becomes inculcated in the children. The passion is just so woven into the fabric of the culture of the South” (Slive as cited in Anderson, 2013, para. 3). As the head of the SEC, Slive’s comments about culture and just how important football is show the true fanaticism of the SEC fans. The extremely popular coaches in the SEC also believe in the power of their fans. Nick Saban views the fans as a great tool for recruiting and Mark Richt, the head football coach at the University of Georgia said, “The passion that people in the South have for the sport goes beyond what most would consider normal” (Anderson, 2013, para. 7).

Surely, there is an important connection between the head coach of an SEC football program and the fans. Facebook is one of those strong connections. According to Givens-Carroll and Slade (2012), “As fan bases of sports teams and readers of sports media have grown, both industries have been quickly adapting to the digital age of media, finding new and creative ways to reach out and connect to fans” (p. 159).

The Effect of the Fans

The head coach of a college football program has a lot of media attention, and those involved with the team are under constant pressure to keep the fans content. As technology increases, so does the number of people who are reached by the media. It does not take long for those with a vested interest in the sport to dislike a head coach and call for their resignation. The emergence of social media sites, such as Facebook, is hastening the process of fans being vocal and influential regarding the coach’s job security. Anyone with a Facebook login is able to voice his or her opinion on social media, and this opinion is read and responded to in a matter of seconds. The responses and comments are adopted by other individuals to reflect the opinions of the entire fan base. Through this form of

communication, a coach's job can be put into question by the fans of an organization. Those who comment, with praise or disgust, are ultimately making a difference regarding the job security of those involved. The fans are now a major component of athletic departments, as their voices are well-heard regarding the decisions of the organization. This review studies the relationship media, especially social media, has on a social system, specifically focusing on fans and their effect on a college football program and head coach.

To exhibit the influence a group of people have over social media, one must assume that the fans and their comments are influential. But can this be assumed? To show the effect that social media produces, Miller, Kitzinger, Williams, and Beharrell (1998) looked into the knowledge of AIDS, and how it went from a horror story to widespread caution. Miller et al. found that the knowledge of AIDS prior to the media's interference was minimal. Some of the public thought that only homosexuals could contract the illness, and still others thought it was a racial issue. According to Miller et al. (1998), "Much of this mistrust was rooted in the contradictory or changing reports of expert opinion and the perceived helplessness of science in the face of the AIDS epidemic" (p. 198). After the importance of the HIV virus hit the social media, the general population of the United States became aware. The condom sales shot up, and the AIDS helpline had more calls coming in than ever before (Miller et al., 1998). The example that Miller et al. (1998) brought up was one of social media spreading knowledge to the public and how quickly this type of communication was able to spread. In the topic of sports teams, the same concept happens with social media sites. A Facebook page has many fans commenting about the sports team. If the fans are making comments about firing the coach or calling for major changes, then the information being spread has an extremely large impact on a program. Contrarily, the topic might regard a fan's acceptance

and affirmation of the work of the coaching staff. In that case, the knowledge being made popular is the coach's good work and in turn, increased job security.

Another assumption that is made is that the fans are invested enough in the team to make comments that can truly change the ideas of the organization involved. Zillmann, Bryant, and Sapolsky (1979) had the idea that, "Destructive energy spontaneously builds up in the organism" (p. 310). This energy was released in the form of aggressive acts, and was intensified when the acts were part of a competition. Though, just watching these acts was a viable way to release the energy, and thus the craze for all sports was explained. Zillman et al. went on to point out that the enjoyment of a sport was directly tied to whether or not specific players, or the team as a whole, were doing well. Thus, when the team was not doing well it affected the fan and his or her enjoyment of the whole sport (Zillmann et al., 1979).

Zillman et al. (1979) furthered this idea by performing a study to see how invested a fan truly was with a certain team. The appreciation of a team was measured from audio-recordings of the fans from a college football game. Also, another way the researchers measured the enjoyment and disappointment of a certain play was by giving a survey to participants to rate their satisfaction of each play and the game as a whole. This study was also done with an NFL game. When the findings were compared they both showed a high level of devotion, but more so in the college game (Zillman et al., 1979). Zillman et al. (1979) explained this by saying that, "It has often been suggested that college contests generate more excitement than professional encounters because of far greater involvement on the part of the crowd" (p. 316). This study gave the impression that a fan was devoted to the team they cheered for, and the fan was emotionally involved with the successes and failures

of the organization. Because of this devotion, the fan undoubtedly shared these feelings on social media sites like Facebook.

Sport Psychology

Thomas Tutko and Jack Richards (1971) wrote on the psychology of the coaching career, and how the coaches affected the team and were affected themselves by outside sources. Tutko and Richards (1971) explained the power of the press by exclaiming that, “[The press] have been indirectly involved in deciding a number of athletic contests” (p. 173). Therefore, the press made a coach seem better or worse depending on what the fans heard from the press. Tutko and Richards (1971) claimed that the phrase, “The pen is mightier than the sword holds true in athletics the same as in other areas” (p. 173). There were studies done that displayed how a community accepted the views they saw in the media as the truth. The media then, were capable of adjusting the attitude of an entire group of people. If the press produced a newspaper article or broadcast with negative connotations about the team, then the fans read this and used the information to relate to others in the fan base (Tutko & Richards, 1971). Soon, these writings were being communicated by fans, and were certainly being reiterated in conversations on social media sites such as Facebook. The possible overall idea of a team’s poor performance, which began through social media, affected the actions and performance of the team. The press affected the fans’ opinion of the organization, and the fans affected the organization’s opinion of the head coach and his staff.

Another example of the relationship between sport and psychology was Julian Rotter’s social learning theory. Walter J. Rejeski (1985) brought up this theory and merged it with the world of sports. The theory defined behavior as being determined by expectancy and reinforcement. For example, a player may perform a certain skill or behavior, and because of

this the coach may reinforce that behavior through encouragement. Both the coach's encouragement and the player's success increased the rate of that behavior. The expectancy for a team to do well is beginning to get more and more demanding. Coaches must show success quickly and consistently or the satisfaction of the organization with the staff falls quickly. Rejeski explained this issue as the minimal goal level, and it has direct implications to the issue of college football coaches and their job security. According to Rejeski (1985), the program with, "Extremely high minimal goals will never develop expectancies for success. [They] will never be satisfied with performance outcomes" (p. 21). The fans of a program develop high expectations for their team and they are quick to be disappointed when these expectations are not met. Now that the fans have a place to voice this disappointment, the job security of a coach is even more in jeopardy.

The Role of Mass Communication in Society

DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) studied the idea that the press had some control over the general public. They discussed the idea that the public relied on press to obtain most of their information. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach used an example from World War I to show this point. Until the press of that time had gotten the ability to inform all of the citizens, the people were going on as if the United States had not gone to war (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). According to DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989), "People continued to manufacture goods that they would never ship, buy goods abroad that they would never import, plan careers, and contemplate enterprises that would never be realized" (p. 260). Only after the press got the news out to the public did the American citizens start to live their lives as those in war should be living. What DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach argued was that the citizens relied on the press to remain tapped in to what was happening in the world. Similarly, a Facebook

fan page is a simple way to stay tapped in to everything happening with all college football teams. Not only for news-gathering purposes, but Facebook also puts the power into the public's hands because they are able to post their own opinions. This form of press works just like the propaganda that informed the public of World War I, in that it is able to sway the feelings and ideas of those who read it. Enough negativity on the fan page and the whole perception of the football team, especially the head coach, can turn negative.

Carbough, Gibson, and Milburn (1997) advanced the idea of staying tapped into the media to gain valuable information by adding the variable of communication. They did so by concentrating their focus on actual scenes, communication practices, and cultural discourses. By studying these three factors they were able to show that certain cultural features are passed on and inherited simply through communication. The communicative scene is one in which a new member of a group gathered the information needed to be accepted. This could be cultural information on how a community performed certain rituals, or just a sense of how a group related to each other. Studying the communication practices went deeper into how a group spread their ideas and beliefs between each other (Carbough et al., 1997). Carbough et al. (1997) used the example of a classroom discussion. The classroom held a conversation that gave an outsider a lot of information on the details of the group, and the discussion ended with an agreement that defined the class and their viewpoint. They also used the example of how a dinner discussion ultimately gave perception into a group's values. Finally, the cultural discourse was an overview of where these conversations led (Carbough et al., 1997). Carbough et al. (1997) described the cultural discourse as, "providing the rich and deep webs of meanings being implicated through those very practices" (p. 8). With such high numbers of people using social media to communicate, this is where cultural communication

practices lie. Therefore, these conversations are seen, or heard, by all with the capability to log on to Facebook. As Carbough et al. found, the community was affected and modified by these conversations. Thus, the community of a sports team was affected by the statements of the fans.

DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) wrote about the magic bullet theory. This theory came from the information shown about World War II during the war, and how that information changed the way many felt about America and its enemies. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach presented the idea that mass communication was first harnessed and used during this period. An example used, was the television as a means to portray a belief that the government wanted to project to the public. Quickly, the public changed their view of the war based on what the television showed (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). After this was noted, mass communication has continued to rise. The magic bullet theory explained the changing viewpoints of the public during World War II. According to DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989), “The basic idea is that media messages are received in a uniform way by every member of the audience and that immediate and direct responses are triggered by such stimuli” (p. 164). According to DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989), during the war Americans were shown that they were, “the new hammer and anvil of social solidarity” (p. 165). This led to the positive view of the public toward our involvement in the war and the belief that the whole world viewed us as the defender of peace (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). This is relatable to the use of Facebook, and the way that the public viewpoints can be altered. If there is a general disapproval on a team, then all those fans who read about it ultimately begin to agree with the masses. This then turns into a belief that something must be changed in order to get the team back where the fans are happy.

Defleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) explained the emergence of subgroups into a culture through mass communication. The subgroups could be any group of people who shared a similar idea or belief. Historically, these groups had been comprised of religions, families, school teams, or even work groups. The members of the group had a continuous flow of media content that shaped the way they were supposed to live their lives. This media content was extremely informative when new members joined an existing group. This occurred in cases such as a religious group being presented with what is right and what is wrong on a daily basis (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). According to DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989), “Through this ability to communicate, new members take on the common folkways, approved values, accepted wisdom, and widespread beliefs that enable people to relate to each other in routine social situations” (p. 211). DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach used this assumption to explain that as people join a specific group, they quickly adapt to accepting the general ideas and beliefs that the group has previously established. This relates directly to the way a fan behaves when they join a pre-existing fan base. The barrage of information that they continue to see every day begins to shape the way that they see their new team. The new fan quickly adopts the principles by which their subgroup is defined, or they find it hard to connect and adapt. Thus, if this person wants to relate to others in the group, they must repeat what the media has led them to believe. The thoughts these fans have about a coach, whether appreciative or otherwise, are reiterated throughout the group and to all joining members. Eventually, these beliefs are a part of the group’s assumption as a whole, and as such are only being strengthened by the reiteration of the media.

The Herd Mentality

As Tutko and Richards (1971) moved on to focus on the influence of the fan, one major point that they made was that fans have a strong herd mentality. Tutko and Richards also went into detail on how some fans go to games hoping to see the team do poorly, and that somehow this makes the fans feel better about themselves. This being the case, the fans that are eager to jump at a chance to hurl insults at the home team are still part of this herd. Tutko and Richards formulated this idea before the invention of Facebook. Now that Facebook has been created, the effect of the fans on the head coach, and the entire organization, is amplified. With Facebook, the herd is now able to connect with each other in an instant to discuss their feelings of the team and coach. Also, this approval or distaste of the team is accessible by all the players, coaches, athletic directors, and anybody else who can directly bring change to the institution's athletics. The influence of the fans is even more evident in today's social media culture than it was at the time of Tutko and Richards' research.

Lawrence Nolte (1974) studied how the grouping of individuals has been a humanistic trait since the beginning of man. Nolte described the Darwinian reasoning behind this trait. Nolte discussed the tremendous instinct of people to group together with those that were similar, as well as to stay away from those that were different. Nolte (1974) found that, "Through groups, it is possible to communicate with people who are actively concerned with some problem or project or interest" (p. 105). This study is relatable to the grouping of fans together to cheer for a common goal, or a victory. Nolte developed the idea that the group influences each other in their beliefs and ideas. This is similar to how fans affect each other's

attitude regarding the performance of the head coach. When a grouping of fans cheers or complains together, their opinions further align.

Robert Singer (1972) further studied the herd's effect on a team's performance. Singer claimed that an individual's motor skills were often influenced by the presence of a fan base at a sporting event. This influence could be either positive or negative based on how skillfully the motor operation was being performed (Singer, 1972). According to Singer (1972), "Evidently, once reasonably high skill in a task has been reached, social facilitation occurs" (p. 182). This showed that when a team was doing well, then the acceptance by the fan base increased the team's performance. Oppositely, a team that was doing poorly performed at a lower level when an audience was placed in front of them. Singer showed this by having athletes execute a series of motor skill tests with and without an audience. The tests were specifically designed to be difficult so the athletes were not confident in their actions. The group with the audience had worse results when compared with the group who had no audience. This study by Singer showed how a crowd's endorsement helped a skilled athlete or team perform at a slightly higher level, and a crowd's criticism did the opposite. This phenomena, much like the aforementioned "herd" effect, is magnified by the way that social media is involved in today's society. With the approval or disapproval of a team being just a click away, it has never been easier to criticize the performance of an athlete, coach, or entire organization. This puts the athlete and the coach under more stress. Depending on the public opinions of the fans, this could either be very rewarding or detrimental. Nowadays, the college athlete and coach know they are being constantly watched and publicly judged by the fans. The arrival of live television, live broadcasting, and social media has placed every team directly in the public's eye. All athletes and coaches are under surveillance, and therefore

performance is affected. Phenomena such as the herd mentality and how it relates to social media is explained through the diffusion of innovations theory. This theory helps explain how and why so many fans are now using Facebook to communicate with their favorite college football program.

Fandom

The opinions of the fans matter. Hugenberg, Haridakis, and Earnhardt (2008) studied fans and sports fandom and said, “We watch sports on television, access sports news and information online, and talk to our friends and family about sports” (p. 1). Sports are a huge part of modern culture. Fans access sports information online, and also use the Internet as a major method of communicating about sports. Facebook has become one of the primary ways sports fans communicate online. Givens-Carroll and Slade (2012) researched the relationship between sports fandom and Facebook and said, “Social media will increasingly replace the more traditional outlets of viewing college football on television or in stadiums” (p. 169). The use of blogs is the most dominant example of fans using social media to communicate. The number of blogs continues to increase and along with it, the power of Facebook. The crux of the power of the fans is that their blogs now affect businesses, the population’s views, and perhaps most importantly the media. Givens-Carroll and Slade (2012) found, “Fan websites are increasingly making and breaking news in a way that is transforming the relationship between fans, athletes, coaches, and organizations” (p. 169). The importance of fans is certainly important, but so is understanding how the innovation of Facebook has become so prevalent. A theoretical understanding of the increased use of social media can lead to a better understanding of exactly how much power the fans can have.

Basic Fundamentals of Diffusion of Innovations Theory

The diffusion of innovations theory is predicated on the process of the adoption of new ideas, alternatives, and technologies by different individuals, groups, communities, and organizations (Rogers, 1995). The social processes of innovation and communication are as Heston and Weiner (1999) concluded, “The transmission and adoption of new ideas, new practices, and new technologies” (p. 8). Thus, the diffusion process is very much a social one. Information regarding an innovation is communicated socially from one individual or group to another individual or group (Rogers, 1995). The result of this social process is that the meaning of an innovation to an individual is constructed over time. According to Rogers (1995), an innovation is defined as, “an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or another unit of adoption” (p. xvii). One important aspect of this definition is that the innovation is perceived as new (Rogers, 1995). This is important because when an innovation is perceived as new, the innovation introduces new alternatives, choices, or solutions to the individual or group. However, the individual or group has not yet determined if these new alternatives that an innovation presents are superior to the previous alternatives available. The common result to an individual or group’s question regarding the new alternatives is to seek information in order to further understand details about the innovation and make a more informed decision on whether or not to adopt it (Rogers, 1995). According to Rogers (1995), “Information about an innovation is often sought from near-peers, especially information about their subjective evaluations of the innovation. This information exchange about a new idea occurs through a convergence process involving interpersonal networks” (p. xvii). Thus, the diffusion of innovations is certainly a social process.

Innovations are adopted from one individual or group to the next through a process called diffusion (Rogers, 1995). Rogers (1995) defined diffusion as, “the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system” (p. 5). Communication is a two-way process in which participants exchange information in order to move toward each other or apart through the transfer of sending and receiving messages. With this understanding of communication, Rogers (1995) said that diffusion is, “a special type of communication, in which the messages are about a new idea” (p. 5). According to Rogers, diffusion is also special, because along with the newness of an idea comes uncertainty. Rogers (1995) defined uncertainty as, “the degree to which a number of alternatives are perceived with respect to the occurrence of an event and the relative probability of these alternatives” (p. 6). When an innovation is introduced to an individual or a group, there may be a single or several alternatives that come with the innovation. The greater the amount of uncertainty that exists with an innovation, the more likely an individual or group will hesitate to adopt the innovation before seeking out more information (Rogers, 1995). According to Rogers (1995), this is because information is, “a means of reducing uncertainty” (p. 6). Thus, innovation leads to information seeking and in the end results into change.

An important broad communication aspect of the theory is that diffusion of innovations leads to social change. Rogers (1995) said, “When new ideas are invented, diffused, and are adopted or rejected, leading to certain consequences, social change occurs” (p. 6). Understanding how an individual or community changes is a significant aspect to understanding the overall process of communication in society.

The Four Elements in Diffusion of Innovations Theory

There are four main elements in the diffusion of innovations. These elements are the innovation, communication channels, time, and the social system (Rogers, 1995). The first main element in diffusion of innovations theory is innovation. Innovation is the new idea or technology that an individual or group perceives as new. As long as the innovation is perceived as new, it can be considered an innovation. This is because the “newness” of the innovation is what causes uncertainty for an individual or group and then results in information gathering (Rogers, 1995). Once an innovation is introduced to an individual or group, adoption can be a long slow process or it can happen quite rapidly.

According to Rogers (1995), “The characteristics of innovations, as perceived by individuals, help to explain their different rate of adoption” (p. 15). There are five characteristics of innovations. Relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability are the five characteristics of innovations (Rogers, 1995). Relative advantage is how much the innovation will be better than the previous idea. For example, using the Facebook fan page to communicate an opinion may have a high relative advantage for a fan who previously most likely could not post his or her opinion to be viewed by the entire public. The characteristic of compatibility is how much the innovation is perceived by a group or individual as meeting their values, experiences, and needs. The innovation of a Facebook fan page has high compatibility for an individual who has the need of connectivity to their favorite sports team and values the use of social media. The third characteristic of innovations is complexity. This is the perceived degree of difficulty to use the innovation if it is adopted. The innovation of a Facebook fan page has a low complexity for members of the community who already owned Facebook accounts. However, for many fans who do not use

social networking or social media, the complexity for this innovation is relatively much higher. The fourth characteristic is trialability, which is the ability for an individual or group to experiment with an innovation before having to adopt it permanently. For example, if a fan can post an opinion about their favorite sports team on the Facebook fan page while still having the ability to use their previous innovations, they are more likely to give social media a try. The fifth characteristic is observability, which is the ability for the results of an innovation to be seen by others (Rogers, 1995). In the Facebook fan page example, if others can observe the use of social media and see the results before adopting it, then they will be more likely to adopt the new innovation.

The second main element in the diffusion of innovations is communication channels (Rogers, 1995). Rogers (1995) defined communication channels as the channels, “through which one individual communicates a new idea to one or several others” (p. 18). Two of the most common communication channels that people use are mass media and interpersonal channels. Mass media is an example of an effective communication channel in which a large audience may learn about a new innovation (Rogers, 1995). Interpersonal channels are communication that, “involve a face-to-face exchange between two or more individuals” (Rogers, 1995, p. 18). The two important factors regarding interpersonal channels are the levels of homophily and heterophily. According to Rogers (1995), homophily is, “the degree to which two or more individuals who interact are similar in certain attributes” (p. 18-19). These attributes can include beliefs, education level, and social status. When two people who are communicating about an innovation are similar in these attributes, then the person learning about the innovation is more likely to adopt. The second factor regarding interpersonal channels is heterophily which Rogers (1995) defined as, “the degree to which

two or more individuals who interact are different in certain attributes” (p. 18). In order for interpersonal communication about an innovation to exist, there must be some heterophily in technical competence. When two or more people discuss an innovation, one person must be able to inform and show others how the innovation works. Without some heterophily, there will not be any diffusion of the innovation through interpersonal communication. However, if there is too much heterophily in all attributes of the communicators, then this too prevents diffusion (Rogers, 1995). According to Rogers (1995), “Ideally, they would be homophilous on all other variables (education and social status, for example) even though they are heterophilous regarding the innovation” (p. 19).

The third main element in diffusion of innovations is time (Rogers, 1995). The incorporation of time as an element to the theory is easily criticized because, it depends on the respondent’s recall. However, including time is a great strength for the theory because time gives practicality to understanding how the theory applies in everyday life. There are three aspects in which the element of time is involved in the diffusion of a particular innovation. These three aspects are the innovation-decision process, the innovativeness of an individual, and rate of adoption (Rogers, 1995).

The innovation-decision process is the time period in which an individual first learns about an innovation and then decides to either adopt or reject the innovation (Rogers, 1995). The diffusion of innovations theory accounts for the amount of time it takes for a person to start using a new innovation, if at all. The innovation-decision process according to Rogers (1995) is a process, “through which an individual passes from first knowledge of an innovation to forming an attitude toward the innovation, to a decision to adopt or reject, to implementation and use of the new idea, and to confirmation of this decision” (p. 20).

Using this definition of the innovation-decision process, there are five steps an individual can take (Rogers, 1995). Knowledge is the first step, and it occurs when an individual first learns about the innovation. Persuasion is the second step, and it occurs when an individual forms their attitude and thoughts about the innovation. Decision is the third step, and it occurs when an individual chooses whether or not to adopt the innovation. Implementation is the fourth step, and it occurs when an individual uses the innovation. Finally, confirmation is the fifth step, and it occurs when an individual makes the decision to continue adoption of the innovation or to reverse their decision due to conflict. Diffusion of innovations theory accounts for time by measuring how long it takes for an individual to perform these five steps (Rogers, 1995). Measuring the amount of time the innovation-decision process takes is crucial to understanding the success of an innovation.

There is one scenario in which the innovation-decision process becomes much more complicated. Rogers (1995) said, “When an innovation-decision is made by a system, rather than by an individual, the decision process is more complicated because a number of individuals are involved” (p. 22). If for example, the head of an organization decides he and his workers are going to adopt an innovation, the time of the innovation-decision process is skewed because the workers are forced to immediately adopt the innovation.

According to Rogers (1995), “Innovativeness is the degree to which an individual or other unit of adoption is relatively earlier in adopting new ideas than the other members of a system” (p. 22). This definition of the innovativeness of an individual is the second aspect of time in the diffusion of innovations theory. Individuals are categorized by how likely and how quickly they will either adopt or reject an innovation. Some individuals are extremely likely to adopt the newest innovation, while some individuals are likely to be much less

willing to change through adopting an innovation. The five categories for the level of innovativeness by individuals in our social system are: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. These categories help measure the innovativeness of individuals based on the amount of time at which they will adopt an innovation (Rogers, 1995).

The third aspect of time is the rate of adoption by the members of a social system (Rogers, 1995). For example, when an innovation is introduced to a group of people, the theory takes into account the amount of time and how many individuals in the group adopt the innovation. This rate of adoption gives an understanding of how willing not just an individual, but an entire system is to adopt an innovation. According to Rogers (1995), “The rate of adoption is usually measured by the length of time required for a certain percentage of the members of a system to adopt an innovation” (p. 23). Thus, the rate of adoption is an aspect of time that relates to how a social system travels through the innovation-decision process rather than just an individual (Rogers, 1995).

The fourth main element in the diffusion of innovations theory is a social system (Rogers, 1995). Rogers (1995) defined a social system as, “a set of interrelated units that are engaged in joint problem-solving to accomplish a common goal” (p. 23). A social system is made up of small groups, organizations, or individuals. One characteristic of a social system is that the units in a system are distinguished from one another. Also, the members of a system are bound together by the sharing of a common goal (Rogers, 1995).

The overall main concept in the relationship between a social system and diffusion is how diffusion occurs within the boundaries established by the social system (Rogers, 1995). To understand this main concept, there are five elements to consider. The system’s social

structure, norms, roles of opinion leaders, types of innovation-decisions, and the consequences of innovation are the five elements that affect the diffusion process within a social system (Rogers, 1995).

The first element affecting diffusion within a social system is the social structure (Rogers, 1995). Structure, according to Rogers (1995), is defined as, “the patterned arrangements of the units in a system” (p. 24). In a social system, structure gives consistency in human behavior and thus, decreases uncertainty and allows for more accurate predictions of behavior (Rogers, 1995). Therefore, structure affects diffusion of an innovation within a social system by increasing consistency and predictability, and decreasing uncertainty.

The second element affecting diffusion within a social system is the system norms (Rogers, 1995). Rogers (1995) defined system norms as, “established behavior patterns for the members of a social system” (p. 26). Norms tell the individuals of a social system how to behave. Norms particularly affect when adoption of an innovation goes against the expected behavior of the social structure (Rogers, 1995).

The third element affecting diffusion within a social system is the roles of opinion leaders (Rogers, 1995). Adoption of an innovation by a majority of the social structure is highly dependent upon the decision of the opinion leaders. Rogers (1995) said, “Opinion leadership is the degree to which an individual is able to influence other individuals’ attitudes or overt behavior informally in a desired way with relative frequency” (p. 27). Diffusion occurs at a much higher rate if the opinion leaders adopt the innovation. Depending on the social system, opinion leaders are both innovative and eager to adopt change, or they are both reluctant and opposed to change (Rogers, 1995). In either case, the actions of opinion leaders in a social system greatly affect diffusion.

The fourth element affecting diffusion within a social system is the types of innovation decisions (Rogers, 1995). There are three types of innovation decisions. Each type of decision made by the social system significantly affects diffusion. The first of these three decision types is called optional innovation-decisions. These decisions are made when individuals independently choose whether or not to adopt an innovation. The individual's choice is affected by norms, but it is still an overall independent choice. This decision type is the slowest type of innovation decision in regard to diffusion within a social system. The second decision type is named collective innovation-decisions (Rogers, 1995). Rogers (1995) defined this as, "choices to adopt or reject an innovation that are made by consensus among the members of a system" (p. 28). When all members of a system choose adoption or rejection together, there is a tremendous impact on the rate of diffusion. The third decision type is called authority innovation-decisions. This occurs when the decision to adopt or reject an innovation is made by one or just a few individuals of a system. In this instance, the great majority of the members of a system have no influence on the rate of diffusion. However, the one or few individuals who have the power, status, or expertise to make the decision can cause diffusion of an innovation to happen at an extremely high rate. This decision type is typically the fastest rate of adoption (Rogers, 1995). With these three different decision types, diffusion happens at varying rates and thus, the decision type greatly affects diffusion within a social system.

The fifth element affecting diffusion within a social system is consequences of innovations (Rogers, 1995). Rogers (1995) defined consequences as, "the changes that occur to an individual or to a social system as a result of the adoption or rejection of an innovation" (p. 30). Three types of consequences affect the rate of diffusion. The first type of

consequence is called desirable versus undesirable consequences. These consequences depend on whether the effects of adopting an innovation are functional or dysfunctional. Adoption is more likely to happen if the consequences of adopting are deemed to be functional within the social system. The second type of consequence is called direct versus indirect consequences. Adoption of an innovation causes both immediate consequences as well as a chain reaction causing future consequences. The third type of consequence is called anticipated versus unanticipated consequences. Adoption of an innovation by an individual causes intended consequences, but also causes unintended consequences (Rogers, 1995). In regard to diffusion of an innovation within a social system, the different consequences greatly affect the decision-making process and the rate of diffusion.

Thus, the five elements of a social system play a crucial role in understanding what a social system is and how it operates. The system's social structure, norms, roles of opinion leaders, types of innovation-decisions, and the consequences of innovation affect the diffusion process within a social system (Rogers, 1995). In conclusion, there are four broad elements to the diffusion of innovations theory. These elements are the innovation, communication channels, time, and the social system (Rogers, 1995). Each of these elements contains more detailed characteristics and subcategories. An understanding of all four elements of the theory is extremely important for public relations practitioners. Knowing a particular innovation, how the innovation is communicated, how long the diffusion process takes, and who will adopt the innovation are all great tools that a public relations practitioner uses at their disposal. In order to be as effective as possible, public relations practitioners must understand the details of these four broad elements and how the process known as diffusion of innovations operates.

Opinion Leaders' Role in Innovation Diffusion: A Simulation Study

Van Eck, Jager, and Leeflang (2011) used agent-based simulation models to investigate the role of opinion leaders and word of mouth (WoM) in the processes of diffusion. For marketers, understanding the decision-making process for potential customers was vital. Therefore, the results of this study were valuable for marketers because they distinguished how information was communicated through social media and WoM. Recent researchers disagreed on the effectiveness of opinion leaders in the processes of diffusion (Van Eck et al., 2011). However, a number of those that suggested their role was minimal distinguished opinion leaders based on the number of relations (followers) they possessed, instead of how influential they were. Van Eck et al. (2011) suggested, "Concept of influential consumers should imply more than just their relatively high number of relations" (p. 188). In a recent study, three factors were established, "that determine the role of influential consumers: personality traits, knowledge, and connectivity" (Goldenberg et al. as cited in Van Eck et al., 2011, p. 188). However, these authors did not investigate the potential significance of personality and knowledge among influential customers or opinion leaders. Van Eck et al. on the other hand, investigated in greater detail, the significance of knowledge and personality in regard to the adoption process. Van Eck et al. distinguished between normative and informational influences. Normative influences were defined as the, "tendency to conform to the expectations of others" (Van Eck et al., 2011, p. 189). Informational influences were defined as the, "tendency to accept information from others as evidence of reality" (Van Eck et al., 2011, p. 189). Van Eck et al. (2011) were then able to examine the affects that each had on diffusion of information.

Next, Van Eck et al. (2011) investigated two factors that affected the role of the opinion leader in the adoption process. These two factors were the extent at which mass media was used and the number of opinion leaders found within the network. Van Eck et al. (2011) determined that an opinion leader could influence the diffusion process by, “increasing the speed of diffusion and/or increasing the maximum adoption percentage” (p. 189).

Before running the simulation, Van Eck et al. (2011) posed five separate hypotheses. Hypothesis one (H1) focused on the behavior demonstrated by opinion leaders. H1 stated that, “Innovative behavior by opinion leaders (a) results in a higher adoption percentage, and (b) this effect is stronger if normative influence is more important to followers” (Van Eck et al., 2011, p. 190). Hypothesis two (H2) stated, “For opinion leaders (a) the importance of normative influence relative to information influence is lower than it is for followers. The lower importance of normative influence leads (b) to a higher adoption percentage, and (c) this adoption percentage increases even more when the importance of normative influence for opinion leaders decreases” (Van Eck et al., 2011, p. 190). Hypothesis three (H3) addressed the experience, expertise, and involvement of the opinion leaders. H3 stated that, “Opinion leaders are better at judging products, which results in a faster (a) information diffusion and (b) product diffusion” (Van Eck et al., 2011, p. 190). The fourth hypothesis (H4) suggested that WoM was more effective when there was less extensive mass media usage, which resulted in a stronger role for the opinion leader. The fifth and final hypothesis (H5) stated, “A smaller percentage of opinion leaders in a network enhances the influence of innovative behavior of the opinion leaders in terms of increasing the adoption percentage, particularly if normative influence is more important to these followers” (Van Eck et al.,

2011, p. 191). In order to test the hypotheses, Van Eck et al. (2011) conducted both an empirical and a simulation study because, “The empirical study enables us to parameterize the model for the simulation study” (p. 191).

The empirical study took into account the WoM behavior of children in the context of the diffusion of free Internet games (Van Eck et al., 2011). The study used an online questionnaire to investigate the role of children as opinion leaders in regard to the adoption of the game. In this study, there were one hundred thirty-six participants (33.8% male, 66.2% female) between the ages of six and sixteen years old. All participants were already using the application. Of these one hundred thirty-six participants, the top 29.4% were considered opinion leaders, while the rest of the participants were considered followers, or non-leaders (NL) (Van Eck et al., 2011). Based on the questionnaire alone, Van Eck et al. (2011) found opinion leaders to, “exhibit more innovative behavior than do followers,” be, “more involved with the product; they talk about it in more situations,” and, “not know more about the product than followers, though opinion leaders can better help others in using the product” (p. 192). Van Eck et al. also found in the empirical study that opinion leaders can help others more than followers can help others. This, “indicates that they are more capable of interpreting the information they receive, which might be the result of their higher involvement in and more expertise with the product category” (Van Eck et al., 2011, p. 192). Because of this, opinion leaders were likely to have a much better judgment of product quality. The empirical study also determined that opinion leaders scored high on both informational and normative influence, while followers and non-leaders scored high on only the normative influence. According to Van Eck et al., the empirical study provided support

for H2a. Van Eck et al. (2011) stated, “For opinion leaders the importance of normative influence relative to informational influence is lower than it is for followers” (p. 190-192).

The simulation study used a model based on a previous model developed in 2007 by Delre, Jager, Bijmolt, and Janssen (Van Eck et al., 2011). The reference model was comprised of data and values from the empirical study, which made the reference model, “a relatively close representation of the results of our empirical study” (Van Eck et al., 2011, p. 194). The simulation also included five parameters using data from the empirical study and prior literature. The five parameters were, “(1) the innovativeness of the opinion leader, (2) the weight of normative influence, (3) the quality of the product judgment of the opinion leaders, (4) the number of opinion leaders in the network, and (5) the reach of mass media” (Van Eck et al., 2011, p. 194). All of the parameters were systematically varied throughout the testing. Therefore, by using this reference model and parameters designed to test individual hypotheses, the results that either support or negate the hypotheses were realistic (Van Eck et al., 2011).

Through the empirical study and simulation, Van Eck et al. (2011) found significant support for six of their ten hypotheses. Hypothesis One part b, Hypothesis Four (a and b), and Hypothesis Five were not supported by the agent-based simulation. Van Eck et al. (2011) found that, “If opinion leaders are active in a social network, information spreads faster, the product diffuses faster over the network, and the adoption percentage is significantly higher than in a network without opinion leaders” (p. 199). Additionally, the speed and diffusion depended on the ability of the opinion leader to effectively judge the quality of the product, which led to the conclusion that informational influence had a, “dominant effect on the adoption speed of the product and the speed of information sharing” (Van Eck et al., 2011, p.

199). Furthermore, the adoption percentage depended more on the innovativeness of the opinion leader, as well as their lower sensitivity to normative influence. Van Eck et al. (2011) also determined that a, “less extensive use of mass media further decreases the effect that opinion leaders have on the speed of both product and information diffusion, because consumers become aware of the product at a later point in time” (p. 199). Overall, the study suggested that opinion leaders were not simply influential because of the number of followers they had, as other research had suggested in the past. Van Eck et al. (2011) provided sufficient evidence in the study that suggested that, “opinion leaders are influential because they are highly innovative, have good product judgment, and a low sensitivity to normative influence” (p. 200).

Leaders in Social Networks, the Delicious Case

Increasing use in social networking websites has allowed millions of unacquainted users to interact and influence one another. Without a doubt, on networks such as Twitter, Facebook, and Delicious, certain users exhibited much larger influences than others (Lü, Zhang, Yeung, & Zhou, 2011). By accumulating more followers, or fans, these leaders had the ability to strengthen their influence through the creation of a trickle-down leadership network. Lü et al. (2011) suggested, “What an online community can collectively achieve is to enhance the power of individuals in discovering new information in depth and breadth that no individual can even contemplate, and an effective way is to make use of influential users” (p. 1). However, identifying these leaders accurately was a difficult task.

Lü et al. (2011) developed a parameter-free algorithm, known as LeaderRank, which ranked social networking users based on their influence. LeaderRank was tested by examining users on *delicious.com*, a “representative online social network” that allowed

individuals to collect bookmarks (Lü et al., 2011, p. 1). The test was compared to results from a similar algorithm, PageRank, which was used by Google to rank URLs based on hyperlinks. Before the testing took place, Lü et al. (2011) determined the top twenty, fifty, and one hundred users of *delicious.com* based on LeaderRank, PageRank, and popularity amongst users. Lü et al. focused specifically on three measurable criteria and how effectively each algorithm ranked users in regards to these criteria. These criteria included identifying influential users who initiated a “quicker and wider spreading of information,” having a higher “tolerance to noisy data,” and having a greater “robustness against spammers” (Lü et al., 2011, p. 1-2).

When looking at the “quicker and wider spreading of information,” Lü et al. (2011) developed an experiment that resembled, “an opinion spreading initiated from the top users and observe how the opinion propagates” (p. 5). Four of the top twenty users from LeaderRank and PageRank, that did not appear in both lists, were labeled as being infected. The spread of this “infection” measured how quickly and wide-spread an influence the users had, which determined which ranking system was more accurate (Lü et al., 2011). According to Lü et al. (2011) “Infecting the top users from LeaderRank results in a faster growth and a higher saturated number of infected, indicating a quicker and wider spreading” (p. 5).

The tolerance of noisy data was particularly important in regard to social networks that tended to have high traffic levels such as Twitter, Facebook, and Delicious. In order to examine this, Lü et al. (2011) designed an experiment that would simulate spurious or missing relationships and links among leaders and fans on *delicious.com*. The test measured the change in scores and rankings when links were randomly added and removed (Lü et al.,

2011). Lü et al. (2011) found that LeaderRank was more tolerant than PageRank against noisy data and “hence a better candidate for ranking in noisy networks” (p. 6).

The final experiment by Lü et al. (2011) aimed at gauging which ranking system was more robust against spammers. The systems proposed that, “malicious activities are common in social networks, in particular when users manipulate to gain a skewed reputation” (Lü et al., 2011, p. 6). Furthermore, “One example of manipulation is called *Sybil Attack*, in which spammers deliberately create fake entities to obtain disproportionately high rank” (Lü et al., 2011, p. 6). That is to say, when ranking systems simply took into account the number of fans or followers a user had, the systems did not account for malicious activities. Lü et al. (2011) created a simulation in which a user created a number of fake fans. Then the ranking robustness in LeaderRank and PageRank were compared. Lü et al. (2011) concluded, “LeaderRank is more robust against spammers as the change of rankings is smaller than that by PageRank” (p. 7). In conclusion, Lü et al. (2011) claimed, “LeaderRank is a better candidate for robust rankings against manipulations” (p. 7).

Based on the results of their experimentation, Lü et al. (2011) concluded, “identifying influential users is not a simple task” and that it, “is not merely answering who is the best, but as well to consider the influences and consequences brought by a ranking algorithm” (p. 7). In addition, Lü et al. (2011) suggested, “These consequences are of particular importance for social networks” (p. 7). Therefore, LeaderRank, because of its ability to determine importance and credibility, as opposed to simply quantity of fans, was much more effective in measuring influence on noisy social networks than PageRank (Lü et al., 2011).

Satirists as Opinion Leaders: Is Social Media Redefining Roles?

In researching social media, one must be wary of satire. Certain topics and critical issues are difficult to discuss. This fact, along with the desire to sell papers, led to the rise of satirical, and sometimes completely false, news. As Crittenden, Hopkins, and Simmons (2011) suggested, “Satire has often emerged as the forum for escaping reality by intertwining fact and fiction humorously” (p. 174). Furthermore, Crittenden et al. (2011) stated, “Satire has developed into a medium through which critical issues can be conveyed while maintaining a sense of lightheartedness” (p. 175). Satire is not a new discovery. However, the delivery has changed drastically in just a matter of years. In the era of newspapers, radio broadcasting, and basic network television, satire was a tool used by only the professionals. However, with the creation and success of social media, satire has become available for use by anyone. With this development, the world of opinion leaders has changed as well. What was once a small group is now one with no boundaries (Crittenden et al., 2011).

Crittenden et al. (2011) focused on the relationship between satire and social media, “with a keen focus on how the creation and dissemination of satirical messages will evolve with the ever changing social media ecosystem” (p. 175). Additionally, Crittenden et al. (2011) found that due to the, “intertwining of satire, social media, and deconstruction” they have classified four types of potential opinion leaders that will emerge as well as identify research questions that will spark future work in regards to social media and political opinion (p. 175).

“Satire, as we know it today, is the art of using language to communicate in such a way as to hold shortcomings up for censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, or other similar methods” (New World Encyclopedia as cited in Crittenden et al., 2011, p.

175). Satire originally appeared in print media, often in the form of editorial cartoons, most commonly political in nature. Satire in print media led to the development of newspapers such as *The Onion* and *The Humor Times*, which appear to be traditional newspapers. However, Crittenden et al. (2011) showed these publications were entirely satirical and, “parody tradition by featuring editorials, interviews, and stock quotes” (p. 175). In more recent years, satire has spread to television with shows such as *Saturday Night Live*, *The Colbert Report*, and *The Daily Show* (Crittenden et al., 2011). Shows such as these, “use a variety of techniques that revive critical inquiry and advance a model of deliberate democracy” (Baym as cited in Crittenden et al., 2011, p. 175). Despite the satirical nature of his show, “Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* was voted the most trusted newsperson in the post-Cronkite era” (Jones & Baym as cited in Crittenden et al., 2011, p. 175). The popularity of satire has been and continues to be on the rise. This is evident when considering the purchasing behavior and viewership noted in the popularity of cartoons, television shows, and print (Crittenden et al., 2011).

In the last quarter-century, the ease of accessing and sharing information has increased drastically (Crittenden et al., 2011). The World Wide Web, created twenty-five years ago, has grown significantly since its creation with nearly two billion users worldwide today (Crittenden et al., 2011). Social media is defined as, “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenli as cited in Crittenden et al., 2011, p. 176). The number of social media providers on the web today is extremely large and the platforms used vary from social networking, photos, podcasts, videos, blogs, and so on (Crittenden et al., 2011). Easy access and ability has led users to

constantly, “publish, maintain, upload, comment, rate, save, share, connect, unite, and read content” (Li & Bernoff as cited in Crittenden et al., 2011, p. 176). Due to these behaviors, it is assumed that satire and its spread of influence will be impacted because users not only want, but expect to be active participants in the age of social media (Crittenden et al., 2011).

Exposure to satire likely happens on a daily basis. Between print, television, and social media, people are constantly exposed to satire (Crittenden et al., 2011). Not only are people coming into contact with more satire, but also the process at which the message is examined, known as deconstruction, is becoming much simpler. In fact, deconstruction is often bypassed by many viewers because it is done so by a previous message recipient and provided with the satirical message via social media. Social media allows anyone to participate in the sharing of news. For example, based on *YouTube* Statistics in 2010, a search for political satire resulted in over six thousand different videos (Crittenden et al., 2011).

Since anyone has the ability to be an opinion leader through social media, many of which use satire, Crittenden et al. (2011) suggested that there are four types of opinion leaders in new media satire. The four types of opinion leaders are categorized by their traditional view on satire, professional versus non-professional, and their focus, message content, or medium of delivery (Crittenden et al., 2011). Professionals that focus on message content are considered traditionalists. According to Crittenden et al. (2011) a traditionalist has, “an underlying message that he or she is seeking to convey to the audience and is unlikely to be focused on the medium of delivery” (p. 177). Ryan Zuk (2009) suggested that all thought leaders use six traits. These traits describe traditionalists. First, leaders are, “Knowledgeable – they develop expertise on a specific topic” (Zuk, 2009, p. 7). Second,

leaders are, “Aware – they track trends in their industry and across business at large so that they can insert themselves into conversations, or start new ones, in a timely and relevant manner” (Zuk, 2009, p. 7). Thirdly, leaders are, “Interesting – they are charismatic and have memorable ways of delivering their messages” (Zuk, 2009, p. 7). Fourthly, leaders are, “Innovative – they create new ways of thinking about and solving problems, and highlight these ideas in their conversations, writings, media interviews and speaking engagements” (Zuk, 2009, p. 7). Fifthly, leaders are, “Engaged – they start conversations, and stick around to facilitate and encourage them, often including a compelling call to action or question that helps spread their message” (Zuk, 2009, p. 7). Lastly, leaders are, “Accessible – they openly make themselves available to media, analysts, prospects, customers, fans and followers so that their ideas resonate and can be shared easily across the social web” (Zuk, 2009, p. 7).

Those satirists that are professional, but have a greater concern for medium of message as opposed to meaning are said to be creators (Crittenden et al., 2011). Creators have mastered the skills and technologies necessary for production of quality media. The “rookie” was classified, according to Crittenden et al. (2011), as one that is a “non-professional who enjoys the humor of satire and wants to try his or her skill at creating satire” (p. 178). More often than not, rookies have the ability to produce satire that is humorous, however, lack the skills in rhetoric to create meaningful and critical works. The fourth and final opinion leader is known as the technologist (Crittenden et al., 2011). The technologist is a, “non-professional satirist who uses the medium to deliver humor” (Crittenden et al., 2011, p. 178).

With the increase in satirical opinion leaders, some of which are more successful at using humor as constructive criticism than others, a question about satirical longevity in the

technologically savvy world has been raised. Ultimately, for the success of satire in media to continue, professionals must adapt to the new mediums and technologies involved in the production and presentation process (Crittenden et al., 2011).

Analysis of Decision Making Styles of Social Media Opinion Leaders and Seekers

Özgen and Duman Kurt (2013) suggested that opinion leaders are important factors in marketing communication because, “Consumers consider their opinions more credible and influential than marketer-dominated sources of information such as advertising” (p. 254). Therefore, marketers seek to identify and influence opinion leaders in order to create positive word-of-mouth for their products. On top of that, the behavior of opinion seekers is also vital information for marketers (Özgen & Duman Kurt, 2013). As technologies continue to increase in number and complexity, the amount of marketing done online and through social media also increases. Because of this, Özgen and Duman Kurt (2013) recommended that marketers analyze social media opinion leadership and seeking behavior, as well as analyze distinctive characteristics of social media opinion leaders and seekers in order to take advantage of the limitless social media platform.

Opinion leaders are established as consumers who, “exert an unequal amount of influence on the decisions of other” (Rogers & Cartano as cited in Özgen & Duman Kurt, 2013, p. 256). Those that actively seek information and advice are opinion seekers (Özgen & Duman Kurt, 2013). Özgen and Duman Kurt (2013) suggested, contrary to other researchers, that opinion leaders and seekers should be taken into consideration together as related concepts. Furthermore, Özgen and Duman Kurt believed opinion leaders can be opinion seekers as well. The Internet and social media have created many new platforms for opinion leaders and seekers to distribute and gather information. These platforms allow for constant

receiving, generating, and sharing of ideas. Those that participate in social media use it as, “a tool for online word of mouth (WOM)” (Özgen & Duman Kurt, 2013, p. 257). Online WOM is much more efficient and influential than print media. Therefore, establishing the decision making styles of social media opinion leaders and seekers is very important for marketers (Özgen & Duman Kurt, 2013).

Özgen and Duman Kurt (2013) designed and executed a study in order to connect current opinion leadership and seeking literature with the social media platform, as well as reveal the differences of decision-making styles of social media opinion leaders and seekers. Özgen and Duman Kurt (2013) focused their study on answering two questions; “RQ₁: Do decision-making styles of high and low ‘social media opinion leaders’ differ?” and, “RQ₂: Do decision-making styles of high and low ‘social media opinion seekers’ differ?” (p. 257). In this study, the Consumer Styles Inventory (CSI), which was developed in 1986 and has been widely used and accepted by researchers, was used to analyze the decision making of both opinion leaders and seekers (Özgen & Duman Kurt, 2013). The CSI considered eight decision traits when analyzing consumer decision making; “perfectionist, high quality conscious consumers,” “brand conscious, ‘price equals quality’ consumers,” “novelty-fashion conscious consumers,” “recreational, hedonistic consumers,” “price conscious, ‘value for money’ consumers,” “impulsive, careless consumers,” “confused by over choice consumers,” and “habitual, brand loyal consumers” (Sproles & Kendall as cited in Özgen & Duman Kurt, 2013, p. 255).

The study found that low and high social media opinion leaders did not significantly differ in respect to brand consciousness, confusion, and shopping avoidance (Özgen & Duman Kurt, 2013). However, those that were high opinion leaders were more perfectionist,

recreational and hedonistic, novelty-fashion conscious, and habitual-brand loyal price conscious consumers than those that were lower opinion leaders. Unlike the low and high opinion leaders, the study found a significant difference between low and high opinion seekers in regard to perfectionism, brand consciousness, novelty-fashion consciousness, confusion, and price consciousness (Özgen & Duman Kurt, 2013). According to Özgen & Duman Kurt (2013), the results of the analysis provided evidence proving social media opinion leaders shop, “more carefully, more systematically, and by comparing other alternatives” (p. 261). Özgen & Duman Kurt (2013) stated that opinion leaders, “are not satisfied with only ‘good enough’ products/services, enjoy shopping, and feel excitement and pleasure from buying new products” (p. 261). Opinion leaders also tended to plan their shopping and search for sale prices. However, opinion leaders did not emphasize lower prices as much as low opinion leaders or opinion seekers. Opinion seekers were much more concerned with getting the best value for their money (Özgen & Duman Kurt, 2013). Based on the results of this analysis, Özgen and Duman Kurt (2013) concluded that marketers should, “inform social media opinion leaders about new products/campaigns in order to reach social media information seekers and create favorable WOM” (p. 262). This informative content should not only include emotional appeals, but also rational appeals (price and quality) (Özgen & Duman Kurt, 2013).

Who tends to spread Negative Word of Mouth When a Social Network Game Failure Happens? Opinion Leader or Opinion Seeker

After the success of Facebook, many social network games (SNG) have latched on to Facebook, embedded within the website, which attracts more players from the Facebook population (Luor & Lu, 2012). One particular SNG that was of interest in this study was

called Happy Farm. Happy Farm was similar to the SNG called FarmVille, which was more prevalent in the United States. Happy Farm was extremely popular in Taiwan, where it had over three million players at the publication of this article. However, the game began to receive a large number of complaints and negative word of mouth (NWOM) by players. Luor and Lu suggested that these complaints and NWOM could be attributed to the number of players currently playing, or the unstable performance of the game, because players needed to devote a reasonable amount of time and real money to the game to be successful. In order to determine the relationship among the variables of dissatisfaction, compensation, attitude of continuing to play, intention of continuing to play, and intention to spread NWOM when an SNG failure occurred, this study used a research model that adopted the theory of planned behavior and framework (Luor & Lu, 2012). This study presented three primary research topics. The first research topic wanted to, “Develop a model that can explain the effects of electronic WOM (eWOM) when an SNG failure occurs” (Luor & Lu, 2012, p. 27-28). The second research topic sought to answer, “Who tends to spread NWOM when an SNG failure occurs?” (Luor & Lu, 2012, p. 28). The third research topic sought to answer, “What is the compensation effect when SNG failure occurs?” (Luor & Lu, 2012, p. 28).

Before analyzing the research model it was necessary to understand the variables in greater detail. The theory of reasoned action and the theory of planned behavior stated that, “Subjective norms refer to the influence of people in one’s social environment on his/her behavioral intentions” (Fishbein & Ajzen as cited in Luor & Lu, 2012, p. 29). Further, “The beliefs of people, weighted by the importance one attributes to each of their opinions, will influence one’s behavioral intention” (Luor & Lu, 2012, p. 29). Luor and Lu (2012) stated that an individual’s attitude is their, “positive or negative belief about performing a specific

behavior” (p. 29). An individual’s intent to engage in an action is derived from the individual’s attitude toward the said action or behavior. Therefore, the player’s attitude should have a positive correlation to the player’s intention. In this study, due to the belief that intention to practice was necessary to carry out the behavior, attitude was also positively correlated to the player’s intention to continue playing (Luor & Lu, 2012).

In order to model intrinsic motivation in the technical acceptance model, the concept of perceived enjoyment was developed, which was defined as, “the extent to which the activity of using the computer is perceived to be enjoyable in its own right, excluding any performance consequences that may be anticipated” (Davis et al. as cited in Luor & Lu, 2012, p. 31). Perceived enjoyment was believed to influence individuals’ attitude toward continuing to play the SNG (Luor & Lu, 2012). On top of perceived enjoyment, users and players had perceived risks and uncertainties toward interactions with web-based vendors. This could be attributed to a user or player’s common attitudes toward the Internet. Additionally, customers expected some sort of compensation that was equal in magnitude to any amount of monetary or systemic failure they encountered (Luor & Lu, 2012).

Luor and Lu (2012) defined social influences as, “the effects of other people’s opinions, superior influence, and peer influence” (p. 32). Social norms and social pressures have also been considered social influences. Opinion leaders fell into this category. Opinion leaders had the ability to build a sense of community and influence the behavioral intentions of other users and consumers (Luor & Lu, 2012). Those users, opinion seekers, “seek clarification of facts or opinions in group task roles” (Kozar & Zigurs as cited in Luor & Lu, 2012, p. 33). However, when NWOM spread after the unstable conditions of Happy Farm,

Luor and Lu (2012) suggested, it was not from one group of leaders or seekers, but potentially both.

Based on the background literature and research, Luor and Lu (2012) proposed nine hypotheses that were tested through a questionnaire. Subjects, sixty-five Happy Farm players, were selected from a larger number that participated in an online survey. The majority of participants had played Happy Farm for over three months. Participation was voluntary and provided no incentive or encouragement for participation. The results of the questionnaire were analyzed using path analysis with a regression approach. Based on their findings, all but one hypothesis was supported (Luor & Lu, 2012).

Furthermore, the study provided answers to the research questions that were asked earlier. To explain the effects of electronic word of mouth when an SNG disaster occurs, the study found that attitude had a positive effect on intention (Luor & Lu, 2012). Secondly, enjoyment and compensation were positively correlated with attitude, while risk had a negative correlation. Thirdly, subjective norms also had a positive relationship with the intention to continue playing. Even those players that had the intention to continue playing the game spread NWOM, as long as their attitudes toward the game were negative (Luor & Lu, 2012). Luor and Lu (2012) discovered, “Only players with psychometric qualities of opinion seeking have the intention to spread NWOM” (p. 41).

The second research question sought to find who spreads NWOM after an SNG failure or disaster. The study confirmed that players with positive attitudes and the intent to continue playing had no intent to spread NWOM (Luor & Lu, 2012). Those that had negative attitudes toward the game, despite having the intention to continue playing, had the intention to spread NWOM. Luor and Lu (2012) found that opinion leaders, although they had the

social influence to affect the opinions of others, “are less likely to spread NWOM through cyberspace because they acknowledge the power of their influence” (p. 42). However, this did not stop opinion seekers from spreading NWOM. Thus, Luor and Lu (2012) argued that, “Trying to avoid NWOM is more important than building positive WOM” (p. 42).

The final question asked what the effect of compensation was when an SNG failure or disaster occurred. Because attitude and intention to continue playing the SNG were negatively correlated with perceived risk, it was vital to keep players satisfied (Luor & Lu, 2012). Luor and Lu (2012) found that, “Compensation can reduce players’ dissatisfaction and encourage them to continue to play” (p. 42). Furthermore, compensation should be conducted when a failure occurred that resulted in complaints, because it would help cut the vendor’s losses (Luor & Lu, 2012).

Why Study Facebook?

Facebook is one of the most interesting recent public relations-related innovations. In 2010, Facebook’s founder, Mark Zuckerberg, was voted as *Time* magazine’s “Person of the Year” (Dyrud, 2011). Facebook is not only a recent phenomenon, but is a growing one. In the summer of 2011, Facebook reached over seven hundred fifty million active members (Dyrud, 2011). Even more recently, Facebook reached eight hundred seventy-four million monthly active users who used Facebook mobile products as of September 30, 2013 (“Facebook,” n.d.). Facebook has become a deeply ingrained aspect of our culture and communication. Individuals and groups of like-minded individuals can now use Facebook to affect social change through online communication (Dyrud, 2011). Moving forward, public relations practitioners in all fields, but specifically in college football must recognize the importance

of Facebook and how it affects the social and monetary outcomes of the college football program.

Understanding how to properly use Facebook to their advantage is going to be a crucial aspect to public relations policies and everyday work life. One reason Facebook is so vital to modern public relations is that only about 55% of its users are younger than twenty-five years old and that women fifty-five years and older are the fastest growing demographic of Facebook users (Decarie, 2010). This statistic shows the wide range of Facebook's social reach. Facebook requires intelligent writing and enhanced interpersonal communication skills. When examining Facebook accounts with poorly written opinions and status updates, people relate that account to negative connotations such as lack of education, unpleasant, aggressive, and overall undesirable behavior (Decarie, 2010). This shows just how important the Facebook accounts of a college football program must be. Negativity by the fans can have significant monetary effects on any football program.

One major aspect of Facebook and how a college football program, particularly a large SEC football program, could use Facebook to successfully communicate with its fans is to understand and properly adapt to the social norms that exist on Facebook (Vorvoreanu, 2009). From the years 2004 to 2007, Facebook existed only for social networking among primarily college students. During this time, college students created a set of social norms and a particular culture for communicating on Facebook. In November 2007, Facebook launched a new system allowing businesses to create pages. However, these businesses had to advertise and communicate while operating within the social norms and culture already in place (Vorvoreanu, 2009). The significance was that public relations practitioners like a Sports Information Director, needed to adapt and research social norms of Facebook in order

to most effectively use it in order to communicate. Thus, an SEC football program must communicate with its fans in a manner that does not break social norms. If not, the program risks lack of desirability, credibility, and overall effectiveness when it comes to communicating with the fan base. Finally, Vorvoreanu (2009) found that, “As opposed to large corporations, students were much more welcoming of small businesses on Facebook and perceived that communication with small business owners can fit in well with the personal tone of Facebook communication” (p. 81). This overall finding is vital for an SEC football program to understand that its communication on Facebook with the fans needs to be as personal as possible. When the head football coach or the football program as a whole communicates with the fan base on Facebook, there needs to be an overall sense of a small community in order to have the most positive effects.

The SEC Coach on Facebook

One of the major aspects of a college football program’s Facebook page is the relationship between social media and the head coach. Further evaluation of how the head coach and the sports information director, or other public relations practitioner of a football program, can use Facebook to their advantage is becoming increasingly important. This importance is only magnified in the SEC because it is the winningest conference in the entire sport of college football, having won every Bowl Championship Series (BCS) National Championship from 2006-2012. The view of the fans of an SEC head football coach can be greatly affected by the communication taking place on Facebook.

Often, the head coach receives a great majority of the credit when the team does well. Perhaps even more prevalent, is when the head coach receives a vast amount of the blame when the team loses or struggles on the field. Facebook is now an easily accessed public

venue for the fans to voice their opinions of the head coach and the job he is doing. As more and more people offer opinions about the head coach on Facebook as well as in other media, the head coach becomes extremely well-known by the fan base. Sometimes the head coach is beloved by the fans and other times he is almost hated by the fans. Over time, there is a snowball effect from all of these opinions, and the head coach becomes almost larger than life. Particularly in the SEC, the head football coach may be viewed as a hero by the fans.

The Heroic View of a Head Coach: The Hero's Journey of Nick Saban

College football coaches can be seen as heroes by their fans. A historic example of this is Bear Bryant who became the winningest coach in college football history in 1981 (Herskowitz, 1987). Givens-Carroll and Slade (2012) said, "Perhaps the most mythological or legendary figure in the history of Southern college football is Alabama's former head coach Paul 'Bear' Bryant" (p. 166). In Dunnivant's (1996) biography, one of Coach Bryant's players, George Blanda, said, "This must be what God looks like" (p. 71). Paul Bryant is still seen today as a legendary coach and a statue of his likeness sits outside the football stadium in Tuscaloosa, AL.

Much like Coach Bryant, there is another coach at the University of Alabama who is seen as a hero. This is current Head Coach, Nick Saban. The career of University of Alabama head football coach Nick Saban, who was recently interviewed on "60 Minutes," parallels greatly with the theory of the "monomyth" when mythologist and writer Joseph Campbell (1949) wrote, "Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished" (p. 3). Nick Saban's actions parallel the actions of a mythical hero in that, the fans study and concern their lives with his every decision. Coach Saban makes several decisions in a football game that the fans either love or hate. They cheer

uncontrollably when their hero makes a successful decision, and lament dramatically when the decisions bring defeat. Luckily, for Alabama fans, defeat has been a very rare occurrence as Nick Saban's team has won three of the last five BCS National Championships.

The beginning stage for a hero is The Departure Stage known as The Call to Adventure (Campbell, 1949). Saban was born and raised in a small mining town of West Virginia (Mihailovich, 2013). He first played football on his father's little league team called the "Black Diamonds" (Mihailovich, 2013). Nick Saban still recalls the joys and difficulties of sprinting up a large hill near the field at the command of his father. Saban continued to play football all the way through college (Mihailovich, 2013).

The next stage for a hero is called Refusal of the Call (Campbell 1949). This was signified for Nick Saban when he originally chose to be a car dealer for his career. However, Saban continued his heroic adventure in the coaching world by first serving as a graduate assistant coach at Kent State University in 1973 after telling his father that coaching was in his blood (Mihailovich, 2013).

Saban continued to coach and launch his career (Mihailovich, 2013). He made several stops along the way before entering the part of his career that parallels what Campbell (1949) called the Crossing of the First Threshold. Saban's crossing of the first threshold took place when he won the 2003 national championship as the head coach at Louisiana State University (LSU) (Mihailovich, 2013). This is the point where he became nationally known and a proven winner.

According to Campbell (1949), after the hero crosses the first threshold, the hero then falls and enters into the stage in the Belly of the Whale. After Saban won the 2003 national championship, he was lured away to the National Football League (NFL) to coach the Miami

Dolphins (Mihailovich, 2013). LSU fans began referring to him as “Nick Satan,” and many still do today. As the head coach of the Miami Dolphins, Saban struggled to win. Late in the 2006 season, the University of Alabama targeted Saban as their next head coach. Saban was quoted as saying, “Well then I guess I have to say it, I’m not going to be the Alabama coach” (Mihailovich, 2013). However, shortly after, Saban resigned from the Dolphins and became the head coach at Alabama (Mihailovich, 2013). Saban was ridiculed by many for this complete contradiction. This is the point in Saban’s career that signifies when he was in the Belly of the Whale.

Saban endured the ridicule of the media and many sports fans. This was the stage Campbell (1949) referred to as The Road of Trials. However, since that time, Nick Saban has won three national championships and has become the highest-paid coach in all of college football (Mihailovich, 2013). Saban is now in Campbell’s stage that he called The Ultimate Boon. Saban can now do no wrong in the eyes of the fans of his football program.

Nick Saban’s career parallels the Hero’s Journey. He even had a statue of himself erected just outside the football stadium on the University of Alabama’s campus (Mihailovich, 2013). Saban has a near cult following in Alabama, and there is no sign of slowing down. Many fans refer to him as being the greatest head coach of all time.

Today, there are several head coaches trying to emulate Nick Saban’s winning formula. Christian and Givens-Carroll (2011) compared Michael Jackson’s life to the theory of the monomyth through a “critical cultural analysis” (p. 328). A similar analysis of Nick Saban, through the lens of the critical cultural theory of The Hero’s Journey, showed how an SEC head football coach could go through very dynamic portrayals by the fans. Many SEC fans once despised Nick Saban and now many view him as the greatest head coach ever.

With modern technology and social media inundating so much of people's lives, Facebook must certainly play a large role in how an SEC head coach is viewed by the fans of his football program. Therefore, there is no doubt about the necessity for further research. The current literature has shown the effects of mass communication in society, the magnitude of sports and college football, and the social and corporate effects of Facebook. However, new research must be done to determine the specific effects of Facebook on the way fans of a top-tier college football program in the SEC view their team's head coach.

Research Questions

The SEC is clearly the toughest and most talented conference in college football. The SEC also has the most fan involvement and attracts many of the best head coaches in the country. With Nick Saban at the University of Alabama currently having the most success, his fans view him as a hero. Further research is necessary to study exactly how the fans in the SEC view their team's head coach.

RQ 1: Do fans on SEC Facebook fan pages make comments referring to their team's head coach as a hero?

With increased fan activity through diffusion of innovations theory, there is an increased chance of an individual's comments receiving support from multiple other fans. In the social media realm, it is possible for a type of social structure to develop. If this is occurring, then a unique type of opinion leader might exist on social media websites. With increased fan activity, the potential for increased comments about the head coach exist.

RQ 2: Do fan comments favoring or disfavoring the head coach exist on SEC Facebook fan pages?

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Content Analysis

In order to answer the research questions, a qualitative content analysis was conducted. According to Zhang and Wildemuth (2009), “As one of today’s most extensively employed analytical tools, content analysis has been used fruitfully in a wide variety of research applications in information and library science (ILS)” (p. 1). A content analysis is a widely used and very effective form of research. Qualitative content analysis delves deeper than simply counting certain words or counting certain types of content, especially in unique studies of this type. This depth is why a qualitative content analysis was favored to answer the research questions. Qualitative content analysis allows for a deeper understanding by extracting overall themes and patterns. Examples of finding deeper meanings were developed in anthropology, sociology, and psychology, where researchers find socially scientific meanings of underlying physical messages (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

Qualitative research consists of three categories (Wolcott, 1994). These three categories are description, analysis, and interpretation. Description is the observations employed in the research. Analysis is the process to be used when determining the relationships of different texts and their context. Finally, interpretation is the process of categorizing analysis into overall qualitative themes through discovery (Wolcott, 1994). Essentially, qualitative content analysis describes the data, analyzes the effects and relationships of the data, and determines thematic conclusions relative to the research questions.

Qualitative content analysis is much more inductive than deductive (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). The data is studied and leads to conclusions based on overall themes and patterns. Conducting a qualitative content analysis allowed the research to draw these

conclusions because, “It allows researchers to understand social reality in a subjective but scientific manner” (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 1). In understanding the social reality of the context of the Facebook fan pages, the research purposely selected texts which specifically contained information about the research questions being investigated through comments regarding SEC coaches. Answering the research questions was most effective through a qualitative study. According to Zhang and Wildemuth (2009), “Qualitative content analysis pays attention to unique themes that illustrate the range of the meanings of the phenomenon rather than the statistical significance of the occurrence of particular texts or concepts” (p. 2). Overall, a qualitative content analysis is a broad thematic research method that effectively answered the research questions.

The thesis sought to answer broad questions regarding the views of SEC fans about their team’s football coach. Truly gauging the views of the fans in order to answer a question was not a quantifiable endeavor easily answered with empirical data. Rather, this study sought to gain a deep understanding of the emotions, opinions, and context of statements from the fans. This deep understanding allowed for discovery of overall themes and exploration of conclusions to the research questions.

Conducting the Study

To answer the research questions, the research took an in-depth look and conducted a qualitative content analysis of the SEC football Facebook posts and what the fans were saying on these public pages. According to Berg and Lune (2012), “Typically, content analysis is performed on various forms of human communications” (p. 350).

The study observed Facebook comments posted during the month of November 2014, due to the fact that November was right in the heart of SEC football conference play, and

November was also the month where the major outcomes of each team's season were determined. November was also when the most heated rivalry games took place such as "The Boot" between LSU and Arkansas, "The Iron Bowl" between Alabama and Auburn, "The Egg Bowl" between Mississippi (Ole Miss) and Mississippi State, and "The World's Largest Outdoor Cocktail Party" between Florida and Georgia. These were historic and intense rivalries and contributed to November being the month where an SEC head football coach would have felt tremendous pressure, and the fans would have been highly involved on their team's Facebook pages.

The study analyzed a purposive sample of particular Facebook fan pages. Pajares (2007) also called this a "nonprobability sample" and held that, "rationale and limitations must be clearly provided" (VI, E, 5).

The research considered only the one existing official Facebook page for each SEC football team. Facebook pages that were not official representations of an SEC program indicated in their description that they are "unofficial," while the official pages were recognized as a "school sports team" page on Facebook and indicated in their description that they were the "official" Facebook page. These "official" pages had a blue checkmark that stated they were "verified" by Facebook. There were three teams that did not have football specific Facebook pages, so the research analyzed the football-related comments on their "official" and "verified" athletic department pages. Those three programs were the University of Florida, the University of South Carolina, and Vanderbilt University. The study did not analyze the several, typically smaller and unofficial Facebook pages of each SEC football team. Also, the study did not research the Facebook pages of the individual SEC head coaches. While study of these pages could prove useful in the future, the study focused

only on the aspects of social media that a public relations practitioner such as the Sports Information Director would have control of. There were a total of fourteen SEC football programs in existence split into East and West divisions as shown in Table 1 along with the name of their respective head coaches.

Table 1

SEC Football Program Head Coach Names

SEC WEST		SEC EAST	
SCHOOL	HEAD COACH	SCHOOL	HEAD COACH
Alabama	Nick Saban	Florida	Will Muschamp
Arkansas	Bret Bielema	Georgia	Mark Richt
Auburn	Gus Malzahn	Kentucky	Mark Stoops
LSU	Les Miles	Missouri	Gary Pinkel
Mississippi State	Dan Mullen	South Carolina	Steve Spurrier
Ole Miss	Hugh Freeze	Tennessee	Butch Jones
Texas A&M	Kevin Sumlin	Vanderbilt	Derek Mason

This study analyzed Facebook fan comments during the month of November for the following official SEC football Facebook pages: “Alabama Football,” “Arkansas Razorback Football,” “Auburn Football,” “Florida Gators,” “Georgia Football,” “University of Kentucky Football,” “LSU Football,” “Ole Miss Football,” “Mississippi State Football,” “Mizzou Football,” “South Carolina Gamecocks,” “Tennessee Football,” “Texas A&M Football,” and “Vanderbilt University Athletics.” Facebook fans were able to follow their team’s posts by clicking the “Like” button on the team’s page. In Table 2, the numbers of Facebook “Likes” for each school’s official page are shown as of February 5, 2015.

Table 2

SEC Football Program Facebook Page Likes

SEC WEST		SEC EAST	
SCHOOL	FACEBOOK “LIKES”	SCHOOL	FACEBOOK “LIKES”
LSU	1,265,934	Florida	1,691,845
Alabama	1,114,672	South Carolina	589,450
Auburn	283,360	Tennessee	482,115
Arkansas	137,302	Georgia	223,074
Texas A&M	129,883	Vanderbilt	105,619
Mississippi State	124,402	Missouri	97,897
Ole Miss	115,852	Kentucky	50,248

The research consisted of studying the comments by the fans that were posted within a three-day time period of each game in November. The day before, the day of, and the day after the team played their November contest were the days where fan comments would be studied and noted. In order to determine these time periods, the schedule of contests for each SEC football team were researched. The process to research these schedules consisted of conducting an online search for each SEC football team’s respective official athletic website. In order to do this, the researcher typed “<University Name> Official Football” for each team using an online search engine. Then, the researcher verified that the website was labeled as “The Official” home or website of the team. Thirdly, the researcher navigated to the “Football” page. Finally, the researcher navigated to the “2014-15 Football Schedule.” This process was conducted for each of the fourteen SEC football teams. Once each team’s

schedule was known, the allowable dates for observing Facebook comments were also known.

The data was collected by expanding the comment threads located on posts that occurred within the aforementioned time frame. In order to expand the comment threads, the researcher selected “view previous comments” or “view more comments” when applicable. The comments were observed and studied in their entirety. During the research, applicable comments that pertained to answering the research questions were noted. All notes relevant to comments did not include names or identities of any person. All comments were kept anonymous. In order for the researcher to understand what comments should be noted, the study operationally defined what comments were relevant to the research questions.

The first research question was studied through qualitatively analyzing all noted comments that had a heroic pretense or theme. The study analyzed these comments in order to draw conclusions relative to the first research question. The operational definition for comments relevant to a heroic theme was based on the use of key words. The key words included the definitions, listed synonyms, and related words for “hero.” These words were; “hero,” “god,” “savior,” “icon,” “idol,” “brave,” “legend,” “warrior,” “courage,” and “great” (“Hero,” n.d.). Any comment containing one or more of these listed words was noted and qualitatively analyzed. The comments were noted by “copying” and “pasting” them from the Facebook thread to a password-protected Microsoft Word document. This document included only the relevant comments that pertained to answering the first research question. On Facebook, if a particular comment was supported, others could “Like” the comment. Notes of relevant comments that were saved to the document also included the number of “Likes” the comment received from the Facebook community. This document was

qualitatively analyzed to help answer both RQ1 and RQ2. All notes did not include the name of the person who posted the comment. The notes that endured this process were kept entirely confidential.

The second research question was studied through analysis of all comments noted that referred to the head coach either positively or negatively, but not in a heroic pretense or theme. Any comment containing the word “coach” or referencing the respective coach’s first or last name was noted and qualitatively analyzed later on. If the comment contained any of the key words related to “hero” the comment was noted in the RQ1 Word document and did not need to be noted again. The comments were noted by “copying” and “pasting” from the Facebook thread to a separate password-protected Microsoft Word document that contained only comments that referred to the coach and were “non-hero” related. Notes also included the number of “Likes” the comment received on Facebook. This document was qualitatively analyzed to answer RQ2. All notes did not include the name of the person who posted the comment. The notes that endured this process were also kept entirely confidential. Both of the Word documents were never e-mailed. They were password-protected and saved in only one location.

The second research question was answered through a qualitative content analysis that analyzed interactions among Facebook users, as well as observed the “Likes” that the relevant noted comments received. The broad, rich understanding, and depth of a qualitative study truly benefited the research in determining the answer to RQ2. Rather than simply quantifying how many “Likes” relevant comments received, the study qualitatively analyzed whether or not comments regarding the football coach were supported by other fans.

Over the course of analyzing all comments noted from all fourteen SEC football Facebook pages, the research delved into themes and discovered qualitative observations based on the content. These results had strong reliability. In order to maximize the consistency of Facebook comments, which could be edited and altered, the research took place exactly two months following the conclusion of the college football season. That is to say, the study took place two months after the completion of the college football national championship game, which occurred on January 12, 2015. Future tests of the same procedure could offer more consistent results because the vast majority of post-season alterations of comments on Facebook pages had already occurred once the two month time frame had elapsed. By waiting two months, the themes that fans produced over social media remained consistent once the study began, and also future studies will yield extremely similar results. For these reasons, the study had strong reliability.

Pajares (2007) defined external validity as, “the extent to which findings of a study can be generalized to people or situations other than those observed in the study” (VI, E, 2). This research lacked strong external validity because it was not generalizable to all of college football. The lack of generalizability was due to the study’s focus on solely analyzing content from SEC football fans. Thus, a similar study of fans from different regions of the country could likely produce different results as a consequence of studying fans that may use the innovation of social media differently than fans of SEC teams. Despite a potential lack of generalizability, the study did focus on the fans of one of the highest revenue-generating conferences in college football with four of the top ten revenue-generating football programs in the country in 2014 (“NCAA Finances,” n.d.).

What the research may have lacked in external validity it made up for in reliability, and in providing the researcher with much deeper knowledge of the content. While providing this deep and rich qualitative content analysis, the research also had what Pajares (2007) called internal validity. Pajares (2007) defined internal validity as, “the extent to which the outcomes of a study result from the variables that were manipulated, measured, or selected rather than from other variables not systematically treated” (VI, E, 3). The variable in the research questions that the study analyzed was the online comments of the fans. Because the study focused specifically on the Facebook pages, types of comments, and the particular psychographic of college football fans, there was a high certainty of internal validity. That is to say, the research sought to study SEC football fans’ views on Facebook, and that is exactly the variable that was analyzed thanks to a deep understanding and reliability because of the strengths of a qualitative analysis.

University of Texas Football: A Case Study

In 2014, the total revenue for the University of Texas athletics department was over one hundred sixty-five million (“NCAA Finances,” n.d.). This was the largest total revenue for any university athletics department. Although the University of Texas is not an SEC program, it is located in the American Southwest. As a non-SEC program, studying the University of Texas did not skew the study of the SEC programs. The current Head Football Coach for the University of Texas is Charlie Strong, so his name was searched when finding relevant Facebook comments.

In order to fine-tune the methodology of the research, a case study of the official Facebook fan page for the University of Texas was conducted. First, the study located the official Facebook fan page for the University of Texas football program. The Facebook page

was titled, “Texas Football.” This page had 34,860 “Likes,” was “verified” by Facebook, and was listed as “the official page of the University of Texas Football program” (“Texas Football,” 2015).

Second, the study located the 2014 football schedule for the University of Texas football program. “University of Texas Official Football” was searched through an online search engine known as Google at www.google.com. The first link provided led to the Football page titled, “The Official Website of UT Athletics.” A simple online navigation to “Schedule” and selecting “2014” led to the 2014 Texas football schedule.

Thirdly, the study defined exactly what dates were applicable to study. In the month of November, the Texas football program played four contests. The dates of the contests were; November 1, 2014, November 8, 2014, November 15, 2014, and November 27, 2014.

Next, the study located the posts on the official Facebook fan page for “Texas Football” that occurred the day before, day of, or day after any of the four contests in the month of November. The applicable dates that contained a post by “Texas Football” were; November 8, 2014, which contained one post, November 15, 2014, which contained three posts, and November 27, 2014, which contained one post.

A qualitative content analysis was then conducted by observing all comments and interactions visible in the comment threads for the aforementioned posts. This process was then repeated to ensure reliability and that all applicable comments were noted.

In researching comments relevant to RQ1, there were no comments observed that met the criteria necessary to be classified as “hero” related.

In researching comments relevant to the second potential Word document, a total of six comments that contained the word “coach” or Charlie Strong’s name were observed.

These comments and total number of associated “Likes” were copied and pasted into a password-protected Word document. No identities were saved or pasted with the notes.

Texas Case Study Findings

The study then qualitatively analyzed the noted comments and associated number of “Likes.” Overall, comments regarding the coach were extremely positive. One example of this was a user who commented, “Thanks Coach Strong! We knew you were the man for the job...😊.”

Comments that contained both the words “coach” and the coach’s name were more highly supported by other Facebook users than comments that contained only one instance of the word “coach” or his name. For example, the comment above contained both the words “Coach” and “Strong.” The comment received three “Likes.” On the other hand, a Facebook user commented saying, “Hook em [*sic*] coach that was a good game.” This comment only contained one instance of the word “coach” or his name. This comment did not receive public support due to the lack of receiving any “Likes.”

Comments that contained more depth and length when posted seemed to receive much higher support than the shorter, simpler comments. The longer comments seemed to relate to other users and therefore received more support. Another example was one user who commented, “While we aren’t there yet, I think Coach Strong has us headed in the right direction. HOOK ‘EM [*sic*].” This comment received the most support from all the noted comments with a total of nine “Likes.”

In conclusion, the answer to Research Question One was no. There were zero comments observed that linked Charlie Strong to being referred to as a “hero.” The answer to Research Question Two was yes. Comments about the coach were supported by other users.

Furthermore, the support for individual comments increased for comments with more depth and increased mentioning of the coach. Comments about Charlie Strong, head football coach at the University of Texas, were favorable overall. The study had strong reliability; however, the external validity was low. This was because the comments were specific to Charlie Strong and did not generalize to other football programs with different coaches. The study shed light on some extremely interesting aspects of the relationship between social media and college football fandom. The study also set the example for the full study of the SEC football programs.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Summary of Results

The study analyzed all fourteen SEC Football Facebook pages. During the qualitative content analysis, all comments relative to RQ1 and RQ2 were copied and pasted into their respective Microsoft Word documents. The comments relating the head coach to a “hero” or having a heroic pretense were noted as “hero comments” and were relevant to RQ1. In addition to the “hero-related” words mentioned in the methodology, the researcher found several other words that pertained to the overall theme of associating the head coach to being viewed as a hero. Through the content analysis, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of how fans view their favorite team’s head football coach as a hero. Some of these additional “hero-related” words were positive, while others were negative. Words such as “satan” and “curse” were negative, but they still displayed the head coach as a heroic figure in the eyes of the fans. Below, Table 3 shows the original hero-related words, as well as the additional words or phrases the researcher added as being pertinent to answering RQ1.

Table 3

Summary of Hero-Related Words

Original Hero-Related Words/Phrases	Additional Hero-Related Words/Phrases
“hero,” “god,” “savior,” “icon,” “idol,”	“satan,” “genius,” “throne,” “curse,”
“brave,” “legend,” “warrior,” “courage,”	“magic,” “best coach ever”
“great”	

The comments that mentioned the head coach in either a favorable or unfavorable manner, without relating the coach to a “hero” were noted as “general comments” and were

relevant to RQ2. It is important to note, the researcher did include comments that referred to the head coach through the use of a pronoun or nickname. A qualitative analysis allowed the researcher to fully understand when a particular fan was referencing the head coach. These individual documents of noted comments were then analyzed to gain a true understanding of the underlying themes and patterns. The research uncovered a far greater amount of general comments than hero comments.

The study found seven hundred forty-five total comments relative to the head football coach. Of the seven hundred forty-five, only seventeen hero comments were uncovered while seven hundred twenty-eight general comments were found. The University of Florida accounted for a tremendous amount with five hundred comments that were relevant to the research. In Table 4 below, the number of general comments and hero comments for each SEC Football Facebook page are shown.

Table 4

Summary of Facebook Page Comments

Facebook Page	Hero	General	Total
Alabama Football	5	43	48
Arkansas Razorback Football	0	3	3
Auburn Football	6	40	46
Florida Gators	1	499	500
Georgia Football	0	20	20
University of Kentucky Football	2	16	18
LSU Football	2	35	37
Ole Miss Football	0	3	3

Table 4 (continued)

Facebook Page	Hero	General	Total
Mississippi State Football	0	18	18
Mizzou Football	0	6	6
South Carolina Gamecocks	0	29	29
Tennessee Football	1	12	13
Texas A&M Football	0	4	4
Vanderbilt University Athletics	0	0	0
Total	17	728	745

Discussion of Results

The major finding of the study was the discovery of how active and negative a group of fans can become when their team is experiencing tremendous failure. The most overwhelming result of the study was the number of comments about Florida Gators' head coach Will Muschamp. Over two-thirds of the recorded comments pertained to Will Muschamp. The study discovered how fans can react either negatively or positively during unsuccessful times.

Also, the study uncovered several themes and patterns for multiple football programs. These themes ranged from extremely negative comments regarding the head coach all the way to positive comments. Some comments were found which portrayed the head coach to be heroic. The major themes that spanned across multiple programs were; humanization of the head coach, the existence of comments about the opposing head coach, the link between the Facebook page activity and number of comments, and the individual atmosphere and culture that existed with each SEC football program.

Fans' Reactions during the Road of Trials: Will Muschamp as a Hero

The study uncovered how fans react during difficult times. There were numerous comments pertaining to Will Muschamp and the Florida Gators who were experiencing frequent losses and little success. The heightened activity level of the Florida Gators Facebook page provided evidence to exhibit how SEC fans viewed their head football coach as a hero. In the case of Will Muschamp, the enormous amount of fan comments about him showed the type of impact an SEC head football coach has on the thoughts and emotions of the fan base. A hero garners much attention, and the copious amount of findings paralleled Will Muschamp's career path to the early stages of Joseph Campbell's (1949) theory, "The Hero's Journey."

With an astounding five hundred of the recorded comments relating to Will Muschamp, the study revealed how he was viewed as a hero by the fans because of his importance to their thoughts and opinions. Muschamp was clearly at an important stage in his career and on his journey. This past season, Muschamp was at the stage known as the "Road of Trials," where the hero is on the journey and faces several tests and difficulties (Campbell, 1949). By looking at his past, the parallels of his career and the journey of a hero become quite clear.

The first stage of Muschamp's journey was, "The Call to Adventure" (Campbell, 1949). This was where the hero was first called to pursue the heroic journey. Using the position of head football coach as becoming a hero, Muschamp's "call" took place in 2008 when he was the defensive coordinator at the University of Texas (UT), and he was being courted by several schools to become their head coach (Associated Press, 2008). Clemson, Tennessee, and Washington were all considering Will Muschamp to be their head football

coach. Muschamp was the darling of the Texas Longhorns and was a highly touted assistant coach.

The second stage of his journey was, “Refusal of the Call” (Campbell, 1949). This was where the hero initially refused to pursue the heroic journey. Will Muschamp refused to pursue these head coaching opportunities and instead chose to remain at UT (Associated Press, 2008).

The third stage of the journey was, “Supernatural Aid” (Campbell, 1949). This was where the hero received help from others to prepare him. When Muschamp chose to remain at UT, he was given the additional title of “head-coach-in-waiting” (Associated Press, 2008). This meant that Muschamp was guaranteed to be the next head coach at UT in the future, and UT would train him as he began preparing in his mind to become a head coach.

The fourth stage of his journey was, “Crossing the First Threshold” (Campbell, 1949). This was where the hero began the journey and reached the point of no return. Will Muschamp reached this stage when he abandoned his post as head-coach-in-waiting and chose to become head coach at Florida. There was no going back at this point. He then reached the fifth state of the journey known as, “The Belly of the Whale” (Campbell, 1949). This was when the hero entered the first dangerous part of the journey. Muschamp entered into the belly of the SEC during his first season as head coach at Florida.

The sixth and final stage that paralleled to Will Muschamp’s career was, “The Road of Trials” (Campbell, 1949). This was when Muschamp began dealing with all of the trials that came along with being an SEC head coach. He had some minor trials and even strong success in 2012. However, he endured his hardest trial during the football season that the

study analyzed. This is where the research uncovered the extremism and fervor of the SEC fans of Florida.

For the heroic journey of an SEC head football coach, the trials took place during the first head coaching job. The study uncovered how fans reacted differently to both Will Muschamp at Florida and Dan Mullen at Mississippi State. While Muschamp was enduring his toughest trial, the fans were extremely negative. The results mirrored a social media version of a “lynch mob.” Contrarily, Dan Mullen was having overall great success, and the fans’ comments were positive during his smaller trial of the season when he lost to Nick Saban. Clearly, the overall theme discovered by the study through the findings was the fans’ rampant participation in commenting on Facebook pages during the trials of their head coaches, particularly when the trials were the toughest.

Humanization of the Hero

The second major theme the research found was the humanization of the head coach. In an interesting manner, the qualitative analysis revealed several examples of fans becoming overly excited about many small, humanistic attributes of the head coach. These comments existed across multiple SEC fan bases and established the first major theme of the research, which was the humanization of the “hero.”

One example of this theme was discovered on the Auburn Football Facebook fan page. The fan commented, “Gus gets waffles!” This comment received four “Likes.” Another fan commented, “Wonder if Malzahn found a seat at the Waffle House... I bet he did... WDE.” The fact that the head football coach at Auburn eats waffles seemed to really resonate with some fans. Another humanistic quality that Auburn Head Football Coach Gus Malzahn displayed was dancing in the locker room. A fan commented, “Can’t believe you

didn't put in some of Gus dancing to the same song!" This comment received five "Likes." Also, another fan replied to this comment saying, "No doubt best comment on this no matter what! We needed some Malzahn break dancing right in the middle of the video. Lol [*sic*]." This comment received two "Likes." These examples from the Auburn fan base displayed an example of one overall theme the research discovered. Fans seemed to truly enjoy discussing humanistic aspects of the head coach. This humanization seemed to bring the fans closer to personally relating to the head coach.

Another example of the humanization theme was found on the Alabama Football Facebook fan page. A fan commented, "Anyone no [*sic*] where to find that white nike jacket nick saban was wearing last night?" A similar comment was found on the Mizzou Football Facebook fan page. A fan commented, "Does anyone know where you can buy the sweatshirt coach steckel is wearing?" These are two examples of fans from different SEC fan bases, who were interested in the clothing of the head coach. Similar to a child dressing as their favorite superhero, some fans desire to be able to dress the same as the head coach of their favorite football program.

The final example of the humanization of the hero was prevalent on the Florida Gators Facebook fan page. A fan commented, "Good to see Muschamp smiling again." Another fan said, "Didn't know MUSCHAMP knew how to smile." These fans seemed to really take an interest in the thought of their head coach expressing this human emotion. Also from the Florida fan base, a fan commented, "Glad to see the Gator coach being able to smile. The fans need to cheer for the coach and show his little boys that Dad is a winner as well as his team. Also happy for the win for my 91 year [*sic*] old Aunt that is a fan from way back!! I am sure she enjoyed every minute of the game." Yet another humanistic attribute,

the love for one's family, was on display in this comment. The fan related their joy about the coach to their own family in an attempt to personally relate with the head coach. All of these examples showed the overall theme of the attempt by the fans to humanize and relate to their head coach. This attempt revealed the original view by many fans that the head coach was not simply a normal human, but also a hero.

Opposing Coach Comments

The third major pattern the research found was the existence of numerous fan comments regarding the opposing team's head coach. Fans across multiple SEC football programs seemed to love commenting about their opponent's head coach. These comments took place most often in the midst of heated rivalry games and were often quite negative.

One example of opposing coach comments occurred during a highly-touted matchup between Alabama and Mississippi State. Both teams were nationally ranked in the top three spots for all of college football. A Mississippi State fan commented, "F [*sic*] you Nick Saban!!!" This comment received two "Likes." Another fan commented, "It seems this guy Gary Daniels really loves Alabama and would love to blow Sabin [*sic*]?" This comment was one of the most highly supported comments by other fans having received seventeen "Likes."

Another example of opposing coach comments occurred following the Iron Bowl matchup between Alabama and Auburn. This extremely heated rivalry game was nationally televised and many fans commented during the game. One Alabama fan commented, "Mr. Malzahn take your loss and get out of Tuscaloosa please!" Also during the Iron Bowl, a fan commented, "Gus and the Auburn kitties just got on the short bus heading home after a ROLL TIDE shellacking , [*sic*] Straight up football victory by BAMA, no one luck [*sic*] play like the Auburn kitties had last year. OUCH Bama 55 kitties 44 it must hurt." Several other

instances of fans commenting and mentioning the opposing head coach during the Iron Bowl took place.

An interesting example occurred during the matchup between Florida and South Carolina. The head coach for South Carolina was the head coach at Florida previously. Florida was having a very unsuccessful season. A Florida fan commented, “Muschamp isn’t fit to lace up Spurriers [*sic*] cleats.” This example, which received four “Likes,” was a fan berating his own head coach while promoting the opposing head coach. Another Florida fan commented, “Can we switch coaches?” This comment was highly supported having received eleven “Likes.” A third fan commented, “Muschamp has to go. Come home Mr. Spurrier.” Three other fans replied to this comment in support. In this game alone, there were eighteen instances where fans made comments that mentioned the opposing head coach. Overall, fans from multiple SEC teams seemed to truly enjoy commenting on the opposing head coach. This was an aspect of the research that could likely be studied further. This pattern continued to reveal the existence of the major theme of fans commenting about opposing SEC head coaches.

SEC Football Facebook Page Activity

The fourth major theme the qualitative content analysis uncovered was the impact that the level of activity that existed for each SEC football Facebook page had on the research. A few of the football programs had Facebook pages that were highly active. These pages posted game scores, highlight videos, pictures, and headline stories on a consistent basis. This affected the research because there were greater opportunities for fans to post comments about their team. On the other hand, some SEC football Facebook pages had

limited activity, and as a result there were far fewer opportunities for fans to post comments about their team.

Some examples of SEC teams with more active Facebook pages were; “Alabama Football,” “LSU Football,” and “Florida Gators.” These Facebook pages tended to have more “Likes” associated with the page than some of the more inactive SEC football Facebook pages. Overall, the research found that the more active Facebook pages also had more “Likes” and consequently tended to have more fan comments. The three SEC football Facebook pages had over one million “Likes.” In Table 5 below, the summary of all fourteen SEC football Facebook pages and the relationships between “Likes” and number of recorded fan comments are shown.

Table 5

Summary of Relationship between “Likes” and Recorded Fan Comments

Facebook Page	Facebook “Likes”	Comments Recorded
Florida Gators	1,691,845	500
LSU Football	1,265,934	37
Alabama Football	1,114,672	48
South Carolina Gamecocks	589,450	29
Tennessee Football	482,115	13
Auburn Football	283,360	46
Georgia Football	223,074	20
Arkansas Razorback Football	137,302	3
Texas A&M Football	129,883	4

Table 5 (continued)

Facebook Page	Facebook “Likes”	Comments Recorded
Mississippi State Football	124,402	18
Ole Miss Football	115,852	3
Vanderbilt University Athletics	105,619	0
Mizzou Football	97,897	6
University of Kentucky Football	50,248	18

As the table shows, the study found that Facebook pages with more “Likes” tended to have the most fan comments about the head coach. Likewise, as the number of “Likes” decreased, the number of fan comments about the head coach also tended to decrease. Mississippi State and Kentucky did not necessarily follow this trend. The reason was that while fan page activity was important, the atmosphere and individual situations of these two football programs played a larger role.

Individual Findings of SEC Football Programs

The most prevalent pattern for all schools the research discovered was the effect that each individual SEC football program’s situation had on the content of fan comments. Rivalry games, a recent win or loss, head coach contract discussions, and the overall level of recent success all played a major role in uncovering the focus of the fan comments. The researcher found certain themes specific to each SEC school. The trends of fan comments for some schools were similar if the situation at the schools was also similar. However, the overall patterns and themes uncovered were unique to each school.

Alabama Football

The recurring trend for fan comments about Alabama Football was in relation to the great success of the team, the rivalry Iron Bowl matchup, and the heroic dynamic of the head coach Nick Saban. The fans of Alabama Football were accustomed to having great success each season. The team had won many games, and the fans expected to win. They credited much of the success to the head coach. One fan commented, “Our flag is planted!!! ~Love those Bama boys and our awesome Coach Nick Saban!!!! Been for Alabama all my life and SUPER proud of them for all they have accomplished!!! GO BAMA GO!!! RTR [*sic*].” This fan clearly credited the head coach with a lot of the success. Fan comments with this theme were extremely prevalent on the Alabama Football Facebook page.

The individual games played a large role in the topic of fan comments. One of the biggest college football games every season is the Iron Bowl rivalry matchup between Alabama and Auburn. The fans did not disappoint with the plethora of comments regarding this big game. To put this point in perspective, of the forty-eight total comments the research recorded for Alabama Football, forty-six of the comments were found during the Iron Bowl. One fan commented, “Maybe Saben [*sic*] needs to light that iron bowl up and make that iron go CRIMSON.” After Alabama won the game, despite being down at the half, one fan said, “Well whatever Coach Saban said or whatever the other coaches might’ve [*sic*] said at half-time must’ve [*sic*] work!!! Woop Woop!!! Good job! Rammer Jammer!!!” This fan gave almost all of the credit for the win to the coaching staff. The researcher found that the Iron Bowl was a lightning rod for fan comments and many of them gave credit to Nick Saban. The importance of the game seemed to play an extensive role in the amount of fan comments

the research uncovered. When Alabama played a far inferior opponent in Western Carolina on November 22, 2014, there were no comments about the head coach.

The final theme the research revealed about Alabama Football was the heroic view the fans exhibited of head coach Nick Saban. One fan said, “Nick Saban is a football genius i [sic] would have taken Blake Sims out after the third interception. Coach Saban had confidence and football knowledge. Great job great win Alabama!” This fan credited the huge win to the “genius” of Nick Saban. Another fan said, “Nick, Great job sticking with Sims. There is a reason you are the best coach in the game and possibly ever. . . .” This fan clearly viewed Nick Saban as the best coach in the entire world. The pattern of fans idolizing Nick Saban was common. However, one comment by a fan showed how the fan viewed Nick Saban in a mythological light. This fan said, “I’m really enjoying this! Nick Satan [sic] deserves this!” This comment occurred when Alabama was losing. This particular fan compared Nick Saban to the devil, thus showing a mythological view of him. Overall, the Alabama Football Facebook fan page revealed the intensity of the Iron Bowl, the heroic view of Nick Saban by the fans, and the correlation between the number of fan comments about the coach and the importance of the particular game being played.

Arkansas Razorback Football

There were only three total comments recorded by the researcher for the Arkansas Razorback football team. The Facebook page was in the bottom half of the SEC in terms of activity, or number of “Likes.” This lack of fan participation on the page led to fewer available comments. In addition, Arkansas Football was not particularly successful having won only four games heading into the month of November and having won only three games in the entire 2013 season.

However, the fans of Arkansas Razorback Football did contribute significantly to the trend of increased comments during rivalry games. In the rivalry game known as “The Boot” against LSU, there were a lot of fan comments and the research uncovered three comments about the coach. One fan said, “So PROUD TO BE A HOG FAN!! WTG!! [*sic*] We have THE BEST coach in the SEC!! He never let them get down or doubt. Love Coach B!! [*sic*]” This fan clearly credited the head coach with the victory and the comment also received two “Likes.” A similar comment crediting the coach received nine “Likes.” Overall, while the research did not find a large number of comments, the research did reveal the theme of increased comments about the coach during the rivalry SEC matchups.

Auburn Football

Auburn Football had a highly active Facebook page, and several comments about head coach Gus Malzahn were recorded. The research uncovered patterns of increased activity during rivalry SEC games and heroic themes as well. The Iron Bowl was a huge game for Auburn fans as well as Alabama fans. As a result, Auburn fans credited Gus Malzahn for their successes and failures during and after the game. For example, one fan said, “Gus better be looking for a defensive coordinator. Hes [*sic*] accountable for this defensive disaster!!!” This fan blamed the head coach for the entire defense. Another fan said, “An AD and head coach search should be underway immediately.” This fan was ready for Gus Malzahn to be fired after losing the Iron Bowl. Another fan replied to this comment saying, “Head coach? Lol [*sic*] wanna [*sic*] fire malzahn [*sic*] after this? Y'all [*sic*] made it to the BCS championship last year, and have had a pretty decent season this year. They just need a new DC.” While not all of the fans were ready to fire Gus Malzahn one year after making it to the championship, it was shocking to see that some fans would think this way.

Gus Malzahn was also one of the SEC head coaches that seemed to be viewed as a hero by the fans. For example, one fan commented, “105 yards of penalties... [*sic*] at HALFTIME is unacceptable! Our defense looks like The Keystone Cops tonight (all season?). [*sic*] Struggling to understand our #3 ranking. Need some halftime coaching magic that Gus is known for inspiring!!!!” This fan believed Gus capable of magic to lead the team to victory. Another fan said, “You wish and you hope. Gus is on his way to replace Saban on the throne and he will do it at Auburn. That's all.” This comment revealed not only a heroic view of Nick Saban for Alabama, but also the view that Gus Malzahn can conquer Nick Saban and become a hero in the process.

While several comments were recorded from the Iron Bowl matchup that revealed both heroic pretenses and blaming of the coach, other games in November yielded much less fan activity. In Auburn’s game against Georgia, there was only one fan comment regarding the coach. This disparity in comments clearly showed the importance of the rivalry SEC matchups.

Florida Gators

The Facebook page for Florida Football was far and away the most active with five hundred recorded comments. The fans blamed head coach Will Muschamp repeatedly. The common patterns the research revealed for this individual program were the blaming of the coach for the team’s failure and the importance of the SEC rivalry matchup.

The research uncovered hundreds of fan comments blaming Will Muschamp for the failures of the football team. A fan commented, “Please lose so we can get rid of Muschump!! [*sic*]” Another fan said, “There should be no more chances for moosedump [*sic*] no matter what he does the remainder of the year.” Another fan said, “Mushchamp [*sic*] is

gone regardless of if we win every game the rest of the season.” These comments continued over and over again. The blaming of Will Muschamp for the lack of success at Florida was rampant.

Another interesting theme for Florida fans was the number of fans that commented in support of Will Muschamp. This highlighted the fact that fans can be both negative and positive during the extreme trials of a coach’s career. Despite the team’s lack of success, one fan said, “The Keep coach Muschamp page is already up and running! I actually like him and Roper and say give them a chance.” This fan not only supported the head coach, but the fan also promoted another Facebook page dedicated to keeping the coach. Another fan said, “Some of [*sic*] people sound so incredibly stupid on here. lol [*sic*] never happy about anything. Go Gators! Go Muschamp!” This comment in favor of the head coach received twenty-three “Likes.” The pattern of fans backing the head coach was certainly smaller than the fans blaming him and calling for him to be fired. However, the pro-Muschamp theme was still fairly prevalent.

A third interesting theme the research uncovered was the effect the SEC rivalry game against Georgia had on the fan comments. Florida won “The World’s Largest Outdoor Cocktail Party” by defeating Georgia. This game was extremely important to the fans, and the overall tone of the comments changed dramatically regarding Will Muschamp after this victory. Many fans, despite the season-long lack of success, commented positively for the head coach after this game. One fan said, “Save Mushchamp's job! Program changing win!” Another fan said, “Congrats Gators! Great Win Coach Muschamp!” Another fan commented, “Wil [*sic*] is the best coach ever for Florida - [*sic*] getting the most out of nothing players versue [*sic*] Georgia - [*sic*] must keep this guy.” While many comments were positive, other

fans turned the Facebook page into a debate. Other fans commented that the head coach should still be fired. A fan said, “We should ALWAYS beat Vandy and NEVER be surprised when we beat Georgia. Fire Muschamp.” Another fan said, “Great game, now lets [*sic*] fire mushchamp & [*sic*] let him go off on a good note.” A third fan said, “Can't believe how wishy [*sic*] washy [*sic*] you all are ! [*sic*] Muschamp is still the coach who lost our homecoming game and others in such dismal fashion. He has no business coaching at UF...fire Muschamp!” A clear result the research uncovered was too many failures had occurred for Muschamp to keep his position. Overall, the research further revealed the importance of SEC rivalry games. Winning just the one game could potentially be enough for some fans to credit and desire to keep even the most disliked head coach.

Georgia Football

While Georgia was a relatively successful team and had been for several years, the theme the research revealed was a highly negative view of the coach by the fans. Again, rivalry matchups played the key role in the development of this theme. In November, Georgia played two rivalry games. The first was the SEC rivalry game known as “The World’s Largest Outdoor Cocktail Party” against Florida, and the other rivalry game was the in-state game against Georgia Tech.

One example of a negative fan comment during the SEC rivalry game was, “Richt is a joke.” Another fan said, “Rich [*sic*] clueless as usual god this guy sucks.” A third fan said, “I am totally out of this game. The season is over. Train up a new quarter back [*sic*] and some new coaches.” There was an outpouring of negative comments about head coach Mark Richt at Georgia during their loss to Florida. This pattern continued later in the month when Georgia lost their in-state rivalry game. One fan said, “I wouldn't be surprised if the Dawgs

don't show up. Richts [*sic*] trademark.” The trend for Georgia fan comments was overall extremely negative, particularly in regard to the coach.

A second finding that the research uncovered was the close relationship fans seemed to feel with Mark Richt. He had coached at Georgia for several years. Before a game one fan said, “Richt says wear RED!” Another fan said, “Richt said NO blackout!” These fans played a part in showing the close connectedness feeling many fans had to the head coach Mark Richt. This finding was unique for the Georgia Football fan page. Overall, the importance of rivalry games and the effect these games have on fan comments was further developed.

LSU Football

The research uncovered a high activity of fan comments about the coach for LSU. The major themes the researcher found included the rivalry game impact, as well as some hero-related comments. LSU also had a relatively successful season, but their loss to Arkansas in “The Boot” created a very negative theme of blaming head coach Les Miles.

One example of a fan commenting after the loss was, “The next Golden boot Les Miles sees needs to be the one in his backside. Kicking his sorry butt outta [*sic*] Baton Rouge.” Another fan said, “Send Les to Michigan. This is an embarrassment.” Les Miles had been rumored to be leaving for Michigan in recent history, and this fan was hoping it was true. A third fan said, “Fire les miles now please and save Louisiana from more embarrassment.” Despite LSU being a very successful program in recent history and even this season, losing the SEC rivalry game yet again caused a stir of negativity among fan comments on Facebook.

A second finding that the study uncovered regarding LSU was “hero-related” comments. Les Miles is a high profile head coach, and some fans made comments of a

mythological nature. One fan said, “Les Miles, you are a curse! I quit liking the Cowboys after they fired Jimmy Johnson. I'm done with LSU until they fire you. Same ole [*sic*] same ole [*sic*]!” This fan did not only view Les Miles negatively, but believed that he was powerful enough to be a curse to the program. Another fan further developed the heroic nature of Alabama’s coach Nick Saban by saying, “Come on tigers bring the whole 60 min [*sic*] and no refs better [*sic*] not screw the game like satan I mean sabans [*sic*] last sat [*sic*] grrrr [*sic*] still love ya [*sic*] mad hatter!!! ...are [*sic*] we out of bowl contention since last weeks [*sic*] heartbreaker ???” This was yet another example of a fan comparing Nick Saban to the devil. These types of comments further developed the theme of SEC head coaches being more than just human in the eyes of the fans. Hero-related comments and the importance of SEC rivalry games were the major themes uncovered by the research for LSU.

Mississippi State Football

The research found some interesting results regarding Mississippi State Football. This Facebook page was interesting in because the study recorded several comments despite the fact that the fan page had a relatively small number of “Likes.” The themes the research uncovered were the importance of a very important SEC game, as well as the passion that fans of multiple teams showed for the SEC itself.

Mississippi State played Alabama in one of the most important games of the year. Although this was not a historic SEC rivalry game, both teams were ranked extremely high in the country when they played. Alabama was ranked third and Mississippi State was ranked first in the entire nation. In the end, Alabama won the game and Mississippi State endured a tough loss. However, the unique theme the research found here was the difference in the positive to negative comments following the loss. Unlike findings where the head coach was

berated by the fans after losing a big game to a rival, the head coach for Mississippi State was still mentioned quite favorably after the loss. When mentioning the head coach Dan Mullen, one fan said, “Mullen and the MSU team are still great people and deserve our 100% support even with this loss. On to the Egg Bowl!!” Another fan said, “So much love for Coach Dan, Dak, and the rest of our boys! Y'all [*sic*] we have so much to be proud of! HAIL STATE.” When some fans made negative comments about Dan Mullen one fan replied saying, “Fire Mullen? That has to be a joke right.” The overall pattern of positive comments about Dan Mullen despite the loss was uniquely different than the trends discovered from other SEC football team’s losing their rivalry games. This highlighted how fans can be positive when their head coach is undergoing a trial, but is overall still a successful coach. The fans are sticking with their “hero” Dan Mullen, and are enduring his current “Road of Trials” hoping to reach the constant success known as, “The Ultimate Boon” (Campbell, 1949).

A second discovery was the existence of comments about other SEC coaches, and an overall positive view of the SEC itself. During the important game against Alabama, one fan credited Nick Saban saying, “Bama is a better team and has a better coach. How many national titles has state won?” An Alabama fan posted on Mississippi State’s fan page saying, “From a Bama fan my hat's [*sic*] off to the Bulldogs. They fought hard and never gave up. I hope State [*sic*] only drops to 4 and stays in the playoff picture. Couldn't think of two better teams to represent the toughest division in the toughest conference in the playoffs. Coach Mullen is on track to make State [*sic*] a team to be battling for championships on a regular basis. Go SEC and Roll Tide!” This comment was unique and really displayed the pattern the researcher found regarding the positive opinion of the SEC as a whole by the fans. The study

found that fans of both successful and unsuccessful teams all had a reverence for the conference as a whole.

Mizzou Football

Overall, Mizzou Football was a fairly inactive fan page. However, when the team played their SEC rivalry game against Arkansas known as the “Battle Line Rivalry,” the activity increased and several comments were recorded by the researcher. This particular game was also important because a victory would ensure Missouri’s spot in the SEC Championship. Once again, the relationship between fan activity and rivalry games was developed further.

The theme the research uncovered from the comments was a very positive view of the head coach by the fans. Fans thanked the coach for his success and also praised his ability to build the program, which has only been in the SEC for a few years. One fan said, “Gary Pinkel is THE COACH!! Congrats to Coach, staff and team! You make us all proud to be MIZZOU! ! [*sic*]” Another fan said, “If you don't think Mizzou will improve every year, you're crazy.” The overall positive pattern of comments from the fans was unique. However, the fact that Missouri won their SEC rivalry game and had a successful season certainly played an important role in the development of this theme.

Ole Miss Football

The research did not uncover many findings relative to the Ole Miss Football Facebook page. The page was one of the more inactive pages, and therefore the amount of comments the research recorded was low. The three comments the researcher recorded were definitely negative regarding head coach Hugh Freeze. One fan said, “Coach Freeze has some soul searching to do and some hard decisions to make.” The comments were recorded

following a loss by Ole Miss. Overall, the fans did contribute some evidence to the pattern of negative comments about the head coach after a loss.

South Carolina Gamecocks

The research relative to the head coach at South Carolina, Steve Spurrier, revealed and developed two major themes. The theme of the importance of the rivalry game was further developed, and the theme of a coach being viewed by fans as a hero was also revealed. The in-state rivalry game for South Carolina came at the end of November when they played Clemson. South Carolina lost this game, and the overall theme of negative fan comments blaming the head coach was found yet again. The research uncovered no shortage of negative comments about Steve Spurrier after the loss to in-state rival Clemson. One fan commented, “Yes, Clemson won. But we need to realize we watched the most inept playing and coaching we have seen in a long long [*sic*] time. A high school team could have beat [*sic*] Carolina yesterday.” Another fan said, “Tell spurrier never to gove [*sic*] up on his team again!” A third fan commented, “You quit on the fans today. Team and coaches. We won't forget this.” The research definitely uncovered a negative theme of comments bashing the head coach after the rivalry loss.

Some fans were not so negative however. One fan said, “Just rember [*sic*] the Hbc [*sic*] has won 37 of last47 [*sic*] go cocks.” Another fan said, “Steve Spurrier goes 33-6 in the three seasons prior to this one; and fans want to say he has lost it. Wow....” This comment received nine “Likes.” While there was definitely a large number of negative comments, there were also several comments supporting Steve Spurrier by the fans as well.

The research uncovered a unique theme regarding Steve Spurrier through the comments analyzed on both the South Carolina Gamecocks and Florida Gators Facebook fan

pages. Many fans seemed to revere Steve Spurrier and view him as a sort of legendary football coach. Spurrier's well-known nickname is "The Old Ball Coach." He earned this nickname several years ago when he was the head coach at Florida where he won the National Championship. To this day, fans consistently refer to him by this nickname and the researcher discovered this legendary theme through the analysis of the comments. One fan from Florida said, "Mitch Thompson... [*sic*] The Davidson family have been GATORS since Ray Graves as a Head Coach days [*sic*]...I came in at the end of the Galon Hall days and the good ole [*sic*] days of The Ole [*sic*] Ball Coach." This fan certainly missed the days of Steve Spurrier as head coach in Florida. Another fan said, "Wonder if the old ball coach still owns a home in gainesville? Muschamp has all but gift wrapped the swamp for him or any one [*sic*] else that might want to move to town with even a hint of coaching talent." This fan not only posted a negative comment regarding the current head coach, but also added to the legendary view of Steve Spurrier and the idea that he could immediately fix the failures of the Florida team. The researcher found several comments that mentioned Steve Spurrier by his legendary nickname, and this was a unique theme throughout the study.

Texas A&M Football

Similar to some of the other more inactive Facebook pages, the research did not uncover many findings relative to Texas A&M Football. Although the findings were small in number, they did contribute to the overall theme of fans posting negative comments about the coach following a loss. After Texas A&M lost to Missouri, one fan said, "I give them ONE MORE SEASON as we will now see what Sumlin's recruits will do but he needs to light a fire under their rears as they lack heart and passion!" Overall, the findings relative to Texas A&M were few, but did help develop the research a bit further.

University of Kentucky Football

The research revealed a unique discovery through the qualitative analysis of fan comments for the University of Kentucky Football. One day before a November matchup against Missouri, the news of a contract extension for Kentucky head coach, Mark Stoops, was announced. Fans voiced their opinions almost immediately on the Facebook fan page. This led to the pattern of several fan comments about Mark Stoops. This section of the research was also unique because the University of Kentucky Football Facebook fan page was definitely one of the least active overall pages. However, this changed quickly when the multi-million dollar contract for head coach Mark Stoops was announced.

Overall, the fan comments were in favor of the contract extension. One fan said, “This is awesome!! congratulations [*sic*] coach! This pleases me.” Another fan said, “KEEP ON PUTTIN OUT A GOOD PRODUCT COACH...WE MIGHT GIVE YA A HORSE FARM [*sic*].” While not all of the comments were in favor, the research revealed positive feedback overall. The analysis encompassed several comments as fans commented and debated back and forth on their opinions. Overall, the scope and depth of the importance fans place on the head football coach was increased significantly through this part of the study.

Tennessee Football

The Tennessee Football Facebook fan page was a fairly active page. The trend the research uncovered was very similar to the overall trends of other SEC programs. The fans commented a significant amount during the in-state rivalry game against Vanderbilt. Tennessee won the game against their rival, and in turn the fans posted several positive comments about head coach Butch Jones.

One fan posted a positive comment saying, “Indeed! Butch delivered exactly what he a [*sic*] said he would even against overwhelming odds! Job well done!” Another fan said, “Great job this year coach, and how about dem [*sic*] VOLS!!!” There were several other fans who commented similarly about Butch Jones. The research showed that fans contributed success to the head coach. The position of head coach continued to earn credit or blame following a win or loss against a rival school.

Vanderbilt University Athletics

The research did not collect coach-related fan comments from the Vanderbilt University Athletics Facebook fan page. The page was highly inactive. There were not many posts relative to November games. Also, this page which encompassed all athletic sports, still had the third fewest amount of “Likes.” This seemed to show the researcher an overall lack of fan activity regarding athletics at Vanderbilt.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Conclusion Summary

The scope of college football continues to increase dramatically in modern American culture. The athletic departments' total revenue, football coaching salaries, fan involvement, and social media coverage are constantly evolving and growing. This study has enhanced the knowledge and role that public relations practitioners in collegiate athletics can play. The qualitative content analysis of the fourteen SEC football program Facebook fan pages delved into several aspects and themes about the relationship and communication between social media, fans, and SEC head coaches. Public relations practitioners can use this enhanced knowledge to understand and improve on the communication techniques between the growing college athletic departments and fan bases.

Answering the Research Questions

The first research question sought to gain a deeper understanding of how SEC fans view their head coach, particularly regarding the idea that he could be viewed as a hero.

RQ 1: Do fans on SEC Facebook fan pages make comments referring to their team's head coach as a hero?

The study showed how fans can react both positively and negatively to a head coach during a difficult time in his career. The study was able to parallel SEC head coaching careers to Joseph Campbell's theory. The study also found several specific examples of fans referring to a head coach as a hero through comments on Facebook fan pages. The qualitative content analysis approach allowed the researcher to gain a deep understanding of the thoughts and origins of comments made by the fans. This resulted in uncovering heroic

themes relating to fans' comments during both large and small trials of their head coach's career.

The study found that the head coaches Nick Saban, Gus Malzahn, Les Miles, and Steve Spurrier received the most specific hero comments by the SEC fans. Correspondingly, these SEC head coaches were also some of the highest-paid and most well-known head coaches in the SEC, because all four coaches had won at least one national championship in their coaching career. Also, all four programs of these coaches had highly active Facebook pages relative to other SEC Facebook fan pages.

The second research question sought to gain a deeper understanding of fan comments about the head coach on SEC Facebook fan pages.

RQ 2: Do fan comments favoring or disfavoring the head coach exist on SEC Facebook fan pages?

The study overwhelmingly found that a highly unsuccessful season is the biggest factor leading to numerous comments about the head coach. This was shown through the analysis of the Florida Gators. In addition, the study found several examples as well as other themes and patterns of fan comments about the SEC head coaches. The qualitative analysis allowed the researcher to discover the large impact of rivalry games on the amount of fan comments that credited or blamed the coach. The importance of winning the rivalry games to the fans was a recurring theme throughout the study. In addition to the role of rivalry games, the outcome of the most recent game played a large role in the types of fan comments about the head coach that were posted on Facebook fan pages.

The third major trend the study uncovered regarding fan comments was that, the level of activity of the Facebook page had a large effect on the number of fan comments. Some

Facebook fan pages contained a lot of activity and were “Liked” by hundreds of thousands of fans. These pages contained many more fan comments about the head coach. However, several Facebook fan pages had much fewer “Likes” and the decreased activity level had a large effect on the amount and frequency of fan comments about the head coach.

The fourth theme the study uncovered was the role that each individual situation played. Each separate SEC football program had its own unique circumstances and recent events that greatly affected the amount and frequency of fan comments about the head coach. This pattern emphasized the importance of each SEC football program having a public relations practitioner who understands the current culture and situation of the entire program, because each program’s situation was both unique and dynamic.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Study

The strengths of the study were found in the reliability, internal validity, and the benefits of conducting a qualitative analysis. The study had reliability due to the fact that the study took place well after the college football season ended. While Facebook comments can always be edited or removed, by conducting the study two months following the National Championship, the probability of the same comments still existing for repeated uses of the study was much higher. The second strength of the study was the internal validity of the study. The study sought to conduct a qualitative content analysis specifically on SEC football fans’ views on Facebook. The specificity of qualitatively analyzing only SEC fans and the methodology created a study with high internal validity. Finally, the major strength of the study was the benefit of conducting a qualitative analysis rather than quantitative. Rather than simply producing numbers and statistics relative to the research questions, the qualitative content analysis allowed the researcher to gain a true understanding of the views

and opinions of the fans. By delving deep into the social media world through analysis of hundreds of comments, the researcher found the themes and patterns that truly answered the research questions.

The weaknesses of the study were the generalizability and the dependence on the activity level of each Facebook fan page studied. The study was not necessarily generalizable to other college football conferences or fan bases, because the study focused specifically on the SEC and its fans. College football is simply bigger and different for fans of the SEC than fans in other parts of the country. For this reason, the study could not be guaranteed to generalize to other fan bases or conferences in college football. The major weakness of the study that was discovered during the research was the dependence on the activity level of each SEC Facebook fan page. Several SEC Facebook fan pages had significantly fewer “Likes” than other SEC pages. Also, the athletic department did not post as often for many SEC teams. Finally, the researcher found that many teams would not post following a loss. This lack of posts made it impossible for fans to comment on the page, particularly following a loss when they were most apt to post negative remarks about the head coach.

Future Research

In order to combat the weaknesses of the study, future research should be conducted. The weaknesses of generalizability and dependence on Facebook activity level could be strengthened through future research. By comparing this study with other conferences, studying the active pages of all of college football, studying rivalry games for all college football conferences, expanding the study to include the entire season, expanding the study to include other social media fora, or performing a quantitative analysis to answer the research questions are all options for future research that could yield expansive results. By conducting

the same study with other major college football conferences, the question of generalizability could be answered. A larger full-scale study that encompassed one or both of all college football teams and games from the entire season would certainly yield extremely strong answers to the research questions, and it would strengthen the weakness of the generalizability of this particular study. Because the study found that SEC rivalry games played such an important role, a larger study that included rivalry games of all college football schools could potentially yield results of high activity levels of fan comments about all college football head coaches. Similarly, a study of only college football Facebook fan pages with high levels of activity, or one that includes other popular forms of social medium could produce great results for answering the research questions for all college football programs.

Finally, a quantitative analysis of SEC Facebook fan pages could answer the specific SEC-related research questions of this study with precise data. This quantitative study could compare and contrast the number of fan comments in relation to several other factors such as; number of posts by the SEC Facebook page, percentages of hero-related comments, and the percentage of positive and negative fan comments about the head coach. All of these possibilities for future research would shed light on the impact of social media communications, and how public relations practitioners in college athletics could use social media fora to benefit their organization.

If the monetary and cultural impact of college football continues to increase, the need for public relations practitioners to expand into this field will become greater. The athletic department budgets, football coaching salaries, fan involvement, and social media coverage are constantly evolving. The field of public relations must also evolve. This study has

enhanced the knowledge and role that public relations practitioners can play in SEC college football. The weaknesses and limitations of this study, particularly the generalizability to all of college football, and lack of Facebook activity by some SEC football Facebook fan pages have allowed for only some advancement of public relations knowledge. Further research is necessary to increase the scope and quantitative understanding of college football and social media, which is an important and growing aspect of American culture and media communications.

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ABSTRACT

College football has become an enormous aspect of American culture. The effects have permeated into the growing realm of social media, particularly Facebook. College football budgets and the salaries of the head coaches are higher than ever before, and they are only getting larger. Further research is necessary to study how public relations practitioners in college athletic departments can understand the link between social media and college football coaches. This study qualitatively analyzes the Facebook pages of the most dominant college football conference, the Southeastern Conference (SEC). The study analyzes if Facebook fans for each SEC football program view the head coaches as heroes, as well as gauge the scope and existence of Facebook fan comments that favorably or unfavorably reference the head coach. A qualitative content analysis of SEC football Facebook fan comments during the peak competition month of November answers these questions. This study shows that certain fans in the SEC, do indeed, view their head coach as a hero. The study also demonstrates the themes, particularly fan revolt against a losing head coach and the importance of rivalry games as it relates to positive and negative fan comments about the SEC head coaches. The effect of this study on the field of public relations is also discussed.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Christopher Limbach was born to Paul and Kathleen Limbach in Munster, Indiana on April 14, 1986. He attended Eastern Illinois University where he graduated Cum Laude with University Honors and earned a Bachelor of Arts in History with Secondary Education Certification. Christopher entered the college football coaching profession through a graduate assistantship at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in 2008. Christopher married his wife, Kimberly, on June 19, 2010. He currently resides in Danville, Kentucky and works as an assistant football coach at Centre College. Christopher earned a Master of Science in Communication upon completion of this study.