

“#BringDickieVtoMurray”: A Case Study Analysis of a Fan-Enacted Twitter Campaign

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Abstract

This case study examined how fans initiated and utilized the Twitter hashtag #BringDickieVtoMurray to successfully persuade ESPN and renowned college basketball broadcaster Dick Vitale to nationally broadcast a game at Murray State University, illustrating the potential for influencing media entities and media figures to action using Twitter. A thematic analysis of 514 tweets was conducted and revealed four themes: (a) use of persuasive tactics, (b) references to the hashtag itself, (c) links to points of attachment, and (d) basking in reflected glory. Furthermore, a series of semi-structured interviews were employed to provide additional context regarding the case.

Keywords: Twitter; college basketball; social media; hashtags; sports

Introduction

During the 2011-2012 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Men's Basketball season, the Murray State Racers enjoyed extraordinary success, which included a 23-0 start to their season, a 23rd Ohio Valley Conference (OVC) championship, which ultimately culminated in a 31-2 final record after being defeated during the round of 32 teams at the 2012 NCAA men's basketball tournament. In addition to the team's success, Murray State received immense positive media coverage, much of which was channeled through social media channels, particularly Twitter and Facebook. Catherine Sivills, Assistant Vice-President for Communications at Murray State at the time, believed that the university gained at least \$10

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million dollars of additional revenue from the team’s overall media exposure in the 2011-2012 season (Johnson, 2012).

Further substantiation of Murray State’s expanded Twitter presence was evidenced at three different points of the 2011-2012 season, when Murray State was among the top 15 topics trending worldwide on Twitter. Perhaps the most noteworthy event of the season occurred in February 2012, when Hall of Fame college basketball broadcaster Dick Vitale was assigned to cover a game in Murray, KY that would be broadcasted nationally on the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN), specifically ESPN2. Although this celebrated event was predominantly due to the on-court success of the two opponents, Murray State University and Saint Mary’s (CA) College, a flood of social media requests to Vitale’s social media accounts was also largely credited as well. While this type of notoriety may be commonplace for large-budget, nationally recognizable Men’s basketball teams, it was quite a boon for this less recognized program representing a regional state university of approximately 11,000 students in a rural, thinly populated region of the United States.

While some of the extant research involving social media has focused on sports journalists’ usage of the medium (Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012; Schultz & Sheffer, 2010; Sheffer & Schultz, 2010), very little has focused specifically on individual broadcasters (such as Dick Vitale) and the two-way communication well-known sports broadcasters have with audiences on social media (c.f., Weathers, Sanderson, Matthey, Grevious, Warren, & Tehan, 2014). Therefore, this case study analysis will further examine the ways in which those associated with Murray State Basketball (i.e., fans, athletics, university communications staff) interacted with Vitale and helped to foster and maintain this unprecedented level of attention via social media through a collection of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis of tweets using the hashtag #BringDickieVtoMurray. Further, this case study aims to provide insights for sports communication scholars, professionals, and students as to how Murray State was able to capitalize on the power of fan-generated social media conversation, and how other sports organizations and teams may also be experience similar outcomes as Murray State.

Background

The Murray State Basketball Program

The Murray State program has been classified as a mid-major program in NCAA Division I basketball. According to Brennan (2014) a *mid-major program* refers to any program that is not a member of the seven collegiate athletic conferences that typically dominate NCAA Men’s basketball, which tend to have significantly higher budgets for the sport (i.e., American Athletic Conference, Atlantic Coast Conference, Big 12, Big East, Big Ten, Pac-12, Southeastern Conference). Despite the traditional competitive disadvantages mid-major basketball programs face (e.g., less funding than larger conference teams, less media exposure nationally), a few teams, such as Butler University (2010 and 2011 NCAA championship game appearances), George Mason University and Virginia Commonwealth University (“Final Four” appearances in 2006 and 2011 respectively), have created thrilling and memorable attempts to earn NCAA championships in recent years. While Murray State was unable to produce a deep NCAA tournament run to match these previous examples, they did ascend to “top ten” rankings in both the Associated Press poll (ranked as high as #7 nationally) and ESPN/USA Today Coaches poll (ranked as high as #9 nationally). Moreover, Murray State was ranked among the top 25 teams in both of these aforementioned polls for a majority of the 2011-2012 season. The Murray State program does have a successful tradition, as evidenced by their #30 ranking in an ESPN metric-based calculation of collegiate program prestige from the 1984-1985 season (when the NCAA expanded their championship tournament to a field of 64 teams) through the 2007-2008 season (Shelton, Loucks, & Fallica, 2008).

#BringDickieVtoMurray: How the Hashtag Came to Life

On January 16, 2012, ESPN aired a Baylor-Kansas Men’s basketball game. During this broadcast, Vitale noted, “take a look at Murray State, what a great job they're doing. I would love one time to go down there to do a game, to see those young kids” (“Racer fans look to bring Dickie V to Murray,” 2012, para. 1). Soon thereafter, a Murray State fan was credited with beginning the “#BringDickieVtoMurray” hashtag on Twitter (see Figure 1). As the hashtag grew in popularity among Murray State fans on



Figure 1. Video news story about the birth of the #BringDickieVtoMurray hashtag from the program *Roundabout U*. Click the screen shot to [view the video on YouTube](#).

Twitter, other entities on campus also began to use and then promote this hashtag in a variety of ways.

Morris White, Director of Athletic Marketing and Promotions at Murray State University at this time, noted that his department promoted the hashtag during in-arena scoreboard graphics at games as well as a through creative Facebook promotion that encouraged fans to change their profile picture to a graphic showing a photo of Vitale and the #BringDickieVtoMurray hashtag (see Figure 2). During an interview for this case study, White was asked what he felt that the hashtag meant to students on campus, he responded that, "there were a lot of Dick Vitale fans, and for someone of his caliber to come to Murray, KY, it just shows the power of social media...in regards to making something special happen."



Figure 2. Graphic created by Murray State University Athletics to promote the #BringDickieVtoMurray hashtag (Source: [Murray State Athletics](#)).

Catherine Sivills, Assistant Vice-President for Communications at Murray State University at the time, suggested during an interview for this study that the hashtag was exciting because, “when students grab something, you know it’s probably going to be successful.” When asked for this study what the hashtag meant to them as students, a Murray State senior noted that the hashtag, “meant the chance to do something that had never been done before, and who knows, may never happen again.” Likewise, a sophomore student noted the hashtag represented “a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

Sivills also recounted a story involving a graduate student assistant that attempted to call ESPN, and specifically Vitale, to possibly obtain an interview for a Murray State-produced television program in the early stages of the #BringDickieVtoMurray campaign, before the decision was made to have Vitale broadcast at Murray State. Vitale returned the call and stated “I want to come to Murray, but it’s not all up to me, you all keep doing what you’re doing, you keep pushing it.” Sivills then mentioned that this conversation was a “green light from him personally to do everything

we could to promote.” It certainly appeared that Vitale was deeply interested in visiting Murray State, as were Murray State fans that followed him on Twitter and liked him on Facebook. This social media campaign eventually led to the broadcast of the February 18, 2012 “BracketBuster”¹ game between Murray State and Saint Mary’s (CA) College (two mid-major programs that were ranked nationally at the time of the contest), which was broadcasted nationally on ESPN2 and featured Vitale and broadcast partner Dave O’Brien. This broadcasting team was typically reserved for prime-time games on ESPN’s flagship network that involve highly anticipated contests between traditionally powerful college basketball teams and programs. In this instance, Vitale and O’Brien had been previously scheduled to broadcast the Ohio State versus Michigan game, a contest between another pair of highly ranked teams at the time from a major conference (Big Ten). But a change of plans was made at least in part due to the efforts of Murray State fans, which flooded Dick Vitale’s social media accounts; some fans even went as far as directly contacting ESPN via telephone, email, or hard-copy letters.

Research

Sports Fans and Social Media

A growing body of research has illustrated the ways in which social media, especially Twitter, are utilized by sports fans to interact and build or foster a sense of community (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Pegararo, 2013; Reichart-Smith & Smith, 2012). Often, sports fan communities are used to enhance and express team identification, or “the extent to which a fan feels psychologically connected to a team” (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001, p. 3). More specifically, scholars have reported that messages utilized on social media websites resemble many of the behaviors cited in the extensive work on fan identification, such as emotional and affective responses to game and team-relevant events (Sanderson, 2013; Yu & Wang, 2015) and ingroup favoritism/outgroup

¹ BracketBusters was an annual one-day television event on the ESPN family of networks from 2003-2012 where teams having strong seasons from smaller NCAA basketball conferences (i.e., mid-major teams) were matched versus one another and broadcasted. It took its title from the basketball vernacular for situations when a less visible/lower ranked team defeats one or more higher ranked teams during the NCAA Basketball Tournament.

heckling (Reichart-Smith & Smith, 2012). Additionally, social media has provided sports fans with heightened abilities to express their fandom through two-way communication with athletes, coaches, and official team channels (Clavio, 2011; Clavio & Kian, 2010; Clavio & Walsh, 2014; Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2012; Hull, 2014; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Pagararo, 2010; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010).

More specific to the current study, the impact of specific hashtags on Twitter has been examined by scholars. Some of these studies have examined how fans may utilize a hashtag in crisis communication situations involving both athletes (Schmittel & Hull, 2015) and teams (Brown & Billings, 2013). Additionally, scholars have examined how hashtags have been used on Twitter to discuss different sporting events (Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012; Hull, 2014; Reichart-Smith & Smith, 2012). In studying the #WorldSeries hashtag used by Major League Baseball (MLB) fans, Blazka et al. (2012) demonstrated that fans were the primary users of this hashtag and that fans tweets were predominantly expressions of their allegiance to their favorite team. Reichart-Smith and Smith (2012) studied how fans employed a variety of team-related hashtags during the College World Series (i.e., the NCAA Baseball Tournament). In linking hashtag use to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), they concluded that hashtags “can be seen as a way for fans to identify with teams—a virtual wearing of a team jersey” (p. 551).

Hull (2014) described how a group of athletes mobilized broad support through a hashtag (#Fight4UNCWSwimandDive) in a successful effort to save their collegiate swimming and diving teams from elimination by the university in a cost-saving measure. Another recent example of a successful hashtag campaign occurred in October 2016, when students at Drake University, a 5,000-student private university in Des Moines, Iowa, persuaded the globally recognized hip-hop artist Drake to come to campus after his concert in Des Moines using the hashtag #BringDrakeToDrake (Zamudio-Suaréz, 2016a). During his performance, Drake wore a Drake University basketball jersey and letter jacket on stage (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Photo of hip-hop artist Drake wearing Drake University basketball jersey and letter jacket during concert on October 4, 2016 (Source: [Amber Tague/The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)).

Beyond hashtags, Clavio and Walsh (2014) found that college sports fans are highly motivated to use social media for informational gratifications. More specifically, for both Facebook and Twitter, fans reported being motivated by interacting with coaches/players, athletic department accounts, and other fans. Participants also conveyed a desire to use Twitter to participate in a promotional contest involving team athletics. While the current case study involved both interacting with the athletic department and with other fans online, it can also be framed in terms of a “contest.” Instead of a giveaway sponsored by an athlete or team, the contest in this case was a fan-fueled social media campaign aimed toward persuading ESPN and Vitale to come to Murray State. In sum, because research has highlighted the use of hashtags on Twitter by sports fans for strategic purposes and the use of social media to enhance interaction within college sports organizations, teams, and athletes, I asked:

RQ1: What types of Twitter messages and strategies did Murray State basketball fans employ while using the #BringDickieVtoMurray hashtag to successfully campaign for Dick Vitale’s appearance?

Points of Attachment

One emerging area of study involving fan identification is *points of attachment* research (POA). First forwarded by Trail, Robinson, Dick, and Gillentine (2003), POA posits that sports fans experience multiple types of identification beyond just team identification, such as identification with individual athletes. Studies have found that fans have POA with team coaches, the sport itself, a particular level of sport, an institution/university, a larger community, and the conference or league in which a sports team plays in (Kim, Trail, & Magnusen, 2013; Kwon, Trail, & Anderson, 2005; Robinson & Trail, 2005; Robinson, Trail, Dick, & Gillentine, 2005; Spinda, Wann, & Hardin, 2016; Woo, Trail, Kwon, & Anderson, 2009). Across these studies, POA measurements (i.e., points of attachment index) have consistently demonstrated validity when tested in confirmatory factor analyses. Additionally, POA have been found to significantly vary amongst fans of different levels of sports (e.g., high school, college, and professional football), with team attachment highest for college fans, and attachment to athletes and coach highest for high school fans (Spinda, Wann, & Hardin, 2016). Woo et al. (2009) noted that particular sport fans motivations have been linked to various POA, such as vicarious achievement and social interaction motives positively relating to team identification, while aesthetics and drama motives have been found to be associated to identification with an overall sport. Kwon et al. (2005) found that attachment to the team, university, and coach predicted future intention of attendance as well as basking in reflected glory (BIRGing), which involves individuals strategically aligning themselves with successful other(s), often through some type of public display. At this point, however, there has been a lack of research that has examined how various POA are manifested in social media messages. Therefore, I asked:

RQ2: Are points of attachment evident in the Twitter messages used in the successful #BringDickieVtoMurray hashtag campaign?

Evaluation

Methods

To examine the Twitter messages associated with #BringDickieVtoMurray hashtag, tweets were collected from January 16, 2012, when the hashtag first began after Vitale's comments about Murray State on ESPN, until February 18, 2012, when Vitale came to Murray State as part of the ESPN broadcast team; this was effectively the "lifespan" of the hashtag. Radian6 software and a Twitter website search were used to search for exclusively for tweets using the #BringDickieVtoMurray hashtag, returning 514 overall tweets. Retweets were excluded from the analysis, aside from three cases where a retweet was employed in a way to celebrate the achievement of bringing Dick Vitale to Murray State. Thus, these tweets either posted by a Twitter user or were replies to another user's tweet that utilized the hashtag. In this study, the entire census of tweets were applied as units of analysis. The collected tweets were then imported into qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) and a thematic analysis was conducted using a six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process included: (1) becoming familiar with the data through active reading, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes by collating initial codes, (4) reviewing themes to ensure codes and themes are congruent with one another, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) reporting the results. This approach allows for the recognition of possible patterns to emerge and be formed throughout the thematic analysis.

Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that coding in thematic analysis may either be data-driven or theory-driven. The initial coding in phase two of this study contained both types of analysis. Theory-driven analysis was conducted by creating *a priori* initial codes where various points of attachment were found to be evident. For instance, a code for attachment to team was created upon reading the following tweet, as it appeared to distinctly illustrate team attachment, "Great win tonight by MSU...the ESPN love continues to grow #racernation #bringDickieVtoMurray."² Meanwhile, data-driven analysis was used for tweets that were not found to directly indicate a particular POA and were coded based on the

² The hashtag #RacerNation is seen throughout the tweets mentioned and used in this study. It was used throughout the 2011-2012 season and remains widely used currently by fans of Murray State Athletics, mostly in regards to Men's basketball.

emerging patterns of content evident in the tweets in phase three of analysis. From this thematic analysis described above, four main themes emerged: (a) use of persuasive tactics, (b) references to the hashtag itself, (c) links to points of attachment (POA), and (d) basking in reflected glory (BIRGing). Overall, 26 tweets were omitted during the analysis due to being indistinguishable or arbitrary in nature, leaving 488 tweets for analysis.

Results and Interpretation

Within the description of the aforementioned themes, the text of the original tweets is presented intact. The Twitter usernames of private accounts/fan accounts were removed. However, tweets sent to/from Dick Vitale and tweets that emanated from other official accounts related to Murray State University were left intact, as both parties were prevalent in the discourse of the hashtag. Also, when web addresses were used within tweets, that link was removed (instead the word [link] appears).

Use of Persuasive Tactics. Overall, the prevailing theme observed in the tweets was the use of persuasive tactics to appeal to Dick Vitale to come to Murray State ($n = 222$). A large array of persuasive strategies were employed by fans towards both Vitale himself and ESPN social media accounts on Twitter. Within this larger theme, tweets were found to fall within four main codes: (a) general persuasion ($n = 101$), (b) passionate pleas ($n = 56$), petitioning ESPN ($n = 51$), and impersonating ($n = 14$). First, tweets in the general persuasion code were the most broadly construed. Many of these tweets would be considered polite requests:

- “Watching @DickieV call the UNC-Duke game! Hope he goes to Murray to call a game! #BringDickieVtoMurray”
- “@DickieV CFSB Center is rockin in Murray tonight! Love to have you here for the BB game v St Mary's #epicmatchup #BringDickieVtoMurray”³
- “@dickiev I'll be in Murray for the St. Mary BracketBuster game on Feb 18th. Will you be joining me? #BringDickievToMurray”

³ The CFSB Center is the on-campus arena of Murray State Basketball, it is named for Community Financial Services Bank.

These types of respectful, face-giving requests appeared very much to be social media variants of the face-to-face, interpersonal communication tactics outlined in Brown & Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory. More specifically, these tweets very much resembled positive politeness strategies. Many of the general persuasion tweets were also aimed at steering Vitale toward content fans had made regarding his possible visit or pointing out past tweets from Vitale himself that indicated his desire to come to Murray State:

- “@DickieV check out this video!!! Murray State Anthem [link] #bringdickievtomurray”
- “@DickieV: Get me to Racer country.’ #BringDickieVtoMurray”

Such messages are also indicative of the face-giving strategies that are illustrated in politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Next, the passionate plea code involved tweets that were expressions of a strong desire to have Vitale come to Murray State and included messages that employed electronic paralanguage cues to convey expressive feelings that are designed to modify the meanings of words and help to regulate interaction in computer-mediated communication environments (Carey, 1980; Walther, 1992). The use of electronic paralanguage was evident through tweets that employed all capital letters to “shout” persuasive messages and to convey strong sentiments:

- “@DickieV COME TO MURRAY ON THE 18TH PLEEEAAAASSSEE. WE NEED YOU. GO TO GORACERS.COM. YOU'RE ON IT. #BringDickieVtoMurray”
- “#BringDickieVtoMurray come oooooooooon @DickieV you know you wanna visit lil ole Murray KY!”
- “@MSURacers @murraystateuniv #BringDickieVtoMurray how can he say no?????!!!!!!!”
- “@DickieV #BringDickieVtoMurray #BringDickieVtoMurray please oh please?!?!”

Additionally, passionate pleas were demonstrated through what can be described as compliance gaining techniques (Marwell & Schmitt, 1967), such as positive self-feelings or tweets that fall in the category of pregiving strategies:

- “#BringDickieVtoMurray you won't regret it @DickieV”
- “@DickieV, come to Murray State! You won't be disappointed. #BringDickieVtoMurray #racernation”
- “@DickieV come 2 Murray State & I will hook u up with this #RacerNation shirt I created, need size #BringDickieVtoMurray”
- “@DickieV I was holding your big head tonight at the #Racer game! #BringDickieVToMurray”⁴

A third code within the persuasive tactics theme involved fans directly petitioning the ESPN organization to have Vitale come to Murray State to broadcast the game. In particular, one tweet in this code that stood out that involved Vitale himself instructing a fan to contact those responsible at ESPN:

- “@DickieV: Tell my bosses’ #BringDickieVToMurray”

Indeed, fans took this additional step, with a number of tweets being directed to those either perceived to be in control of the announcer assignments, or perceived to be able to impact such a decision:

- “if u are the one responsible for sending @DickieV to Murray, Racers R crying out for your blessing. #BringDickieVtoMurray”
- “[link]... go to the link and ask for @DickieV for the #BracketBusters @murraystateuniv #BringDickieVtoMurray”

⁴ A “big head” informally refers to sports fans, and especially basketball fans, creating large signs that depict broadcasters/popular culture figures by showing only their head. Here is an example of a Murray State fan holding a Dick Vitale “big head”: <http://i.usatoday.net/communitymanager/photos/game-on/2012/02/15/vitalex-large.jpg>

Beyond the tweets toward specific individuals at ESPN, much of this code included tweets that were sent to ESPN's primary Twitter account (@ESPN) by Murray State fans,

- "@espn #RacerNation is in #BringDickieVtoMurray mode. Let's make it happen for our Bracketbuster!!!!"
- "@espn @DickieV what else do we need to do to #BringDickieVtoMurray? We'll do it and do it big!"

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, Twitter was used to promote, discuss, and organize a physical mailing of letters by Murray State students to ESPN (see Figure 4):

- "Friday from 10-2 in the CC @murraystateSGA will have letters for you to sign and then we'll mail them to @espn #BringDickieVtoMurray"⁵
- "Hey @murraystateuniv on Friday @murraystateSGA is sponsoring a letter signing to mail to ESPN in order to #BringDickieVtoMurray"
- "@murraystateSGA has 142 letters for @ESPN_FanCentral to #BringDickieVtoMurray @DickieV @murraystateuniv @MSURacers"

The fourth and final code in the persuasive tactics theme illustrated Murray State fans using textual representations or imitations of on-air catch phrases or sayings typically used by Vitale on the air in their tweets. Some of these catch phrases commonly employed by Vitale include the enthusiastic use of the word "baby" to conclude sentences, or "P.T.P." to indicate a "prime-time player," or a player he regards as a top player in college basketball ("Dick Vitale's Dictionary," n.d.). Quite often, these tweets also employed the aforementioned paralanguage (Carey, 1980) in

⁵ CC is shorthand for the Curris Center, the on-campus student center and social hub, where the Murray State Student Government office is located, referred to in this tweet through their username @MurrayStateSGA.

February 3, 2012

Center for Student Involvement
2002 University Station
Murray, KY 42071

ESPN, Inc.
c/o Public Relations Department
ESPN Plaza
Bristol, CT 06010

Dear ESPN,

I am writing to you at the request of sports legend Dick Vitale to please "#BringDickieVtoMurray." Murray State University's men's basketball team is in the midst of making history as they continue on with their 22-0 record and fight to be the first team to enter the NCAA Tournament unscathed in more than two decades. On February 18, 2012 Murray State will be pitted against the 16th ranked St. Mary's Gaels in the premier game of the 2012 Sears Bracketbusters. It would be fitting to have the game's greatest commentator in attendance.

Mr. Vitale has made it publicly known that he wants to come to Murray State University. He has tweeted "Must get me there," that it "would be fun," and "GO RACERS" and on January 26 on the Mike & Mike in the Morning Mr. Vitale is quoted saying, "I'm getting more people tweeting me from Racer Nation. They want me to come to Murray State. I hope that my bosses are listening." I assure you that we do want "Dickie V" to come to Murray State. A quick search on Twitter of "#BringDickieVtoMurray" will show you just how much Racer Nation wants Mr. Vitale to see the Racers in person.

Mr. Vitale would love the rich tradition that Murray State has. With 25 consecutive winning seasons, Murray State is no newcomer to success. For generations, the region has known the gem that we have in the Racers. We've maintained sellout crowds in the CFSB Center with the fans on their feet for every basket. This atmosphere would only feed off of Mr. Vitale's electric personality.

Racer Nation would love to host Mr. Vitale and Mr. Vitale has made it known that he would love to visit. So many people are looking forward to our Bracketbusters that it was sold out before our opponent was announced on January 30th. The Racer Nation would appreciate it if you could make both of our wishes come to fruition.

Best regards,

A Racer Fan

Figure 4. Copy of letter provided by Murray State University Student Government Association for students to sign and be sent to ESPN headquarters (Source: [Alex Green Twitter](#)).

what could be described as an attempt to capture the “spirit” of Vitale’s on-air persona, and thus aimed to increase Vitale’s desire to come to Murray State:

- “I hope @DickieV comes to Murray State so bad. YEA BABYYYYYYYYY!!!! #bringdickievtomurray”
- “@DickieV it would be incredible if you came to visit MSU and the Racers! Lets make it happen! GET TO MURRAY BABY!!! #bringdickievtomurray”
- “@DickieV when you coming to @murraystateuniv we have a couple PTPs! Show some love! #BringDickieVtoMurray”

References to the Hashtag Itself. The second theme observed in the tweets using the #BringDickieVtoMurray involved references to the hashtag and the online movement to bring Vitale to Murray State ($n = 112$). Within this larger theme, five main codes were evident: (a) using the primary hashtag(s) ($n = 44$), (b) Twitter campaign and matchup discussion ($n = 29$), trending and encouraging the hashtag ($n = 20$), status updates and visit verification ($n = 14$) and the hashtag around town ($n = 5$). First, the primary hashtag(s) code involved Murray State fans tweeting either the main hashtag used in the movement to bring Vitale to campus by itself, adding multiple iterations of the hashtag in one tweet, combining the primary hashtag with other team-relevant hashtags (i.e., #GoRacers, #WeAreRacers), or creating unique combinations of hashtags in a single message⁶:

- “#BringDickieVtoMurray,” “#BringDickieVtoMurray
#BringDickieVtoMurray #BringDickieVtoMurray
#BringDickieVtoMurray #BringDickieVtoMurray
#BringDickieVtoMurray”
- “#RacerNation #StandUp #WeAreRacers #declareWAR
#bringdickievtomurray”

⁶ The selected tweets in this segment refer to additional, less widely used hashtags that support Murray State Athletics (#WeAreRacers, #declareWAR), references to the home arena of Murray State Basketball (#fillupthebank, #cramtheCFSB), references to Murray State University’s primary regional rival in sports, Austin Peay University (TN) (#FlushThePeay), as well as a reference to another now-former ESPN broadcast personality, Erin Andrews (#bringErinAndrewstomurray).

- “#fillupthebank #FlushThePeay #cramtheCFSB #GORACERS #BringDickieVtoMurray #hashtagproblems”
- “#bringErinAndrewstomurray >>>> #bringdickievtomurray”

These hashtag-dominant tweets sometimes were sent to Vitale’s Twitter account, and other times sent to no particular Twitter user. The approach of using the hashtag by itself with no other clear message would seem to be strategically used to keep the hashtag relevant, or perhaps to influence social media searches that illustrate how many times a particular hashtag was posted to Twitter in the case of tweets involving multiple, repetitive uses of the hashtag.

Next, tweets included in the Twitter campaign and matchup discussion code involved fans using Twitter to discuss the overall campaign generally:

- “Nothing I hashtag will ever live up to #BringDickieVtoMurray. I think I'm going to retire”
- “That may be the best #BringDickieVtoMurray tweet I've seen yet. Kudos to you, sir. :)”

Additionally, this code involved using the hashtag to elaborate and hypothesize about bringing Vitale to campus for the matchup that they would get for ESPN’s “BracketBuster” event:

- “Any leak on who #RacerNation will get for #BracketBusters? I gotta get my game face on to #BringDickieVtoMurray”
- “Bracketbuster game on Feb. 18th vs. St. Mary's! #BringDickieVtoMurray”
- “Can't wait to see the racers for the bracket buster game. Only thing that would make it better: #BringDickieVToMurray”

The trending and encouraging the hashtag code was evident in tweets that encouraged other people to join the campaign to bring Vitale to Murray State and to continue to post messages that would allow the hashtag to

possibly trend on Twitter, thereby expanding the hashtag's reach beyond just Murray State fans. Some examples of these tweets were:

- "Hey Murray State!! Let's get #BringDickieVtoMurray trending!!! @DickieV #racernation"
- "Help out #RacerNation #BringDickieVtoMurray get it trending!!"
- "Kentucky sports news has officially joined the campaign to #BringDickieVtoMurray let's make it happen for the people down in Murray!"

Fourth, the status updates and visit verification code involved fans seeking updates and verification about whether Vitale was coming to Murray for the BracketBuster game on ESPN:

- "It's 12 days until the #Racers take on St Mary's. Any idea who's calling it yet? #BringDickieVtoMurray"
- "What's the word on #BringDickieVtoMurray"
- "@DickieV is what I am hearing true? Are you for real coming to #RACERnation?? #BringDickieVtoMurray"

The final code in this theme, hashtag around town, involved fans making reference seeing promotions for the hashtag on display at a local movie theater and on in-venue signage during this time frame to grow the campaign:

- "@DickieV that '#BringDickieVtoMurray' logo was on the screen at the movies before the movie started here in Murray"
- "Hashtags now appearing on fan signage inside of arenas. #BringDickieVtoMurray"

Points of Attachment (POA). The third theme within the #BringDickieVtoMurray tweets revolved around the conceptual aspects of points of attachment (POA) research discussed earlier ($n = 76$). More specifically, six codes were encompassed the larger POA theme, attachment to team ($n = 31$), attachment to university/Murray ($n = 27$),

attachment to athlete ($n = 9$), attachment to venue ($n = 7$), attachment to coach ($n = 3$). Team attachment was observed in situations where fans used the hashtag to demonstrate identification with the larger Murray State Men's basketball team:

- "i am so proud of my racers.... #BringDickieVtoMurray on feb 18th. we will actually be at that game, so i hope it happens!"
- "Great win tonight Racers!! #GoRacers #RacerNation #Undefeated @DickieV #BringDickieVtoMurray @DickieVtoMurray"
- "ESPN's Mike and Mike chooses Murray State over St. Mary's!!! #racernation #weareracers #BringDickieVtoMurray @murraystateuniv"⁷

Next, the attachment to university code involved tweets where Murray State University specifically was supported in addition to the hashtag:

- "'@DickieV: This is where heroes r made' Heroes are made at @murraystateuniv @MSURacers #BringDickieVtoMurray"
- "Murray State leading Sportscenter, how awesome is that #BringDickieVtoMurray #waittillAskagetsback"⁸

Included in this code were also tweets that demonstrated affinity or attachment to the Murray, KY region itself through local establishments and how to best host Vitale during his visit:

- "Whos going to the bracket buster ?? I AM !! @DickieV #bringdickievtomurray Maybe after @DickieV you could stop in at Mugsy's for a meal ?"
- "#BringDickieVtoMurray give him some Matt B's pizza!! It would be awesome with a Capital A!!"

⁷ This tweet refers to Mike & Mike, a morning radio show aired across the United States on ESPN radio stations and also televised on ESPN networks featuring broadcasters Mike Greenberg and Mike Golic.

⁸ This tweet references SportsCenter, ESPN's flagship news program as well as Murray State basketball player Ivan Aska, who was injured at this point in the 2011-2012 season.

Next, tweets in the attachment to athlete code exhibited the hashtag along identification with specific athletes, particularly top scorer Isaiah Canaan, who is now playing professionally in the National Basketball Association (NBA):

- “@DickieV Chuck Norris wears Isaiah Canaan pajamas Yeah, Baby! #racernation #BringDickieVtoMurray”
- “#BringDickieVtoMurray @DickieV you know you want to see #BoomGoesTheCanaan #RacerNation”

The attachment to venue code was observed regarding on-campus arena (i.e., CFSB Center) in conjunction with the hashtag:

- “no better feeling than being packed in the bank! let's go boys! #racernation #bringDickieVtomurray”

The attachment to coach code was evident when tweets about Head Coach Steve Prohm, now in the same role at Iowa State University, also employed the hashtag:

- “#RacerNation - gotta help bring the Chrome Dome to the Prohm Dome #BringDickieVtoMurray”
- “haha Stevie Prohm according to Dickie V! hahah Stevie! #racernation #bringdickievtomurray”

This theme also included one double-coded tweet that resembled both attachment to athlete and venue:

- “Canaan!!!!!! Place is getting crazy!! @SportsCenter The Bank is Rockin now! #bringdickievtomurray”

Basking in Reflected Glory (BIRGing). The fourth apparent theme evident in the tweets using the #BringDickieVtoMurray hashtag was basking in reflected glory (BIRGing) ($n = 78$). BIRGing involves individuals strategically aligning themselves with successful other(s), often through some type of public display. As it relates to sports fandom, Spinda (2011) found that BIRGing appears to be best described as a collection of behaviors that are predicted differently by demographic and identification

related variables. In this study, one factor that emerged was online team support, which involved posting messages and interacting with others after a favorite team victory. After it was announced Vitale was going to come to Murray State to broadcast for ESPN, tweets from fans demonstrated BIRGing, and more specifically, online team support. In observing these tweets, two codes emerged, campaign success ($n = 43$) and undefeated and ranked ($n = 37$). First, campaign success included tweets that celebrated the successful effort to influence ESPN and Vitale to broadcast from Murray State, both after this news was announced and during the night of the ESPN broadcast:

- “SO STOKED! #BringDickieVToMurray is now #DickieVIsComingToMurray #winning”
- “DICKIE V JUST ANNOUNCED ON ESPN THAT HE’S HEADED TO OUR HOUSE FOR BRACKET BUSTER!! #BringDickieVtoMurray”
- “We did it! Thanks to all those who supported #BringDickieVtoMurray”
- “Dickie V has the Murray State fans going crazy & the band is rockin. They wanted this. #BringDickieVtoMurray”

Second, the undefeated and ranked code included tweets that linked the hashtag to BIRGing about Murray State’s successful season, particularly in the aftermath of team wins during the time when Murray State was undefeated and ranked in the top ten teams nationally during the hashtag campaign:

- “Boy was that an ugly game. The 3 point shots werent falling. Up to 23-0 though. #RacerNation #KeepTheStreak #BringDickieVtoMurray”
- “@espn @DickieV RACER NATION!! UNDEFEATED MURRAY STATE RACERS #BringDickieVtoMurray”
- “Racers are at #7 ! #BringDickieVToMurray!”

Also, two instances were observed where tweets displayed the use of both of codes in the BIRGing theme simultaneously:

- ““When you're 25-1 you get what you want!"
@murraystateuniv #BringDickieVtoMurray #Racers
#RacerNation @DickieV”
- “#racernation 25-1! #bringdickievtomurray =success!!
#WeAreRacers”

Analysis and Discussion

The 2011-2012 season was unique and memorable for fans associated with Murray State Men’s basketball because of the unprecedented surge in both social and traditional media attention and the subsequent interest that accompanied the team’s success on the court. One key highlight of this season was the visit from ESPN and Dick Vitale for the BracketBuster matchup described in this case study. Based on the tweets collected during the lifespan of the #BringDickieVtoMurray hashtag campaign, four main themes were observed: (a) use of persuasive tactics, (b) references to the hashtag itself, (c) links to points of attachment (POA), and (d) basking in reflected glory (BIRGing). Each of these main themes, along with Dick Vitale’s thoughts on his visit, can also be witnessed in Figure 5.

Each of these themes appears to have important links to theoretical concepts and prior research on sports fans and social media. The most prevalent theme in this case study revolved around the use of persuasive tactics by Murray State fans when tweeting at Vitale and ESPN. Persuasion was applied in a number of ways by fans on Twitter, many of which were congruent with existing theories. Classic compliance gaining strategies (Marwell & Schmitt, 1967) that fell into the categories of rewarding activity (e.g., pre-giving) and activation of interpersonal commitments (e.g., positive self-feelings) were employed by some fans. Additionally, because fans were addressing a high-status figure from whom a favor was being sought, the use of positive, face giving messages, as illustrated in Brown & Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, were employed. This was particularly true for messages in the general persuasion code that emerged from the use of persuasive tactics theme, where tweets aimed to show how much Murray State fans would appreciate having Vitale on campus. Or, as Gass and Seiter (2015) noted, “when trying to persuade someone who is more powerful than us, we may be extra polite because it



Figure 5. Video news story about Dick Vitale’s visit to Murray State University from the program *Roundabout U*. Click the screen shot to [view the video on YouTube](#).

is not as likely that our requests will be perceived as legitimate” (p. 247). A similar, yet related, phenomenon was apparent in the aforementioned #BringDrakeToDrake hashtag, where examples of face-giving messages were evident in lighthearted social media messages, including a press release where Drake University made multiple references to hip-hop artist Drake’s lyrics (Zamudio-Suaréz, 2016b).

Another conceptual link of interest in the use of persuasion theme was found in the passionate plea and impersonation codes. In the passionate plea code, fans used paralanguage cues, such as capitalization, exclamation points, and other manipulations of grammatical displays to communicate affect with Vitale. A similar phenomenon was observed when fans employed textual variants of Vitale’s on-air phrases, often employing paralanguage, in what was likely an attempt to build camaraderie. Walther (1992), and many others citing his social information processing model, have noted that using paralanguage enables users to overcome the limited communication cues found in text-driven, character-limited environments, such as Twitter.

Regarding the references to the hashtag itself theme, parallels can be drawn to the existing research that has examined the use of hashtags by sports fans on Twitter. Although employed in a very different context than Hull's (2014) case study where a hashtag (#Fight4UNCWSwimandDive) was used as a vehicle to help save a collegiate sports team on the cusp of elimination, the #BringDickieVtoMurray hashtag also used a hashtag to enact non-Twitter related support. In the case of #Fight4UNCWSwimandDive, tens of thousands of supporters signed an online petition and many advocates directly emailed the university Chancellor. In this case study, numerous supporters sent letters and directly emailed or contacted ESPN in an attempt to persuade the network to have Dick Vitale come to Murray State for a broadcast. In both instances, dedicated fans and supporters were able to “prove that becoming an advocate was possible on Twitter” (Hull, 2014, p. 548). In addition, the use of multiple team-relevant hashtags (e.g., #WeAreRacers, #RacerNation, #GoRacers) was evident in the references to the hashtag itself theme, particularly in the just hashtag(s) code. This finding echoes the results of Reichart-Smith and Smith (2012), who found that fans following teams in the College World Series were using multiple hashtags (in some cases more than five hashtags) in showing their team allegiance on Twitter. Thus, it appears that future studies of hashtag analysis would be greatly benefitted from examining not only primary hashtags, which serve as a “gathering place” for fans, but also ancillary hashtags related to team fandom.

Next, this case study aimed to determine whether points of attachment (POA) were apparent in the tweets using the #BringDickieVtoMurray hashtag. Findings in this case study illustrate support for points of attachment in the analysis of messages on Twitter. Specifically, tweets related to POA tended to mostly correspond to team attachment, attachment to the university/region, and to a lesser extent, attachment to athletes, venues, and the head coach. While POA were not as frequently identified in the analysis as the first two themes, much of this may be due to the focus on Dick Vitale and persuading him to come for a game broadcast self-evident in the hashtag. Future research could benefit from examining POA and how they are demonstrated by fans across different time spans on Twitter. In particular, given the immediate nature of Twitter, it stands to reason that fans may demonstrate different POA at

different moments. In pre-game settings, fans would seem inclined demonstrate team-based support in hopes that their favorite team would win the contest that evening or may tweet about their affinity for the venue the game is being held in, should they be attending. Meanwhile, during the game, it seems quite possible that team-based support would be accompanied by a great number of tweets that demonstrate attachment to individual athletes for their exploits and for coaches and their decision making (and vice versa). During moments of high interest in a particular sport, attachment to sport or attachment to level of play may take center stage, such as fans exhibiting excitement over the top global soccer teams competing for the World Cup or discussing the events of “March Madness” transpiring in the NCAA basketball tournament every spring. Relatedly, those same fans may be inclined to boast on Twitter about how well the conference their favorite team is affiliated with is performing in the NCAA basketball tournament, thereby demonstrating attachment to a particular conference. In short, it would appear that examining points of attachment can be a fruitful area of study moving forward as it relates to social media content.

Lastly, a theme emerged that represented basking in reflected glory (BIRGing) behaviors among Murray State fans. The ranked and undefeated code included tweets that boasted about the team record and national rankings previously unattained by Murray State basketball and paralleled past studies have outlined online celebrations of BIRGing behaviors (Spinda, 2011) and BIRGing via Twitter hashtags specifically (Reichert-Smith & Smith, 2012). However, the campaign success code, which included tweets that were posted once it was announced Dick Vitale would be coming to Murray State for an ESPN broadcast, provided a unique example of BIRGing by sports fans on Twitter as it related to the celebration of achieving the goal of drawing ESPN and Vitale to Murray State. In reflecting on BIRGing to celebrate this fan-enacted behavior, it is noteworthy to consider past research that has specifically linked successful individual performance to increased self-esteem (Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992). While the successful campaign to #BringDickieVtoMurray was achieved through collective action on the part of fans on Twitter (and other avenues, such as the aforementioned letters, emails, and calls to ESPN), it was ultimately driven by individual tweets that employed the hashtag. Although more research is needed to

conclude that self-esteem gains by individuals can be garnered through Twitter use, it does beg an interesting question moving forward.

Limitations and Future Research

One clear limitation in this research is that involves only one fan base using Twitter at during a one-month time frame. During this time, the Murray State Racers were also enjoying the most successful season in team history. Future research should examine instances where fans of different types of teams enact persuasive hashtags for team-relevant causes, such as fans of teams at larger universities with more recognizable brands launching nationwide campaigns. This may also include campaigns started by fans of less visible levels of competition, such as other categorizations of collegiate competition (i.e., Division II, Division III, NAIA) or even high school sports, striving for local or regional coverage. A second limitation evident in this study was the presence of a smaller body of tweets to examine as compared to larger hashtag movements. However, it is worth noting that capturing tweets a regionalized, less broad hashtag did allow for a complete analysis of all tweets involved, as opposed to having tweets randomly drawn from a larger collection. Lastly, the #BringDickieVtoMurray campaign was also active on Facebook, although it did not have its own separate Facebook page and Facebook did not have searchable hashtags at the time this campaign occurred. Ultimately, this led to many posts emerging across an extensive number of personal pages, which are often inaccessible. Given the wide use of Facebook, perhaps additional insights could have been obtained to bolster this research. Future researchers would be well-served to examine hashtags, or the same hashtag, across both Twitter and Facebook.

Conclusion

The 2011-12 basketball season remains the best season in the history of Murray State Men’s Basketball. While it is apparent the primary element of this success was the on-court achievements of the team, it is noteworthy that Murray State fans, students, and local residents were also able to “tell the story” of Racer basketball on a national stage. This included feature articles in national publications, such as *The New York Times* (Weintraub, 2012) and *The Atlantic* (Simpson, 2012), as well as exposure on ESPN through a 30-minute “all-access” program and being

the lead story on ESPN's flagship program *SportsCenter*. Moreover, the passion fans expressed through Twitter in the #BringDickieVtoTwitter campaign, and later during his visit to Murray State, was palpable for Dick Vitale as well. In his blog, he noted that, "Bracket Busters was truly memorable for me. My wife and I had a great time and it was something I will not forget...Murray State was awesome baby with a capital A!" (Vitale, 2012, para. 4-5). A few months later, when Vitale was asked about his experience as a part of this study, he stated:

I believe Twitter and the Racer Nation played a big part in the decision to send me there...The fans treated me very well...I was really impressed by the number of fans that asked me to come out to Murray State. There were so many of them and it was a factor in my wanting to go there. I know it was a factor in the bosses wanting to assign me to that St. Mary's contest.

Discussion Questions

1. What other combination of teams, sports, or media personalities do you feel could reproduce the successful campaign launched by Murray State fans on Twitter? Do you feel it could be duplicated outside of collegiate sports?
2. Even though the #BringDickieVtoMurray campaign was successful on Twitter, what potential issues or pitfalls could emerge from similar "bottom-up" or "grassroots" Twitter campaigns involving sports teams?
3. If you were to attempt a similar persuasive Twitter campaign as the one discussed in this study to draw media attention to your favorite sports team/university, what would the hashtag(s) be? What network or what media personality would you direct your tweets towards and why?
4. Do you feel a successful campaign on Twitter, similar to the one discussed in this study, could lead to a "mid-major" program having long-lasting, positive impacts on their brand nationally or would it be limited to the short-term impact seen by many other hashtags on Twitter?

5. While this case study involved seeking media coverage to enhance exposure for the entire Murray State basketball program (demonstrating attachment to team and university), do you feel that an individual athlete (demonstrating attachment to athlete) can be promoted by a group of dedicated fans in a similar way with similar results?
6. Do you feel that a similar persuasive campaign would be likely to succeed if another form of social media was used apart from Twitter? Would such a campaign work on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.? What strategies and tactics may be different for using these platforms?

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