

#SelfPromote: A Case Study Analyzing Promotion on NBC's Official 2016 Olympic Instagram Account

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Abstract

The 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil offered researchers an opportunity to investigate how Olympic broadcasters utilized social media to promote their televised coverage. This study focuses on posts shared by the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) on the network's official Olympic Instagram account. Guided by the theory of the firm, the research examined nearly 1,050 Instagram posts from @NBCOlympics shared between the Opening and Closing Ceremonies to determine what percentage were promotional, what sports were more heavily promoted, and which athletes were featured most often in the network feeds. The analysis revealed that only 10% of all posts shared by the network contained promotional content, revealing that NBC did not use the platform as a promotional tool.

Introduction

In 2014, the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), the longtime broadcaster of Olympic events in the United States, announced that it reached a deal extending their broadcast agreement with the International Olympic Committee to 2032. The cost of the new deal was \$7.75 billion - a "staggering sum" wrote Richard Sandomir, a media critic for The New York Times (Isidore, 2014; Sandomir, 2014). NBC executives argued the cost was warranted because of the Games' broad appeal to nationwide viewers and because the network believed the Games were an important part of their corporate broadcast strategy, calling it "part of the fabric of our company" (International Olympic Committee Press Release, 2014). While that may be true, NBC is ultimately part of a corporation with shareholders and management executives that are interested in financial profit. Ultimately, the network is part of the Olympics because management sees the event as a way to increase profits (Price, 2016).

However, traditional television viewing methods (watching live on broadcast television during set times) are no longer the norm for all viewers. While 98% of viewers will still watch the Olympics during prime time hours (McAlone, 2016), a younger generation of watchers are not as interested in viewing Olympic coverage during that broadcast window (Smith, 2016). NBC Sports Chairman Mark Lazarus said that millennials "want to watch on their terms, and that's why moving forward we'll continue to adapt to viewer behavior with our coverage on multiple platforms" (Smith, 2016). NBC began showing events online (Roettgers, 2016) and charging more for internet ads compared to television costs (Smith, 2016). Additionally, the rise of social media platforms (SMP) has impacted how people consume traditional media. Therefore, NBC also made a concerted effort during the Olympics to reach out to fans on SMPs including one of the fastest growing, Instagram (Castillo, 2017).

The purpose of this study is to examine if NBC used Instagram to recruit viewers to either the traditional television broadcast or online programming and, if they did use it to recruit viewers, how did NBC do this. Because NBC's ultimate goal was getting the biggest return on their investment, the theory of the firm was used as the theoretical base for this research. The theory, which states that the goal of any business is to maximize profits (Jensen & Meckling, 1976), has previously been used to study individual broadcasters (Hull, 2016), but has not been examined in regards to large media corporations. If NBC was primarily directing Instagram users to watch coverage, then the network would be acting as the theory predicts. Getting the most viewers is important for a television network because that allows them to charge higher fees for advertising (Stelter, 2015). However, if NBC was not openly recruiting viewers, then they are not attempting to maximize their profits through promotion, perhaps hurting their chances at earning the highest return on their investment.

Literature Review

The highly competitive media market drives the competition for viewers' attention. Content creators and distributors seek to keep audiences tuning in and engaging with their content. These large and engaged audiences represent greater revenue potential for NBC. Broadcasters have long dedicated time within a broadcast or newscast to promote their own programming and services with a number of studies over the years reinforce this (Adams-Bloom & Cleary, 2009; Coffey & Cleary, 2008; Eastman, Ferguson, & Klein, 2006; Gregson, 2008). Televised promotions "increased exponentially" after the advent of cable and satellite delivered television (Bellamy & Traudt, 2000, pg. 128) and promotion is now so pervasive that it is considered "one of the most important components of television" (Bellamy & Traudt, 2000, pg. 130). In fact, some broadcasters value promotional content so much that they willingly give up advertising time and space for it (Eastman et al., 2006).

Changing viewing habits and the Olympics

New technology (e.g. smartphones and tablets)—and changing viewer habits (e.g. time shifting and recording) make live traditional TV viewing unpredictable (Eastman et al., 2006; Sandomir, 2014). The rapidly evolving media landscape offers audiences the opportunity to access content across many different platforms, including online streaming and on-demand services. The demographic of 18–29 year-olds, a group highly sought after by media executives and advertisers (Smith, 2016), has increasingly embraced new social and digital technology and are now more likely to use a streaming video service than they are to subscribe to cable or satellite television (Snider, 2015). This cord-cutting trend is shifting the traditional television viewing model and thus shifting the traditional revenue sources (e.g. commercials) found on live television.

Social media has become so ubiquitous that nearly 79 percent of Americans use some form of social media regularly (Social Media Update, 2016). But it is not just for sharing pictures or status updates, as a majority of U.S. adults say they have viewed some type of news on social media (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Therefore, SMP have become a key player in the world of news and sports. In particular, over 50 percent of 18–29 year olds use Instagram, a photo and video-sharing app owned by Facebook (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). Instagram usage is "especially high among younger adults" (Greenwood et al., 2016) and a higher percentage of 18–29 year olds use Instagram than any other social media platform (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). The app is also among the top four SMPs for news consumption by its users (Gottfried &

Shearer, 2016). Specifically among sports fans, Instagram has become increasingly popular as during the 2016 Olympics, 131 million Instagram users had over 900 million interactions about the event (Flynn, 2016). Of the 500 million people that use Instagram each month, 165 million are sports fans who, on average, follow eight sports-related accounts (Patel, 2016).

In response to this shift towards online and SMPs, and to maintain salience in an increasingly competitive environment, NBC unveiled a digital strategy for the 2016 Olympics that placed greater emphasis on providing content—including news and highlights—for platforms beyond traditional television. The decision to embrace digital platforms for news distribution was also influenced by what broadcast officials believed to be a growing technologically literate consumer (NBC Sports Staff, 2016). Previous academic research has demonstrated that online video platforms are displacing television for some consumers (Cha, 2013) and an NBC internal research report found the same (NBC Sports Staff, 2016). The report suggested that 83% of Olympic viewers were more comfortable in 2016 using technology to access Olympic content than ever before (NBC Sports Staff, 2016). NBC focused the bulk of their enhanced digital strategies on increasing live streaming and by placing a greater emphasis on SMPs, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat as a place to get Olympic news, information, and highlights. (NBC Sports Staff, 2016). An NBC press release noted that “while NBC’s network primetime coverage is still clearly the lead dog...a new future has finally arrived from Rio in which viewers are no longer held hostage to outmoded TV formulas” to watch live events and to get up-to-date news and information (NBC Sports Staff, 2016).

The move by NBC was not unprecedented, as other sports leagues have already embraced SMPs as a way to broadcast games and events. Twitter and Amazon had both won rights to stream NFL games (Soper, 2017), Facebook broadcast a NBA game to users who lived in India (Wagner, 2017), and the WNBA live streams games on Twitter (Casey, 2017). The social media account Stadium (@WatchStadium) partnered with the NFL, MLB, and the PGA Tour to show live sporting events and signature sports shows 24 hours a day (Perez, 2017). Watching games through SMPs has proven to be of interest to fans, with 47% of adults saying they would be more inclined to watch a NFL game if it was streamed on social media (Nichols, 2017).

Sports and promotion

For a commercial broadcaster like NBC, the digital strategy not only provided new ways of sharing Olympic content but also opened new revenue streams, including opportunities for advertising and promotion. Scholars have shown that organizations, including news and entertainment providers, are increasingly turning to SMPs as avenues for self-promotion (Ferguson & Greer, 2015; Gilpen, 2010). In the case of NBC, effective promotional efforts on official Olympic SMPs could help strengthen their long term branding initiatives, but in the short term, SMPs could also help drive audience interest back to traditional television programming where the bulk of NBC’s advertisement content is prioritized.

This redirect is a common strategy among news networks on SMPs (Greer & Ferguson; 2011; 2017). Social media content managers may be directed to use the platforms for self-promotion because traditional TV advertisements still generate more profit than digital advertising, making television viewers a critical audience. NBC understands that the more viewers who tune into the televised Olympic broadcast, the more advertising revenue the Games produce for the network. Yet, prior studies reveal that local television stations have failed to take advantage of their social media presence to self-promote, instead using the service primarily as an information dissemination platform for their followers (Greer & Ferguson, 2011; Gregson, 2008). A similar

trend emerges in local sports where a study of local television sports broadcasters found that less than 9% of almost 20,000 tweets from 201 broadcasters were promotional in nature (Hull, 2016).

Promotional messaging can be delivered in a myriad of forms from live discussions between TV personalities to more sophisticated graphic packages that appear similar in text and style to what is shown to deliver the news (McAllister, 2010). For example, an overt promotion would be something that is obviously a promotion for the network or a specific program, such as “Watch Channel 13 tonight at 6:00” (Hull, 2016). Meanwhile, a covert promotion occurs when a viewer may not realize the subtle promotion that is taking place, such as when a news station does a story on one of their anchors appearing at a charity event (Coffey & Cleary, 2011). A unique form of promotional content includes the use of hybrid messages (Balasubramanian, 1994). This technique combines advertising and marketing to covertly promote a product without the consumer recognizing it to be a form of advertisement. For example, sports networks engage in a form of promotional hybrid messaging in the way they organize their newscasts. They consistently place in more prominent parts of the sportscast highlights from games and leagues that are either broadcast on their network or with which they are contractually affiliated (Johnson & Romney, 2017).

Jhalley (1989) wrote that sports and promotions have always had a cozy relationship. He argued that throughout much of sports’ televised history, the medium has been rooted in “commercial relations” (Jhally, 1989, pg. 80). And this partnership only grows more vibrant. McAllister’s (2010) analysis of the 1997 and 2007 college football national championships suggests that sports television is oversaturated with promotional content and that each year more and more promotional content is added to televised sports. For example, during the Fox’s coverage of the 2007 championship game, announcers would frequently promote programs also airing on that channel by stating the day and time that show was to air (McAllister, 2010). Perhaps the pervasiveness of promotional content in sports programming is a result of the effectiveness of the messages on audiences. Studies demonstrate that messages in sports programming are effectual—especially among younger audiences (Cianfrone & Zhang, 2006).

As new mediums and platforms emerge, broadcasters have employed a multi-platform approach, meaning promotional content has moved beyond the medium where the programming originates. For example, NBC might offer promotional materials about its Olympic television programming on other platforms such as radio, the web and, now, on SMPs (Eastman et al., 2006; Tang, Newton, & Wang, 2007). The invasion of promotional content on SMPs is a natural extension of what has been done on legacy platforms for decades. SMPs offer more space for self-promotional content (Gilpen 2010). Media organizations are taking advantage and have increased promotional materials on Twitter (Ferguson & Greer, 2011), Instagram, (Greer & Ferguson, 2017) and Pinterest (Ferguson & Greer, 2015).

Theory of the Firm

Jensen and Meckling’s (1976) theory of the firm may best explain the rationale for the increased focus of promotional content on SMPs. The theory states that the objective of companies is to behave in a manner that will optimize profits (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). The theory has only recently been used in studies on the media (Doyle, 2013; Hoskins, McFadyen, & Finn, 2004; Hull, 2016). Hoskins et al. (2004) wrote that convergence was “blurring the boundaries of what used to distinct industry segments” (pg. 156), such as how NBC now has a television and social media component. Cleary and Adams-Bloom (2009) suggested that publicly traded media

companies (such as NBC) “will always act in its self-interest” (pg. 895). While media organizations are identified as both political and economic actors, the company’s primary motivation tends to be profit maximization (Napoli, 1997). A privately owned media company’s primary motivations are profit maximization (Napoli, 1997; Shoemaker & Reece, 1996) and within the increasingly competitive media environment, there is increased pressure for broadcast stations to maximize resources (Coffey & Cleary, 2008). It may seem cynical to propose that private broadcasters are only interested in maximizing profits and not concerned with promoting cultural development or something more “high minded,” but previously observed facts have proven the focus on financials to be accurate (Hoskins et al., 2004). However, Hull (2016) found that newsroom management was not instructing individual sports broadcasters to promote content on Twitter, which is in contract to the principles stated within the theory of the firm.

With the amount of money NBC has spent to acquire the rights and to broadcast the Olympics, \$1.22 billion for 2016 alone (Sandomir, 2011), getting a high number of viewers is important to attracting the large sums of money paid by companies to advertise on the Olympic broadcasts. If a network can promise a high number of viewers during a program or broadcast, they can charge higher fees for advertising (Stelter, 2015). So while the broad goal is profit maximization, a narrow goal might be increasing audience ratings for the various events (Hoskins et al., 2004). Before the Olympics began, NBC secured \$1.2 billion in national advertising through assurances to advertisers that there would be millions of people watching the events (Poggi, 2016). However, this money is often based on the promise of higher ratings, so if the events do not deliver the promised number of viewers, the network may lose advertising revenue after the event. For example, following disappointing ratings for the 2016 college football championship semifinal games, ESPN had to provide almost \$20 million in free commercials to companies that advertised during the two games after not meeting a previously guaranteed number of viewers (Consoli, 2016). Therefore, despite already collecting the advertising money for the 2016 Olympics, it was still important to NBC to bring in as many viewers as possible. These viewers can be recruited through traditional advertising, such as commercials on television or in print media.

However, as media companies such as NBC focus on maximizing profits (as stated by the theory of the firm), it is worth examining how (or if) Olympic broadcasters are using alternative methods such as SMPs to entice followers to watch the Olympics with the goal of increasing viewership. However, there may be competing objectives between NBC ownership and those responsible for the SMPs. For example, the principal aim for the social media manager may be to expand the influence of the social media platforms and therefore they may not necessarily be focused on driving up viewership numbers for Olympics on NBC television channels (Doyle, 2013).

Instagram

While NBC is aiming to bring viewers to its television broadcast and website, Instagram was selected for examination for several reasons. First, this SMP emphasizes the visual as Instagram is primarily a photo and short video sharing application. Users can post images or videos to their accounts, which then appear in the feed of followers. Because the Olympics are highly visual, Instagram shares a synergistic relationship with the televisuality of traditional over-the-air television. The captivating visuals are one of the unique qualities of the Olympics and Instagram offers a natural space within the SMP ecosystem to highlight these characteristics.

Second, Instagram's growth has been significant since its debut in 2010. Over 40 billion photos have been uploaded and 400 million users worldwide regularly access the app (Alba, 2015; Celebrating a Community of 400 Million, 2015). Social Media analytics report that 32 percent of online adults use the platform (Greenwood et al., 2016). And the platform is especially popular among millennials. Of the major SNPs, Instagram has the largest percentage of 18-29 year olds who regularly use it (Greenwood et al., 2016).

Instagram has also emerged as strategic space to access and share news and information. For example, 23 percent of its users get news and information from the platform (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016), including sports fans seeking news and information about their favorite leagues, teams and athletes (Patel, 2017). ESPN's flagship news and highlight cable TV program, SportsCenter, has become one of the biggest accounts on Instagram, totaling 267 million views in December 2016 (Patel, 2017). An executive with the sports network said they "count Instagram as a real success" and that it serves as a reminder that "we need to continue to experiment with things." (Patel, 2017, para. 7).

Instagram's popularity has driven news organizations and other content providers to view the app as a critical player in the digital universe (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016; Greer & Ferguson, 2017). The number of users who followed the NBC official Olympic accounts reinforces Instagram's role. At the onset of the 2016 Games, the NBC account had 409,000 followers (NBC Olympics Instagram, 2016) and over the duration of the Games—starting with the opening ceremony on August 5, 2016 and ending with the closing ceremony August 21, 2016—the network posted over 1,000 posts to its official Olympic Instagram Games account. Instagram has become especially popular in the world of sports where it is used by teams (Anagnostopoulos, Parganas, Chadwick, & Fenton, 2018; Kim & Hull, 2017), athletes (Davies & Mudrick, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016), sport-related brands (Geurin & Burch, 2017), and fans (Pegoraro, Comeau, & Frederick, 2017).

Because of the platform's popularity, especially among young adults, NBC may have utilized their official Olympic Instagram accounts to share promotional content about their brands and to promote televised coverage of the Games. A study of how Globo Network, the Brazilian broadcaster of the Olympics, found that posts were mostly news based (Gambarato, Alzamora, & Tarcia, 2018). Guided by the theory of the firm, this study analyzes the content of NBC's official Olympic Instagram accounts to determine how the broadcasters used the platform as a tool for self-promotion.

Research Questions

This study analyzed nearly 1,050 posts that NBC posted to its official Olympic Instagram account (@NBCOlympics) during the span of the 2016 Summer Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The theory of the firm states that the goal of any company is to maximize profits (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) and previous research regarding individual sports broadcasters found that the reporters did not primarily promote their work or their television station on social media (Hull, 2016). This indicated that the individuals were not actively attempting to bring in more viewers through promotion and, perhaps, were not motivated by the opportunity to maximize profits of their employer. This study investigated the SMP of an Olympic broadcast network to see if it is attempting to maximize profits by encouraging SMP followers to watch the network either online or on television. Therefore, the first research question is:

RQ₁: How frequently was NBC using @NBCOlympics on Instagram to promote their television or online coverage of the 2016 Olympics?

In addition to examining the promotional frequency of NBC on Instagram, it is worth examining what the network was promoting. In order to get the most viewers, NBC would perhaps choose to promote popular sports and popular athletes. Previous Olympic viewership has demonstrated that there are specific sports and athletes that capture the attention of the public. In 2012, over 38 million people watched NBC's coverage of the women's gymnastics finals (Collins, 2012) and an estimated 28 million viewers tuned into Michael Phelps winning his 22nd gold medal later that same week (Boedecker, 2012). Also during the 2012 Olympics, gymnasts were the top two "most clicked athletes" on NBCOlympics.com, with track star Usain Bolt and swimmer Michael Phelps following closely behind (NBC Sports Group, 2012). Therefore, in order to maximize profits through advertising by garnering the most viewers possible, it would seem logical for NBC to promote sports and athletes that are proven ratings winners. In order to examine what NBC chose to spotlight on its Instagram feed, the following two research questions are proposed.

RQ₂: Which sports were most promoted by NBC on @NBCOlympics on Instagram?

RQ₃: Which athletes were most promoted by NBC on @NBCOlympics on Instagram?

Methods

Data in the form of posts from the NBC Olympics account (@NBCOlympics) were collected from the day of the Opening Ceremony of the 2016 Olympic Games (August 5, 2016) until the day of the Closing Ceremony (August 21, 2016). Each post was collected using the screen capture function. This function displayed the post content, the caption, and the web address of the post. The web address was collected in order to allow coders to go back to the post if necessary (to watch a video, for example).

Content analytic methods were used to categorize the Instagram posts. Content analysis is defined as "the systematic assignment of communication content to categories according to rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those categories using statistical methods" (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005, pg. 3). This method has been used previously in various social media and sport studies including those that examined promotional messages on Twitter by local sports broadcasters (Hull, 2016) and Instagram use by athletes (Smith & Sanderson, 2015).

The coding framework used in Hull (2016) to investigate how sports broadcasters use Twitter to promote content was used as a guide to develop several of the coding categories that related specifically to social media promotions in this study. That study defined promotional content as something that explicitly promoted the newscast ("Blitz starts in 5 minutes") or content on the television station website ("Week 11 HS football scoreboard [link]") (Hull, 2016, pg. 247). Therefore, anything that explicitly mentioned the broadcast, the live stream, or the website was coded as promotional. Figure 1 is an example of a post that was coded as promotional.

Figure 1. Example of promotional post. Post contains events (Cycling, women's rugby, women's soccer, and women's tennis), times (now, 12:00pm, 4:00pm, and 5:45pm), and channel to watch on (NBC).



Additionally, the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) was used to develop the remaining categories that were specific to the context of the Olympics and Instagram by creating preliminary categories, analyzing the posts in regards to those categories, and revisiting the data until new observations failed to alter the existing categories. Type of post (photo or video), explicit promotion for the network or advertisers (in the photo/video, in the text, in the photo/video and text, or post was not a promotion), content of video (highlight, interview, something not serious, promotion, studio news report, or not a video), which athlete was shown (open-ended), and which sport was being shown (open-ended) were all recorded.

Each NBC video ended with a graphic that read, “Watch more on NBC, NBCOlympics.com and the NBC Sports App.” However, this graphic did not occur until the very end of each video, which meant the viewer had to watch the entire segment before getting the promotional material. In some cases, it took almost a minute. Since the graphic is at the end, the viewer can often ignore the reminder before it appears by stopping the video early (or simply not watching the video at all). Therefore, it was determined to not include the graphic when coding the content of the video.

Two undergraduate university students who had previous experience with coding for content analytic studies were selected to code the posts. They were trained on the coding guide by the researchers (who also have experience with coding) and examined 25 random posts for an initial coding pilot test. Upon discussion and resolution of disagreements from the pilot study posts, final intercoder reliability was determined by coding a random sample of 100 posts (9.5% of the data set). Testing this percentage for reliability is consistent with published recommendations (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006) and further exceeds the recommendations of other researchers (Kaid & Wadsworth, 1989). Intercoder reliability using Krippendorff's α determined a high level of reliability among all categories ($\alpha = .947$). Based on the acceptable level of initial agreement for intercoder reliability, the remaining posts ($N = 949$) were divided evenly between the two coders. Posts were coded over a one month period approximately three months after the completion of the Olympics. During the sample time period, the

@NBOlympics account posted 1,049 times. Of those posts, 509 were photos (48.5%) and 540 were video (51.5%).

Results

Frequency of promotion

RQ₁ investigated the frequency of NBC's use of Instagram to promote their television coverage of the Olympics on @NBOlympics. Of the 1,049 posts from NBC during the Olympic Games, 55 or 5.2% were coded as promotional for the television coverage of the events. Of those 55 posts, only six promoted within the visual (10.9% of promotional, 0.6% of NBC's posts). On August 6, a photo showed women's soccer player, Alex Morgan about to kick the ball with the text "USA v. FRANCE Today 4|3c on NBCSN" superimposed to her left. An additional 16 promotional posts used a text caption that accompanied the visual (29.1% of promotional, 1.5% of all of NBC's posts). For example, a photo of two men working on a sand castle had a caption that encouraged followers to see the finished product that evening on NBC. The remaining 33 promotional posts encouraged viewers to watch the events by using both the visual and the text caption (60% of promotional, 3.1% of NBC's posts). An August 8 graphic with "Primetime Schedule" had photos of men's gymnastics, swimmers Michael Phelps, Katie Ledecky, Missy Franklin, and the beach volleyball team of Kerri Walsh Jennings and April Ross. The accompanying caption read, "We've got a ton of action ready for you in prime time tonight! It all starts at 8PM."

In addition to broadcasting the events themselves, NBC also televised Olympic Late Night, a news, sports, and entertainment program that aired from 12:35 a.m. until 1:35 a.m. during the Olympics (Vejnoska, 2016). The show was hosted by American Idol's Ryan Seacrest and was broadcast outside at Copacabana Beach instead of at an inside studio (Steinberg, 2016). The show averaged six million viewers a night and was heavily promoted by Seacrest on his various social media accounts (Wallenstein, 2016). The official NBC Instagram account also promoted Seacrest and the evening program. One such example included a photo of Seacrest with actor Matthew McConaughey on the @NBOlympics feed with the caption "#OlympicLateNight." Slightly less than 5% of all posts (50 posts or 4.8%) were about Olympic Late Night.

By combining the promotional posts for the coverage of events on television and the website and the promotional posts for Olympic Late Night (105 posts), 10% of all of NBC's posts during the Olympics were promotional in nature. Therefore, the vast majority of posts (90%) were not used to promote NBC's Olympic programming online or on television, meaning NBC was not utilizing Instagram primarily as an overt method to recruit viewers.

Of NBC's 55 non-Seacrest promotional posts, 49 of them promoted television coverage and only one directed viewers to the Internet or social media. That single post was simply letting fans know that all previous results were at NBOlympics.com as part of the #FlashbackFriday hashtag. The remaining 5 promotional posts did not specifically mention which outlet (traditional or online media) the event was taking place.

Promotion of specific athletes and sports

RQ₂ and RQ₃ were framed to dig deeper into the content posted on the Instagram page @NBOlympics by the network. RQ₂ focused on what sports were the most promoted on the Instagram feed and RQ₃ examined which athletes were most promoted. Of the 81 posts that

were promotional that featured an athlete on the NBC Olympics Instagram feed, 25 promoted swimming. Eleven posts promoted multiple sports, and six of those mentioned swimming. That means that 38.2% of the promotional posts were about swimming. Thirteen of the promotional posts mentioned gymnastics (eight solo and five as part of a group), while 11 mentioned track and field (nine sole and two as part of a multiple promotional post). This demonstrates that NBC was focusing on specific sports in the posts that were promotional by nature.

RQ₃ switched the focus to which athletes were the most promoted on Instagram by the two television networks. Of the 81 posts that featured an identifiable athlete that were promotional, 33 featured one of six athletes – Michael Phelps, Simone Biles, Usain Bolt, Katie Ledecky, and the beach volleyball team of Kerri Walsh Jennings and April Ross. That means that 40.7% of the promotions were focused on 0.05% of the athletes who competed in the 2016 Olympics (six out of 11,544). Michael Phelps was promoted the most, appearing in 20 of the posts. Once again, this demonstrates that NBC had a very targeted message within their promotional posts. The network chose to focus on popular athletes to showcase instead of a wide variety of Olympians.

Discussion

Social media has been cited as a way for businesses to promote their products directly to consumers. Despite repeated examples of successful social marketing campaigns from a variety of companies, the world of news media has largely stayed away from the practice. Previous research has demonstrated that television stations (Greer & Ferguson, 2011; Gregson, 2008) and individual broadcasters (Hull, 2016) do not use Twitter to promote content on-air and online. Despite this study's focus on a different SMP, Instagram, the results were similar. NBC did not frequently use the photo and video sharing network to encourage followers to watch that network's coverage of the Olympics. Of the 1,049 posts that the networks sent, just over 10% were labeled as promotional. It should be noted that NBC did place a graphic at the end of each video encouraging users to watch coverage on television or online. However, as stated previously, the placing of this reminder is not ideal, as it comes at the final seconds of each video. So while one could say that NBC was promoting frequently on Instagram videos, the effectiveness of those promotions is questionable.

The key to broadcasters' success involves ratings for its programming, and compared to the Summer Olympics in London four years earlier, NBC's ratings for the Rio Games were down 17% overall. In the 18-to-49-year-old age group, ratings were 25% lower than London's viewership (Smith, 2016). These ratings demonstrate NBC's decision not to use Instagram as a promotional tool was even more curious. Based on the fact that 92% of Instagram users are between the ages of 18-to-49 (Greenwood et al., 2016), NBC missed a substantial opportunity to reach a group of viewers who are both highly desired by advertisers and who were not watching the Olympics on traditional media outlets.

The impact of the decreased viewership was not only an immediate disappointment for NBC, but could also lead to more issues in the future. During the Olympics themselves, NBC had to provide complementary ad space to "high-end" advertisers who were promised higher ratings, thus causing a loss of additional revenue that could have been spent on those open commercial spaces (Crupi, 2016). For the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea and 2020 Olympics in Japan, NBC's failure to meet their ratings expectations in Rio, paired with likely lower ratings due to a dramatic time zone difference (Lichtenstادرter, 2016; Lieberman, 2011), could result in NBC having to lower their ad rates for advertisers.

For NBC, the failure to utilize Instagram as a promotional tool is in contrast with the principles stated within the theory of the firm. If NBC were operating with the prime goal of maximizing profits, then they would have been using all possible promotional tools to increase viewership, which would, in turn, allow them to increase the fees they were charging advertisers.

A further examination of the NBC Instagram accounts found that its promotional efforts focused on only a select number athletes and sports. In relation to theory of the firm, this demonstrates that NBC was trying to maximize profits by emphasizing the events and athletes that will likely bring in the most viewership. This proved to be a successful strategy as NBC's most viewed night was Tuesday, August 9, which featured three of their most highly promoted stars: Michael Phelps, Katie Ledecky, and Simone Biles (NBC, 2016).

This study adds to the existing theory of the firm research within the media by showcasing that major corporations do not currently utilize SMPs for promotional activities that would contribute to the goal of maximizing profits. While traditional media promotions on television clearly state what time, day, and channel each event would be shown, very few of the Instagram posts took the same approach. This builds upon Hull's (2016) research by further demonstrating that media companies and individual media members perhaps view social media as a complementary piece to their promotional methods and not as a primary source of recruiting viewers. When it comes to focusing on maximizing profits, using social media does not appear to be a tool that NBC wanted to use to recruit viewers during the Olympics.

The practical implications for NBC demonstrate that a lack of specifics regarding events on the broadcast could cause viewers to miss important events, thus decreasing viewership. NBC is the only place that fans in the United States can watch the Olympics, so any excitement created about the events within the United States should ultimately benefit NBC. However, a covert promotion may provide only the excitement, but not a way for fans to follow up on that excitement. For example, while one could state that simply showing Michael Phelps is enough to get fans motivated to watch his next race, NBC's lack of viewing information forces the user to do additional research about when that race is. If the posts were overtly promotional, the photo of Phelps would also contain the day and time of his next race, allowing the user to know immediately when he or she needed to watch NBC's coverage. Therefore, NBC would be wise to create more overtly promotional posts in order to eliminate the possibility that a user would not take the initiative to know when the next big event is starting. Previous research on the Rio Olympics found that social media use neither "displaced" nor "encouraged" viewing on traditional television (Tang & Cooper, 2017).

Limitations and Future Research

This study examined one specific SMP (Instagram) during one specific sporting event (2016 Olympic Games), providing a limited context for inquiry. To give a more complete picture of how NBC used social media during the Olympics, future researchers may also wish to collect data from Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat and other SMPs that may emerge. A similar study may also be conducted during a different multiple-day international sporting event such as the FIFA World Cup, World Cup of Rugby, or the Winter Olympic Games, which features different sports and where different countries rise to the top.

Future research may wish to survey Instagram users to see what (if any) type of post will motivate them to watch an event on television, on digital streaming, or visit a specific website.

While this research demonstrated that each network did use promotional posts, it would be of interest to practitioners to determine which types of posts are getting the most response from followers. A survey of Instagram users could also provide insight into what would constitute a successful post when attempting to increase viewership.

Another avenue of future research would be to interview advertisers. As ratings drop for traditional television broadcasts and rise for streaming viewing, it would be interesting to get the advertisers vantage point on NBC's lack of promotional posts. Additionally, advertisers may be able to provide information on what advertisement placement would be most successful in terms of the return on investment for both NBC and the advertisers.

Researchers may also wish to survey or interview the individuals in charge of the social media accounts of various television networks. While it appears to be a missed opportunity to not promote coverage during major sporting events, perhaps there is a reason why these networks are choosing not to actively recruit viewers. Interviews with social media managers would provide a glimpse into how the various SMP accounts such as Twitter and Instagram are managed.

Conclusion

With billions of dollars already invested in Olympic coverage, television networks such as NBC need advertising dollars to help maximize profits and recoup the cost of broadcasting the Games. Advertising on multiple platforms has proven to be more effective than simply focusing on one outlet (Tang et al., 2007). Previous research on individual broadcasters has demonstrated that broadcasters do recognize the promotional possibilities of social networks, but are not acting on those opportunities (Hull, 2016). This study adds to the theory of the firm literature by revealing that not only are individual broadcasters not promoting on social media, but that the large television networks that employ those broadcasters are not doing so either. Despite the reach of Instagram to a desirable audience, NBC elected not to overtly promote their content on the social media platform.

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