

Why Are Users Drawn to Rivals.com? A Uses and Gratifications Approach to Who Follows College Sports Recruiting Websites and Their Perceptions of Credibility

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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August 2021

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Wow, seven years of graduate school have come to a close. What a wild ride that I never saw coming, but one I wouldn't trade for the world. And through it all, the one constant has been my amazing wife, Jenny. You are my rock and your constant encouragement has gotten me to this point. I'm the luckiest guy ever to be able to call you my wife. Thank you for listening to my rants, for offering meaningful suggestions, and just being there for me through all the ups and downs this process has been. And to my children, Jett and Jersey, thank you for keeping me humble, but reminding me why I've chosen the path I have. It hasn't always been easy managing a dissertation and being a dad, but I've certainly tried my best. You both have given me so much motivation to keep moving forward when it wasn't always the easiest.

To my dissertation chair, Dr. Erin Whiteside, thank you for being the best mentor I could ask for. Your guidance has truly meant the world to me and it's been a privilege to work with you these past four years. I always trust and value your opinions and critiques and I look forward to more studies in which we can collaborate. You've been the biggest reason I'm glad I chose to pursue my Ph.D. at UT.

I would also like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Adam Love, Dr. Nick Geidner, and Dr. Mark Harmon. It's been an honor to have each of you on my committee and I've enjoyed each of the research projects we worked on during my time at UT. Thank you for your constructive feedback, your recommendations during my job search, and your encouragement. I consider all of you among the best at your crafts and I appreciate you all taking the time to help me navigate this process.

I would not be in this position if it weren't especially for the kindness and generosity of a few faculty and staff members in CCI. Dr. Virginia Kupritz, Dr. Catherine Luther, and Dr. Whiteside, you never hesitated when I needed you during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. I obviously did not plan to return a fourth year until unfortunate circumstances as a result of the pandemic. Each of you went above and beyond to make sure I was able to return, and that I was in the best possible position. Thank you does not do nearly enough to express my eternal gratitude I have towards each of you.

I've also been privileged to work with some amazing faculty in the School of Journalism & Electronic Media and the College of Communication and Information. In addition to Dr. Whiteside, Dr. Geidner and Dr. Harmon, I'd like to thank Dr. Joy Jenkins and Melanie Faizer for all your guidance and assistance in my graduate teaching position. Both of you have been instrumental in shaping me to be the instructor I am, by giving me the confidence to teach and the tools to be successful. Thank you for sharing your knowledge and syllabi. Dr. Barbara Kaye, thank you for allowing me to be a part of your book and contribute with my own chapter. I appreciate your guidance and support throughout. To Dr. Guy Harrison, I feel fortunate to have stuck around another year to work with you. You're one of the brightest minds in the sports media field and JEM got so much better with your addition. And to Dr. Courtney Childers, thank you for allowing me to work on the staff of the Adam Brown Social Media Command Center. It was a pleasure to dive into social media on behalf of the college and I appreciate your guidance and camaraderie throughout.

To Margaret Taylor: you have been a complete blessing and such a welcome addition to the CCI family. I know I speak for everyone at CCI when I say thank you for everything you do. Thank you for being someone to talk to, to point me in the right direction, and to be patient with my continued learning curve in navigating the road to a Ph.D. I'm so glad Jenny never had to call you during my comprehensive exams, but I thank you for going out of your way to remind me that everything would work itself out.

To a guy who's become one of my best friends: Kevin, where do I start? Though it's been exhausting, it's been fun experiencing doctorate school life with you. Thanks for always lending an ear, for talking over conundrums I found myself in and for offering plenty of sage advice. I'll always look fondly back on our many lunch walks to Cumberland Avenue, UT basketball and football games, and late-night calls/Zoom meetings to talk through research, movie references, and everything in between.

To my buddy Brandon: thank you for always being there, whether it was to talk over statistics class, grab a coffee, or turn on Wild Kratts to occupy a toddler while Jenny and I were in the delivery room. Being at similar points in our lives, I needed a friend to talk over dad life, grad life, and remind me that both can be done simultaneously. I look forward to many more talks, research projects, and adventures (Though I'd prefer not to experience another Hotel Branko).

To my cohort, fellow grad students, and dungeonites, Charli, Alex, Shiela, Darina, Joe, James, Monique, Melissa, Dennis, Joseph, Iman, Rob, and everyone else I know I've missed: Thank you for making my time at UT such a fulfilling experience, for your help, for listening, and for being able to just talk about whatever was on our minds. You made

‘The Dungeon’ a fun place to be and somewhere I looked forward to going to during my first three years. A huge hole was definitely created during my fourth year, not being there, but I’ll never forget the many memories made before that.

To Anne Hensley: It was only fitting that you were the first person I saw, who congratulated and hugged me when I passed my comprehensive exams. Thank you for our conversations, for your candy boosts, and for the occasional spare key when I locked myself out of my office. I’ve been grateful for you being there when I just needed to chat, especially during this past year when CCI was a ghost town most of the time.

And finally, thank you to everyone else who’s made my time at UT, Knoxville, and Tennessee so worthwhile. To one of my long-time best friends, D Mac, thank you for your help in taking care of our pets, for the famous McNamara Super Bowl and Derby parties, and for being such a good friend. And to the wonderful staff, parents, and everyone associated with our daycare these past four years: being able to trust you to teach and help our children grow has been a blessing.

ABSTRACT

As the sports media landscape continues to shift, one of the most constant players has been Rivals.com, one of the more influential media organizations covering college athletics. Using the uses and gratifications approach as a guide, this study explores how users engage with Rivals.com content, how they perceive the network and its reporters in terms of credibility, and how that determines their willingness to subscribe. The purpose of this research is to better understand how and why fans interact within Rivals.com's network of websites in order to discern their motivations for engaging with the site and the gratifications obtained through that engagement. Findings also instruct journalists and the media organizations that employ them to improve practice and delivery of content through proper engagement with audiences, cultivating relationships between users and the site, and being cognizant of changing perceptions of journalistic standards, such as bias, to remain credible and financially viable. Further practical and theoretical implications are also explored.

Keywords: Uses and gratifications, Rivals.com, grounded theory, social capital, cultural capital, fandom

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The smell of chicken wings, hot dogs, and hamburgers wafted through the air, slightly more than a deep touchdown pass away from Lane Stadium. A mixture of forty-something, fifty-something, and sixty-something men (mostly White), a few women of the same age, college-aged men and women, myself, my wife, and at least one member of my staff, assembled in lot four at Virginia Tech for what I dubbed the “HokieHaven.com tailgate.” Regardless of the weather, the tailgate began roughly three hours before kickoff of every Virginia Tech home football game for five seasons beginning in 2012. We all stood or sat in collapsible chairs around a gas grill, in and around an E-Z Up canopy adorned with Hokies logos in the parking spot paid for by Tom, a subscriber to the site. Conversations usually centered around Virginia Tech football. Throughout the duration of the tailgate, I was peppered with a myriad of questions from those in attendance, most of whom were subscribers: “Which recruits are visiting today?” “Who’s injured and won’t play in the game?” “When will construction be completed on the new practice facility?” “What do you think of the athletic director?”

HokieHaven.com is a part of Rivals.com, a network of sports news websites dedicated to following more than 160 different collegiate athletics programs (Winemiller, 2020). The specific sites offer more than just news on fans’ favorite college teams, however. They provide an interactive experience through message boards, available only to subscribers, who pay \$9.95 per month for access to those message boards, and other kinds of insider information, like question and answer sessions with the site’s reporters.

Still, Rivals is most known for its coverage of recruiting, and the company has created an industry around its practice of ranking recruits via a star system. Indeed, newly released rankings generate a flurry of activity on the message boards while college football programs that sign what Rivals deems as 4 and 5-star recruits are more likely to reach the sport's top-tier bowls and a substantial payout (Bergman & Logan, 2020). Rivals, meanwhile, sponsors camps that attract some of the nation's top athletes in football and boys' basketball -- events that bring together athletes, coaches and, importantly, Rivals reporters. The business model has been lucrative for Rivals, which delivers content to an estimated 200,000 subscribers (Solomon, 2014), and it was included as part of a \$5 billion purchase by Apollo Global Management in the spring of 2021 (Gottfried & Fitzgerald, 2021).

When I started as publisher of HokieHaven.com, which covers Virginia Tech athletics and recruiting, I sought ways to build the site by increasing subscriptions, strengthening relationships amongst reporters and subscribers, and gaining knowledge about the Hokies and the high school student-athletes being recruited. At Rivals' annual conference in June 2012, publishers of successful sites passed on the idea of holding a pre-game tailgate. They reasoned that it allowed users to connect with each other in-person and permitted them to interact with publishers outside of each site's message boards. Wanting to grow subscribership for my site, I floated the idea on the subscribers-only message board, *The Gobbler*. Upon asking if any subscribers would be interested in participating in a tailgate, Tom sent me an email saying not only that he was interested, but also that he wanted me to use his parking spot for the tailgate. With this momentum, I

secured a sponsor, Bull & Bones Brewhaus & Grill in Blacksburg, Virginia, which provided two party trays of chicken wings and sauce for each tailgate. In exchange for food, I agreed to promote the restaurant by hanging a banner on the canopy. Before each game, I advertised the tailgate via the message board, the site's Facebook and Twitter pages, and my own Twitter profile. In addition to HokieHaven subscribers and their families, I even invited high school football players who were attending the game, along with their parents and those of Virginia Tech football players, many of whom visited the tailgate and socialized. The tailgate resulted in lasting friendships. There are a handful of former subscribers and attendees of tailgates with whom I still correspond via email. One former subscriber, David, even gifted my newborn son a blanket, which was hand-made by his wife. To this day, I still exchange Christmas cards with some attendees.

Rivals.com, which is a subscription-based platform, is geared towards die-hard sports fans in its coverage of predominantly college football, men's college basketball, and the recruiting processes of both sports (Winemiller et al., 2020). This network of national and localized websites representing more than 125 college athletics programs builds and maintains a database of recruits, which includes updated stories and other content. With the proliferation of social media, the Rivals platform has contributed to the growth of collegiate athletics (Winemiller et al., 2020), as continued fan interest and resulting revenue have led to massive paydays for those schools who participate in post-season bowls, of which the College Football Playoff and its \$6 million payout per participating team (Dosh, 2018) are at the top. One of Rivals' hallmarks is its practice of ranking high school recruits based on their talent and potential success as college athletes.

These rankings, created by Rivals, have contributed to the growth and commercialization of the collegiate athletics landscape; not only do they provide high school athletes with visibility that aids in the recruiting process, but also at many athletic programs, securing a highly-ranked recruit results in salary bonuses for coaches and administrators (Berkowitz, 2019). Moreover, success in recruiting highly-ranked high school football and boys' basketball players has directly resulted in revenue windfalls for college athletics departments (Bergman & Logan, 2020).

These rankings and ratings are not without their share of criticism, however. Chief among those is the critique that they are subjective, arbitrary perceptions made by a handful of analysts (Silva, et al., 2018) who, in creating those very rankings, also put Rivals in the position of manufacturing its own news (Winemiller, et al., 2020). Rivals also produces its own series of regional and national football camps each year exclusively covered by Rivals and its team sites, which the network believes separates itself from competitors (Burke, 2013). There is also, arguably, a perception that Rivals analysts could show favoritism to the student-athletes who attend their camps over those who do not (Winemiller, et al., 2020). Indeed, Rivals' business model puts its reporters at a tension point in journalism. Given its focus on reporting insider recruiting news, access to sources, including coaches and recruits, is of critical importance to the site's success, and any potential conflict in those relationships may impede the necessary flow of information. Rivals reporters, thus, are in a precarious position, where they must balance guarding that access with their work as journalists, two objectives that are not always in harmony. Publishers and reporters have lamented but also accepted this conflict of

interest as part of the business model the network and its competitors have created, of recruit rankings and covering the ensuing news (Winemiller, et al., 2020). They argue it is part of the entrepreneurial duties they also have in attracting paying subscribers.

In general, sports journalism has been subject to criticism for its lack of adherence to ethical standards that typically govern the behavior and practices of news journalism. But Rivals is a unique case within sports journalism and scholars have struggled to locate the platform due to its departure from traditional norms, lack of uniform ethics, and incorporation of features such as message boards in which reporters can also participate and interact with users (Yanity & Edmondson, 2011; Singer, 2015; Bergman & Logan, 2016; Evans & Pitts, 2018; Winemiller, et al., 2020). Rivals itself, however, has displayed a desire to be perceived as a credible media organization, alongside such well-known entities as ESPN and Fox Sports. In fact, the network itself claims, “The team of experts and reporters is considered the best in the industry, whether it is reporting the news or ranking the players” (Rivals, 2016). Due to this lack of clarity in defining Rivals.com and similar organizations, these entities have been strongly critiqued for their practice, ethics, and perceived lack of reporter credibility. Scholars have detailed the motivating factors for why individuals engage with sports media pointing to emotional, cognitive and behavioral reasons that include, among others, the ability to enhance one’s self esteem through supporting a successful team, the opportunity to learn about a team or sport, and the opportunity for social experiences (Thorne & Bruner, 2006; Earnhardt, et al., 2012; Hardin, et. al, 2012; Mudrick & Lupinek, 2015). However, previous research

does not examine why consumers engage with specific sports media organizations, and to what ends.

With that in mind, the purpose of this research to better understand how and why fans interact within Rivals.com's network of websites in order to discern their motivations for engaging with the site and the gratifications obtained through that engagement. Given the tensions that Rivals reporters face, this study also assess how audiences evaluate its reporters in terms of credibility, and how that determines their willingness to subscribe. Findings also instruct journalists and the media organizations that employ them to improve practice and delivery of content through proper engagement with audiences, cultivating relationships between users and the site, and being cognizant of changing perceptions of journalistic standards, such as bias, to remain credible and financially viable. Previous research has examined Rivals.com, its audiences, the network, and its sites, employing a quantitative survey (Hardin, et. al, 2012), as well as qualitative, in-depth interviews (Mudrick & Lupinek, 2015). The former, however, included only one college sports recruiting network team site in its study, while the latter was not clear in its participant selection, which consisted of 15 interviews with fans who subscribed to one of three Rivals.com sites, one Scout.com site, and one 247Sports site. The latter are primary competitors of Rivals.com, though 247Sports absorbed Scout in 2017 (247Sports, 2017). No known research exists that examines how audiences perceive these sites in terms of credibility.

In the current study, the research that is available is augmented by my experience of working in and knowledge of the Rivals.com network. I look back on my time

working at Rivals.com with a clearer view of the environment I created with HokieHaven, what I accomplished, and what I wish I had done more. I found myself in what can only be described as a gray area of journalism, where the stakes are high, and the demands and pull from stakeholders is at times overwhelming. There are not many scenarios where a journalist of any subject socializes with their audience in-person, let alone facilitates such a meeting. And while I had intended to enhance my own credibility, enhance subscribers' experiences, and build HokieHaven's brand through the tailgates, I also unwittingly could have impacted high school student-athletes' decisions of where to attend and play college football. There is no way to determine the economic impact those decisions had, as among the recurring guests was Tim Settle, who played at Virginia Tech from 2016 to 2017 and has played with the NFL's Washington franchise the past three seasons. His decision to play for the Hokies resulted in on-field success and continues in positive notoriety for the university and football team.

This study applies the uses and gratifications approach as a guide to examine what fans seek in college sports media coverage and why they choose Rivals.com over other media options. To do so, qualitative methods are employed, to gain an understanding of individual perceptions and experiences, while a constant comparative method was used to analyze and provide results from in-depth interviews of a specific audience: fans who have subscribed to Rivals.com.

Chapter Two examines the relevant literature associated with this study. It begins with a detail of the work routines of sports journalists, including their position as gatekeepers, a continually changing landscape that has forced them to adapt new tasks,

such as social media, and critiques offered by other journalists and academic scholars. Next, the chapter describes the longstanding symbiotic relationship between media and sport, from when and how it began, to the success each enjoyed from that relationship, and the shift of both, through technological and economic changes. ESPN, long one of the behemoths of sports media, is closely examined to provide context of the power of sport media and the changes the network has chosen and been forced to make to adapt to the aforementioned shift. Competition from legacy media is explored, for background on the abundance of media choices available today, while Rivals.com is introduced and analyzed as a key player in sports media, due to its model, subscriber base, and economic impact of its recruit rankings and ratings. The notion of journalistic credibility is introduced, with an explanation of how the term has been described and utilized, how Rivals has been critiqued using that term, how the network has positioned itself regarding journalism standards, and the call for Rivals and other journalists to shift toward transparency. The theoretical framework of the uses and gratifications approach is explored, with regard to its ability to encompass needs and fulfillment, as well as the concepts of social capital (i.e. access to certain people) and cultural capital (i.e. access to what those people know). The chapter concludes with the study's research questions: 1) How do subscribers to Rivals.com situate Rivals.com within the wider sports media landscape? and 2) How do subscribers to Rivals.com perceive the credibility of the organization's reporters?

Chapter three lays the groundwork for the study's methodological underpinnings, with a summary of the qualitative approach, the researcher's role in the study's process,

and the constructivist framework used to develop the study. This study utilized in-depth, qualitative interviews, which examine the perspectives of 21 users who reported they were current Rivals subscribers or previously subscribers within the past five years. These interviews explored the process in which participants determine credibility, specifically in regard to Rivals. The method in recruiting participants, developing an interview guide, and accounting for saturation is described. Data analysis is then thoroughly explained, including the process of moving from in vivo coding to axial coding, and theoretical coding, all while using the constant comparative method, in an effort to be transparent and ensure rigor.

Chapter four explains the findings from this study, which consisted of five themes and four sub-themes. The first theme, in response to RQ1: *Value as a Function of Social Networks and Credible Information*, points to participants' sought gratification of social networking, information they can trust, and other components of Rivals, such as the rankings of high school football and boys' basketball players and podcasts. Participants especially explained the value they place on podcasts and the ability they have to contribute to the site's message boards, as a way for them to also contribute to the site and add substance to their subscriptions. Four themes were noted in response to RQ2: *Perceived Factual Information Over Time, Visibility, Reputation, and Connectivity*. These themes are each of the metrics participants use to determine credibility, a concept that determines the value they place on reporters, who represent the site they work for. Bias is also acknowledged, in which participants spoke to both their perception and acceptance of the term and how it is used by Rivals reporters.

Chapter five provides a thorough interpretation and discussion of the study's results. There are three primary points that are discussed: *User Relationships Matter*, *Reporter/Audience Engagement Matters*, and *Simultaneous Reporter Bias and Factuality*. The first point argues that users have a sought gratification of some type of relationship with the site they subscribe to, signaling the need for Rivals.com and other online media entities to emphasize not only the information they provide, but also relationships as well. The second point argues that Rivals reporters, along with sharing information and other breaking news, must cultivate relationships with users via message boards and podcasts, a significant aspect of their work routines that I argue has industry-wide implications. In order to remain financially viable, media need to not only produce further multimedia content, such as videos, but produce content that allows users to feel like they can form a bond with the reporters who created it. Finally, the third point made is that it is possible for reporters to be both biased and considered credible. This is a departure from traditional journalistic standards and conceptions but is argued as a consideration for reporters to make in order to reach audiences and satisfy their gratifications, which could then result in increased subscriptions. Practical implications from these findings and interpretations are discussed, as well as limitations and directions for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The current study seeks to explore the perceptions of current and recent subscribers to Rivals.com towards the network, its compilation of team sites, and the reporters who work for these sites, to shed light on why they subscribe, as well as provide more explanation of these sites' success. The purpose of the ensuing literature review is threefold in that it aims to 1) position this study within the current sports media landscape, specifically, the phenomenon of the college sports recruiting industry, as well as 2) trace the conceptual development of subscribers to the uses and gratifications approach, in order to 3) develop a contextualized approach that explains how subscribers perceive Rivals.com and its affiliate sites in terms of issues such as credibility and legitimacy, and provides a snapshot of subscriber wants and needs, in terms of sought and achieved gratifications. This chapter provides an explanation of the sports media landscape, how Rivals.com has been situated within that landscape, and how the uses and gratifications approach serves as an applicable framework for this study. The chapter concludes with a set of proposed research questions.

Credibility

Journalists are held to a number of standards for which they are judged as competent and trustworthy, of which a primary component is credibility (Engelke, et al., 2019). This is based largely on a perception of whether a journalist is fair with sources, provides accurate information, and does not show bias toward the person or subject being covered (Fico, et al., 2004), in addition to the sources from which the information

originated (Carr, et al., 2014). Other factors include the personality of the journalist, how that person delivers the information to the audience (Vraga, et al., 2012), and how the journalist's employer brands itself, as a news source, or something else, such as entertainment (Chan-Olmsted & Cha, 2008). Audiences take these factors into consideration, along with their own personal assessment, to then determine if they perceive a journalist as credible (Carr, et al., 2014), or what is referred to as "the believability of information" (Metzger & Flanagin, 2017, p. 446). The level of perceived credibility a person has towards a journalist or media organization can also signify future behavior. According to Hanitzsch et al. (2018), individuals return to media they perceive as credible and their future actions are based in part on the information that comes from those media sources. In doing so, individuals trust that those who they believe are credible will perform in a suitable manner. These individuals can then assume what these credible media sources report is true.

Consequently, a lack of perceived credibility results in audience distrust, disruption of journalism, and eventually, the rejection of its service by audiences (Broersma, 2013). As Prochazka and Schweiger (2019) explain, audiences that largely do not trust media are less informed and polarizing, or idealistically divided among factions. When a journalist or media organization is perceived as biased toward one side of an issue, audiences report a negative perception of the credibility of the journalist and media organization and any news they published (Fico, et al., 2004). Negative perceptions of credibility can also stem from topics deemed uninteresting and writing that is viewed as poor (Carr, et al., 2014). These perceptions are also referred to as skepticism, which is

illustrated by individuals choosing new sources of information, particularly, a move from mainstream or legacy media to non-mainstream (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). One of the roots of skepticism is a person's perception of how a journalist adheres to journalistic standards (Carr, et al., 2014). In other words, individuals believe journalists and media organizations act a certain way and this perception frames how they think journalists and media organizations will act in their future work.

Though audience trust in media has been tracked since Gallup's polls in the 1970s (Swift, 2016), the distrust of media has accelerated over the past two decades. Researchers have traced this to a country's volatility in its political environment (Hanitzsch, et al., 2018), as well as journalists and organizations with low merit that have been dubbed "fake news" (Vargo, et al., 2017). According to Alcott and Gentzkow (2017), the term refers to news that is presented as factual, but instead has no merit or basis. Use of "fake news" has risen since its use by President Donald Trump in the lead-up to and after his win in the 2016 U.S. election and has been combatted by fact-checking organizations, publicly correcting factual errors, and denouncement by journalists and organizations of those responsible for reporting information with no basis (Vargo, et al., 2017). Audience skepticism and finger-pointing to those who practice and produce "fake news" has been particularly noticeable along a political divide, when those in one particular party do not agree with reported news and label it "fake news" (Gottfried, 2021). Pew Research found that Republicans view news organizations they consider to be mainstream, such as cable television news networks, less credible, while Democrats were the opposite.

Sports Journalist Work Routines

As previous research posits, journalists have long struggled with the notion of credibility (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003; Fico, et al., 2004; Metzger & Flanagin, 2017; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). That struggle has especially persisted with the growth of online media, many of which rely on page views and clicks for advertising revenue and rely on a model of more sensationalized news (Vargo & Amazeen, 2017). But while media organizations covering many topics have ventured this direction, sports journalism has especially been critiqued by other journalists and media scholars. Sports journalism has produced its share of award-winning stories, had positive effects on sports, and resulted in financial growth for both sport and media (McChesney, 1989; Rader, 2004; Vogan, 2017), yet it has been described by a well-known analogy. The sports department at traditional media has been playfully referred to as the *toy department*, due in part to sports journalists' lack of adherence to journalistic norms such as ethics, professionalism, and unbiased reporting (Hardin, et. al, 2009). It also reflects an internal conflict that sports journalists face, to report objectively and impartially, while promoting and advocating for sports organizations and individuals who provide access to information (Rowe, 2007). While some efforts have been made to address this criticism, sports journalists have been unable to shake this moniker, which has distanced them from other journalistic forms, such as politics and international news.

Similar to their journalism counterparts who cover other industries, sports journalists have long held the position of gatekeepers. This is one of media's primary roles, in which journalists and the organizations they work for disseminate events into

messages directed towards audiences (Shoemaker & Voss, 2009). Part of this role includes acting as a mediator between sources, or the people from whom journalists obtain information (Berkowitz, 2009), and the public. Journalists need access to sources to obtain and verify the disseminated information and this access has for years been readily available (Sherwood, et al., 2018). For sports journalists, the necessity to obtain information has created the potential for conflict of interest with sources, often more than their journalist peers in other sectors, such as news and feature writing (Bourgeois, 1995). Sports journalists have juggled the obligation to maintain professional credibility with the need to “develop bonds with their sources of information while establishing and maintaining a social distance” (p. 197), as a result of common interests between journalist and source. Further, the writing of sports journalists has been critiqued as subjective, biased and indistinguishable from fans (English, 2016; Hardin, 2005; Hardin, et. al, 2009; McEnnis, 2013). This violates traditional standards of journalism, which promote objective, non-biased reporting that “ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough. An ethical journalist acts with integrity” (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014).

Professionalism has served as an identifier for sports journalists instead of fans. According to Gisoni (2018), sports journalists dress appropriately, with slacks and collared shirts, do not accept gifts from those they cover, do not show favoritism, and adhere to professional codes of conduct, for example, the Society of Professional Journalism code of ethics (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). As new technology has emerged in a landscape where anyone with an internet connection can surmise about

sports news and sources, sports journalists have struggled with the task of differentiating themselves as credible authorities of information (Lauella, 2014).

Unlike other professions, journalists do not require certifications or licenses to practice. There are, however, organizations which allow sports journalists to further distinguish themselves, such as the United States Basketball Writers Association (USBWA) and the Football Writers Association of America (FWAA). Both require paid annual memberships and issue membership cards to those they consider ‘accredited media’ (United States Basketball Writers Association, 2021). The USBWA also touts at the top of its website, “You’re not really a writer...unless you’re a member of the USBWA.” Professional team media relations departments, as well as university athletics departments issue credentials to those they deem credible media (Suggs, 2016), though that does not apply to digital settings. Online, journalists tout their expertise and skills to legitimize and distinguish themselves over amateurs (Lewis, 2012). Due to the lack of requirements and a governing body to enforce rules, there is particularly the concern of divergence from codes and professional behavior. With the jurisdiction of sports journalism in peril, athletes and teams regularly have used contemporary technology to publish their own breaking news and other stories directly to audiences (Schwalbe, et. al, 2015).

In addition to the competition from citizen journalists, sports journalists have competed with many of the primary sources themselves, who have bypassed legacy media to publish information personally via *The Players’ Tribune*. Launched in 2014 by former New York Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter, *The Players’ Tribune* allows those

involved in sports (i.e. athletes and coaches) to circumvent legacy or independent media and publish first-person articles to the public (The Players' Tribune, 2019). The stories published on the site often have criticized legacy media as misguided and untrustworthy and have been largely one-sided (Schwartz & Vogan, 2017). The authors of these stories often are positioned in a favorable light, while feedback from audiences, through stories or social media, largely has been avoided or made unavailable. Comments are either not responded to, or readers are simply not given the option to comment. In addition to this outlet, athletes and coaches also personally have posted information through social media posts and videos (Browning & Sanderson, 2012), sidestepping journalists. Sports reporters now rarely 'break news,' but are instead relegated to report on the athletes' and coaches' authored stories and social media posts.

No longer is simply reporting on and writing about games enough for sports journalists. In order to survive in the current landscape, sports journalists need to be multi-skilled, to produce content through print, video, photography, audio podcasting, and social media, to participate in what is now an overall digital media convergence (Pederson, 2014). These journalists are expected to display broadcasting proficiencies (Murray, et al., 2011), be well-versed in multimedia skills and internet tools (Veglis & Pomportsis, 2014), and use analytical tools (Boehmer & Lacy, 2014), in addition to writing and reporting about games and other live events.

Nevertheless, the transition from legacy media to digital, which includes the inherent additional job tasks (e.g. social media), has been a challenge for many sports journalists, who have struggled to adjust (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010). Media organizations

often have repackaged traditional material online, instead of diversifying their coverage according to consumer demands (Lowes & Robillard, 2018), and older journalists especially have been slow to adopt these demands and added tasks (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010). As a result, some sports journalists have fallen out of the industry due to burnout from an increasing workload (McGuire & Murray, 2016). The movement towards Web 3.0 (artificial intelligence), however, has necessitated that sports journalists embrace and incorporate technological changes in their work, while maintaining the same professional, high standards, or risk becoming obsolete and replaced (Pederson, 2014).

A tension, however, has long existed for sports journalists between professionalism standards and the need for access. For sports journalists, there is a quandary of sacrificing professionalism in order to obtain source access (Rowe, 2007). Having connections to people and information that others do not, distinguishes sports journalists from amateurs and increases these journalists' value in being able to break news and to produce unique, original information (Wilson, et. al, 2018). It also enables sports journalists to cater to their sources at the expense of standard practices and ethics. As Rowe (2007) points out, this causes pundits to question the legitimacy of these reporters' work. According to McEnnis (2020), sports journalists at legacy media have placed blame on online sports journalists, calling them the "toy department within the toy department." While the online or digital journalists have conceded to a deficiency of reputable norms, values, and practices, however, it seems that those placing blame also have done little to remedy their own shortcomings, which has continued the negative perceptions sports journalism has received as a whole (McEnnis, 2020).

Though there has been more critique than suggestions for improved practice (Wilson, et. al, 2018), some scholars have advocated for ways sports journalists could improve the perception of the industry. Rowe (2007) is a proponent of more investigative, critical reporting and writing to improve the quality of sports journalism. This is in contrast to the blasé nature of sports journalists to do little outside of their daily routines and what Rowe refers to as “a fairly cosy world with limited horizons” (p. 399) that does not move the profession forward. Poole (2009) suggests redefining the mission of the sports journalists and their employers to move past those cushy routines. Instead of simply reporting on the existence of a star player’s injury, for example, Poole recommends providing more depth, nuance, and analysis to divulge not only the injury, but also where the player goes from here, what the team does as a result, and how that effects the rest of the league. McEnnis (2013) points to the necessity of developing trust with not only sources, but readers as well. This would require a balance of both professionalism and access by allowing some transparency, while maintaining confidentiality, all facets that would allow for more perceptions of quality work and credibility. More recently, however, Wilson, et. al (2018) found that while there has been ample critique of sports journalists, there has been a scarcity of ‘best practice’ and other suggestions by scholars of how to improve the industry. Without direction to change their practice, many sports journalists remain stuck in the habits long ago established.

Symbiotic Relationship of Media and Sports

The development of organized sports and media have developed in tandem, and the relationship is often described as symbiotic, in that each benefit from the growth of

the other (McChesney, 1989). The connection began around the last half of the nineteenth century (Helland, 2007), as organized sports and leagues began to take shape. According to Bellamy (2006), sports and mass media both grew during this time as a result of “urbanization, the resultant dislocation and alienation of many people, the rapid movement to a cash economy, the spread of systemized education, and the shift in time perspective to one bound by defined work, sleep, and leisure/personal time” (p. 65).

The growth of sports in media began with the birth of the first newspaper sports department in 1883 by Joseph Pulitzer, publisher of the New York World (McChesney, 1989). But by the 1890s, newspaper sports sections and sports periodicals especially took off. During this time, the number of American sports magazines grew from nine in the 1860s, to 48 by 1890 (Betts, 1974) and sports such as boxing, baseball, and racing claimed the front page of these printed media (McChesney, 1989). Newspapers and magazines also sponsored teams or contests, and promoted them, in the first audience production for sale to advertisers (Jhally, 1984). Sports journalists travelled not only to cover the team from afar (i.e. press boxes), but also with the teams themselves. This afforded the reporters the ability to develop close relationships with the athletes, coaches, and other sports figures they reported on and wrote stories about and “then crafted them into heroes for the masses, using creative literary techniques” (Roessner, 2014, p. 13).

The relationship of media and sport especially flourished in the 1920s, with the advent of radio. According to McChesney (1989), it was in this decade that sport “assumed its modern position as a cornerstone of American culture” (McChesney, 1989, p. 55). This is largely credited to the sale of radio sets in massive numbers to the public

and more sports were broadcast as a form of entertainment (Jhally, 1984). Radio and sport overlapped from the beginning. In their experiments with radio, researchers at the University of Minnesota in 1912 created a station that included broadcasting their accounts of the school's football games (Smith & Smith, 2001). This took place eight years before KDKA in Pittsburgh, often referred to as the first radio station in the United States, was founded, in 1920. Boxing was among the sports most popular on early radio, as it grew due to its use by the US Army in training soldiers (Rader, 2004). The added publicity of radio broadcasts only added to the growing popularity as "attendance figures and gate receipts for boxing matches in the 1920s have never been rivaled" (Owens, 2006, p. 126).

Along with radio, newspaper coverage thrust sports into the American spotlight. Because of this, the 1920s are referred to as "the golden age" of American sports and sportswriters (Owens, 2006). While athletes like Babe Ruth and Red Grange became celebrities, in large part because of the media coverage they received, sports writers such as Grantland Rice and Damon Runyan also received celebrity status for what they wrote (Owens, 2006). Researchers point to the media coverage as a primary reason why teams and universities invested millions of dollars into new stadiums and attendance skyrocketed (McChesney, 1989).

There are numerous reasons why audiences flocked to sports via media coverage. As Beck and Bosshart (2003) wrote, sports in many ways reflect the societies they are a part of. Societal values such as sportsmanship, discipline, fairness, and self-control are displayed in sport, which make them appealing to media outlets, hoping to attract broad

audiences. Media shine the spotlight on those values, by giving grandeur and persona to sports and those associated with it, as media have long had a much greater audience reach than sports organizations do themselves (McChesney, 1989). As Bellamy (2006) notes, the terminology of most sports is simple and understandable, as sportscasters and sportswriters typically use common phrases and descriptions, while sports themselves have objectives simple enough to understand regardless of language. The notions of victory and defeat also create tension and emotions for audiences, as sports do not (at least legally) have predetermined outcomes. No two sporting events are exactly the same, which elicit tension, intrigue, and emotion among audiences.

The success of this relationship for media is exemplified in television viewership. The London 2012 Olympic Games, for instance, drew 219.4 million viewers in the U.S. on NBC, in addition to just under two billion page views online and 159.3 million video streams (Rowe & Hutchins, 2014). For Americans, the Super Bowl has also become one of the most viewed annual events. Super Bowl LIV in 2020 drew 101 million viewers, according to Nielsen data (Nielsen, 2021). The viewership for Super Bowl LV in 2021 dipped slightly to 92 million due to the COVID-19 pandemic, still enough to account for 68 percent of homes in the U.S. with televisions. The cost of a 30-second commercial also rose to a record \$5.4 million.

Due to the symbiotic relationship that has developed, sports organizations long have allowed access, albeit on their own terms. Sports organizations, including professional teams and university athletics departments, grant credentials to reporters they deem credible (Suggs, 2016). These credentials allow access to specific areas of an

event that fans are not allowed, including press seating areas, locker rooms, and press conference areas. In the larger symbiotic relationship, access is one of the most important commodities that sports journalists rely on in their daily writing and reporting (Sherwood, Nicholson, & Marjoribanks, 2017). Journalists who wrote favorable accounts were granted better access, while those who did the opposite risked being shunned by those within the organization, or worse, had their privileges covering the organization revoked (Lowes, 1999). In this control of the narrative, sports organizations have provided journalists access to those involved in sport, through locker room availability, press conferences, and other instances.

The journalists most trusted were given further access, including exclusive tips, quotes, and stories (Daum & Scherer, 2018). For decades, the four primary U.S. professional sports leagues: Major League Baseball (MLB), National Football League (NFL), National Basketball Association (NBA), and National Hockey League (NHL), have held the most favorable position among sports journalists and their editors, who decided on the media coverage given (Lowes, 1999). As a result, collegiate athletics, women's sports, and prep sports (high school-aged and younger) often have taken a backseat in coverage, regardless of city or town (McChesney, 1989). More recently, however, there are indications that trend could be changing. Sherwood, et. al (2017) found examples of the growth of women's sports coverage, stemming from not only the increase in female sportswriters, but also that editors valued their perspectives and opinions. Editors also see the merit, value, and newsworthiness that women's sports have for audiences.

Current Sports Media Landscape: A Sketch

Over the past few decades, there has been a dramatic shift in the symbiotic relationship between sports and media. Due to greater resources by professional sports and leagues, as well as greater access to the Internet and social media, there has been far less dependence on legacy media (i.e. newspaper, radio, television) for promotion among various teams and leagues (Suggs, 2016; Hutchins & Boyle, 2017; Daum & Scherer, 2018). Sports organizations still rely heavily on media for promotion and coverage, but in an effort to exert more control over the narrative broadcast to the public, have provided much of the coverage themselves, through their own television channels (e.g. NBA TV, NFL Network, SEC Network, and Big Ten Network), social media pages, and websites (Daum & Scherer, 2018). These productions elicit much of the same look and quality of legacy media, but have been one-sided towards the team, league, or conference they focus on and typically steers clear of damaging information (Suggs, 2016).

This formula has changed somewhat in recent years. Because league and team websites are seen largely as credible news sources (Whiteside, 2014), these organizations have evolved to become a primary source of information that can control the narrative and news cycle (Sherwood, et. al, 2017). If the organization also covers negative news concerning it through its media channels, it can be more proactive than reactive. As a result, sports journalists have shifted their own practice. According to findings from Perreault and Bell (2020), sports journalists who practice predominantly on a digital medium (i.e. online-only publication,) identify more with the aforementioned team media in that they respond to news, rather than actively pursue it. These digital sports journalists

view team and league media as direct competitors, rather than assistants to their own work.

The rise of league and conference-affiliated television networks, however, is a clear result of the manifestation of the symbiotic relationship between sports and media (Beck & Bosshart, 2003). As a result, league-focused networks allow fans wall-to-wall coverage of the sports and leagues they cover, and intensify fanship (Earnhardt, et al., 2012), a central tenet to fandom (Thorne & Bruner, 2006). The SEC Network, for example, devotes all-day coverage of high school football players who sign a national letter of intent (NLI) on the first day the NCAA allows recruits to sign with players, also known as ‘National Signing Day’ (Bell, et. al, 2019). This includes extended air-time on each SEC football program and their recruiting classes, which provides publicity for those programs, institutions, and student-athletes. An NLI is a voluntary, binding agreement between a student-athlete and a university in which the institution agrees to provide financial aid to the student-athlete in exchange for attending the institution and playing his or her designated sport (National Letter of Intent, 2021). These annual agreements also forbid other athletics programs from further recruiting the student-athlete after the NLI is signed. It is important to note that the SEC Network is owned and produced by ESPN, which manufactures annual college football post-season bowl games, through its ownership and production of the games (Vogan, 2017). The financial clout of non-league affiliated networks, ESPN chief among them, continues to determine who wields the most power in the sports media landscape.

ESPN, with its widespread sports enterprise and assets, has long used the moniker, ‘The Worldwide Leader in Sports’ (Vogan, 2017). The network has grown as a result of the power of sport and vice versa (McChesney, 1989). The Walt Disney Company purchased ESPN in 1996 and operates its own flagship television (i.e. ESPN and ESPN2), in addition to a handful of league or sport-specific television stations (e.g. SEC Network, Longhorn Network, and ACC Network), hundreds of radio stations that air its programming live and in syndication, and exclusively broadcasts and owns and operates 14 annual college football bowl games (ESPN Press Room, 2019). In another display of its power, ESPN paid \$15.2 billion through 2021 for the rights to its NFL broadcast, Monday Night Football (Sandomir, 2011).

ESPN has capitalized on the long-standing symbiotic relationship between sport and media. The network continues to deliver exposure and publicity for various sports and leagues, and in return, is granted preferential treatment by those same sports and leagues (Suggs, 2015). For years, the viewership return backed this up, as ESPN went from 1.3 million subscribers when it launched in 1979, to more than 100 million in 2012 (Vogan, 2017). And while ‘the worldwide leader in sports’ has broadcast nearly every conceivable sport, college football is particularly where it has a stronghold. For the 2018-19 college football season, ESPN broadcast 35 of the 40 bowl games, while it owns and operates 13 of those games (Schrotenboer, 2018).

The network has also had its share of controversy due to its exertion of control over some sports. According to Vogan (2017), the network removed its name from a documentary in collaboration with PBS that dealt with how the NFL has handled the

growing number of concussions suffered by its players as a result of the violent collisions that take place during the games. The New York Times has reported that the NFL pressured ESPN to distance itself from the documentary (Miller & Belson, 2013), though the network has denied such reports. ESPN later made the Peabody Award-winning documentary available on its online and streaming platforms (Vogan, 2017).

Even ESPN, however, has not proven to be immune to the changing media landscape. The network has laid off a considerable number of its workforce as a cost-cutting measure for years, including due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Strauss, 2020). Before that move, ESPN had many of its executives and highest-paid commentators accept salary reductions, in part due to financial losses within the Walt Disney Company and sagging television ratings during the pandemic (Reimer, 2020). Viewing habits have also changed, as teleworking has created more flexible viewing. Fewer people now have a routine that includes watching nightly sporting events, while more have gravitated towards streaming services that offer on-demand programming. Like other media, ESPN now has other media competitors to contend with, in addition to streaming services.

Competition for Legacy Media

The popularity of sports has allowed sport organizations to further feed the demand for information. Team-produced networks, such as the New York Yankees' YES Network, the New York Knicks' MSG, the Toronto Blue Jays' SportsNet, and the Colorado Avalanche's Altitude Sports Network employ broadcasters and reporters who are given exclusive access to behind-the-scenes coverage, but largely report one-sided information, or report it in a more positive light for the team (Scherer & Jackson, 2008).

With access granted more for in-house production, sports journalists from legacy media are afforded fewer opportunities for networking with sources, from players, to coaches and those in front office administration. Partly in response, new media players have emerged and filled the voids in content areas demanded by sports fans (Bellamy, 2006), while legacy media sources continue to hemorrhage financially and lay off employees (Strauss, 2020).

Though media relations, sports communications departments, and the like continue to assist legacy media and act as a liaison between reporter and player or coach, they are now “competing with independent media by producing far more content intended primarily for fans, both on their own web and social media platforms and through the expansion of broadcast agreements with television networks. Sports-communication departments have taken on responsibility for delivering content directly to fans through websites and social media, often competing directly with independent media” (Suggs, 2016, p. 263). When sports organizations have disagreed with how their teams, players, or coaches are written about by media not their own, they have either revoked credentials or publicly denounced these particular media offenders. Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban took it a step further when he said he no longer has a need for Internet sports writers, such as those who work for ESPN.com or Yahoo, and that the mutual interests of legacy media and sports are “no longer aligned” (Cuban, 2011).

Despite the continuing loss of access and availability for legacy media through coverage of professional sports and collegiate athletics, one area in which these media still possess an advantage is through the coverage of prep sports. This includes the

coverage of college football and basketball recruiting, of which Rivals.com and 247Sports.com particularly specialize. National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) rules prohibit colleges and administrators from commenting on athletes until after they have signed letters of intent or enrolled at the school and coaches are limited in the amount of contact they are allowed to have with the athlete (Dronyk-Trosper & Stitzel, 2017). These rules also limit the total amount of contact coaches can have with high school student-athletes in the recruiting process. For example, the NCAA enacts ‘dead periods’ in which coaches are barred from communicating in-person with these student-athletes and their parents, and are also forbidden to watch them or visit their high schools (NCAA, 2021). This, however, allows sports journalists to leverage the rather unfettered access they have with high school student-athletes, in establishing rapport with college coaches (Silva, et al., 2018). Sports journalists need coaches to obtain information about which high school recruits the coaches and college programs are recruiting or have offered scholarships to, and college coaches need the sports journalists for information and promotion of their programs during times when the NCAA enacts dead periods or other recruiting limitations.

Sports journalists with outlets such as Rivals.com have taken advantage of the ease of access to high school student-athletes, perhaps to a fault. These journalists report an overabundance of contact with these minors by various media entities and individuals, from Rivals.com, its competitors, including legacy media, and bloggers (Yanity & Edmondson, 2011; Winemiller, et. al, 2020). Despite high school recruits often breaking news of their recruitments themselves via social media (Niesen, 2019), access to these

athletes has given sports journalists at outlets such as Rivals.com a coveted ‘insider’ role between coaches, fans, and other subscribers (Winemiller, et. al, 2020).

Rivals.com

Like the advent of sports television networks and websites, another outcome of the popularity and growth of sports is college sports recruiting networks, including Rivals.com. Launched in 1998, Rivals.com is a subscription-based website that caters to die-hard sports fans (Bloomberg, 2017). Subscriptions cost \$9.95 per month or \$99.95 annually. Rivals.com has grown substantially since it was purchased by Yahoo! in 2007 for \$100 million (Organ, 2015), after reporting revenue of more than \$22 million and an expected \$35 million in 2007 (Duncan, 2007). It was again acquired, by Verizon, in 2016 (Divine, 2016) as part of a \$4.48 billion deal (Shaban, 2017) and in 2021 by Apollo Global Management as part of a \$5 billion deal that left Verizon with a 10% stake (Gottfried & Fitzgerald, 2021). As of 2014, Rivals.com, under the subsidiary of Oath (Choski & Goel, 2017), delivered content to an estimated 200,000 subscribers (Solomon, 2014). “One of the most prominent resources for recruiting information” (Evans & Pitts, 2018, p. 824), the network specializes in daily coverage of college athletics programs and their recruiting activities. The most notable events covered are football national signing days, which occur on the third Wednesday of December and the first Wednesday of February (Bell, et. al, 2019) and routinely draw millions of page views (Rovell, 2007). Underlying the platform’s national coverage, Rivals.com comprises 160 websites (Jackson, 2013) dedicated to institution-specific (e.g. HokieHaven.com for Virginia Tech,

DeaconsIllustrated.com for Wake Forest University, and VolQuest.com for the University of Tennessee) sports news.

Rivals.com and other Internet-based media outlets covering sports, have provided year-round coverage to fanatical sports followers. During a conversation with John Talman, Rivals.com's Publisher Network Director (personal communication, April 15, 2019), he shared that the website has been marketed to devoted sports fans, many of whom desire more than basic team coverage. By paying for subscriptions, these fanatics gain access to daily team multimedia content, high school recruiting news, and premium message boards (Rivals.com, 2016). As Talman stated:

It's always been and always will be for the fanatic. There's people that want to follow their teams 365 days a year. That's why it works and that's why it still works. It's also community-related. We have subscribers who have been talking with other people (on message boards) for 15 years. It's different than social media, because you're with your own community of people who all follow one thing you can agree on. You've gotten them behind a paywall to where they feel like they're getting information they can't get anywhere else and feel like they're part of something.

The success of Rivals.com has reverberated throughout the sports media landscape. Throughout its existence, the network has become the standard for how high school football and boys' basketball players are graded by talent and potential, and, by extension, how college athletics programs are perceived by fans and other onlookers (Bergman & Logan, 2016; Pitts & Evans, 2016; Evans & Pitts, 2018). Rivals.com and

other online-only entities also have forced college athletics programs and other organizations to re-examine their own media policies, such as credentialing (Suggs, 2016), as these entities have gained a foothold. These online outlets were previously not afforded credentials because they were deemed by media relations organizations as illegitimate and inexperienced. But as Suggs points out, online outlets such as Rivals.com have reported enough credible, factual information over their existence that organizations no longer label them unsuitable for credentials. These online outlets have exploded in number over the past two decades, while legacy media outlets have dwindled in staff and coverage.

When news, or even rumor concerning a high school athlete, college athlete, or college athletics program arises, fans flock to the message boards on Rivals.com to read what other users have posted and to surmise themselves what has happened (Love & Hughey, 2014). These message boards provide feelings of community and belonging, priviness to information, social prestige, and boosted fandom (Mudrick & Lupinek, (2015). Subscribers feel like reporters for the website and certain subscribers who have earned a reputation as “insiders” provide timely information not found elsewhere. These feelings enable a subscriber clientele that has been labeled as loyal (i.e. subscriber for an average of 42 months), active (i.e. average time spent on site of 10 hours per week), and overwhelmingly male (i.e. 96.6%) to use Rivals.com as a one-stop-shop for fandom of the team with which they associate (Hardin, et. al, 2012).

Rivals.com and other college sports recruiting websites are known for their national ranking and rating of players. Rivals.com, for instance, rates players on a scale

of 5.2 to 6.1, which directly corresponds to the network's star-ranking system (Helmholdt, 2019). A 6.1 equates to a five-star player, the highest assigned rating and ranking, 5.8 - 5.9 equals a four-star player, 5.5 - 5.7 equals a three-star player, while 5.2 – 5.4 correlates to a two-star player. According to these rankings, five, four, and three-star players are believed to be power-five conference caliber recruits, while two-star players are believed to be any other school not of that distinction (Helmholdt, 2019). These rankings and ratings, through a consensus among a group of Rivals.com experts or 'analysts,' consist of subjective perceptions made by the analysts more than the actual height and weight of a recruit (Silva, et al., 2018), further invoking critique from researchers, fans, coaches, athletes, parents, and other onlookers. The rankings endowed on recruits are arbitrarily and subjectively calculated by a team of analysts who employ a hierarchy of rankings that Silva, et al. (2018) argue, reaffirm hegemonic ideals. For example, the commodification of a high school football player's worth based on size, speed, aggression, and other subjective qualities such as leadership, not only separate elite players from their peers, but also men from lesser men. The rankings are then promoted by college athletic departments in an effort to market their programs.

The recruiting of high school athletes by college programs, which Rivals.com covers extensively, has become big business. The implications of the network's national rankings include monetary benefits that extend throughout a university's football program and athletics department. According to Bergman and Logan (2020), the addition of a five-star football recruit increases an athletic department revenue by \$650,000, while a four-star recruit increases revenue by \$350,000, and a three-star recruit by \$150,000.

On the field, recruiting success was quantified as 63 to 80% responsible for a football team's achievements (Caro, 2012). Further, college football teams that contain just one player who was a five-star rated recruit, are 4.28 percent more likely to reach the top-tier bowls (Bergman & Logan, 2016), of which the College Football Playoff is at the top. For the 2018-19 season, the CFP paid the conferences of the four participating schools \$6 million apiece, which was then distributed among the member schools based on designated conference rules (Dosh, 2018). Coaches individually also profit from recruiting rankings by Rivals.com and its competitors. In 2019, Purdue University football coach Jeff Brohm, for instance, received a \$45,000 bonus because his program's recruiting class that year was ranked in the top 25 by two of the three agreed-upon services, 247Sports and ESPN (Berkowitz, 2019). For perspective, the University of Georgia reported more spending on recruiting during the fiscal year ending June 2019 than any other university in the country. The university spent \$3.7 million on recruiting expenses, which included travel, and was \$250,000 more than Alabama, the next-highest spender (Dodd, 2020). Travel for recruiting was temporarily eliminated in 2020, however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic that forced coaches to recruit virtually. The NCAA mandated a dead period from the onset of the pandemic through May 31, 2021.

Within the college sports recruiting industry, Rivals.com has attempted to separate itself from its competition. Most notably, the network launched its own football camp circuit in 2012, in which it invited high school recruits to participate in regional camps, with the opportunity to compete at a showcase event held at NFL stadiums (Burke, 2013). The events have been covered exclusively by Rivals.com and its own

reporters. The camps initially were sponsored by Under Armour, in a three-year, seven-figure deal (Burke, 2013), though the specific amount has not been announced publicly. Rivals.com partnered with Adidas in 2017 (Niesen, 2019), and in 2020, began a partnership with Gatorade, Wilson Sporting Goods, Xenith headgear, and others (Yahoo Finance, 2021).

Whereas Rivals.com and similar media were previously considered illegitimate and denied access to college athletics programs, that motive has shifted (Suggs, 2016). This has occurred in part due to the blurring of traditional media and Internet-only platforms such as Rivals.com. One example is the partnership many newspapers have struck with sites such as Rivals.com to run or provide content for team sites within the network (Grayson, 2011). The *Tuscaloosa News*, for instance, was tasked with providing content for the Rivals.com site covering The University of Alabama, TideSports.com. The *Tuscaloosa News* then was afforded the ability to include Rivals.com rankings and other content in its print publication. In an effort to compete with Rivals.com and similar networks, traditional media such as ESPN and *Sports Illustrated* also created team-specific blogs and sites with mixed success (Suggs, 2015). Maven, which acquired publishing rights to *Sports Illustrated* in 2019, launched a new model similar to Rivals.com with hundreds of affiliate sites that focused on coverage of a specific college athletics program and its recruiting of student-athletes (Chan, 2020). But due to the COVID-19 pandemic and dwindling revenue, Maven laid off half of the magazine's workforce, and ceased operations of many of those sites. Other websites, such as *The Athletic*, which launched in 2016, used Rivals.com's subscription-model with affiliate

sites and reporters assigned to cover specific professional teams and college sports programs, albeit without message boards (Biasotti, 2017). *The Athletic* reported one million subscribers, \$60 million in subscription revenue and advertising from its podcasts, and considered itself profitable (Sherman, 2020). The company still endured layoffs of 8% of its staff due to financial hardships from the pandemic.

Journalistic and Rivals.com Credibility

Since their inception, college sports recruiting websites, including Rivals.com, have struggled in the minds of scholars and other journalism professionals as not living up to journalistic standards (Yanity & Edmondson, 2011). In addition to their label as part of the “toy department,” sports reporters have been understood by their news counterparts as too close to their sources, and thus at risk of a conflict of interest (Rowe, 2007). It also stems from sports reporters’ admittance of ‘boosterism,’ or supporting the teams, organizations and schools they cover financially and accepting gifts from them (Hardin, 2005).

That criticism of sports journalists extends internationally. English (2016) notes that in India and Australia, “Sports journalists have often been accused of being cheerleaders or fans, sitting in the press box and turning off their critical eyes” (p. 542). Rowe (2007) likens sports journalism more with entertainment and celebrity media coverage, because of the lack of diverse sources, critical, watchdog pieces, “excessively close integration with the sports industry, a lack of critical ambition, and an unimaginative reliance on socially and politically de-contextualized preview, description, and retrospection regarding sports events” (p. 400).

While sports journalists have been looked down upon by other journalists, college sports recruiting websites have been further outcast. Rivals.com, its member sites, and their writers and reporters have long been accused of favoritism towards the teams they cover (Kian, et al., 2014). And in sports journalism, cozying up to sources is not only frowned upon, but also viewed as making the work of journalists not credible (English, 2016).

According to Yanity and Edmondson (2011), three primary issues impede and separate Rivals.com and recruiting journalists from their sports journalism counterparts: lack of concern for formal journalism training, incessant contact of high school student-athletes, and little to no adherence to a code of ethics. While many Rivals.com writers and reporters possess formal, journalistic training, others do not (Suggs, 2015), lending themselves to criticism from academic scholars and other journalists. In this case, online writers and reporters have been called fans themselves, though in some instances, they were fans or alumni before their current roles (Kian, et al. 2011). Typical practices of these writers and reporters have also come into question. As Yanity and Edmondson (2011) assert, “Under the guise of sports journalism, these fan journalists call the athletes’ homes nightly, publish countless articles year-round on Web sites devoted to the recruiting process, and attempt to break the ultimate story—where the athlete will play college football” (pp. 403-404).

Rivals.com recruiting reporters themselves exhibited mixed reactions in addressing the need for training (Winemiller, et al., 2020), which would also provide instruction on various ethical concerns. Reporters are indifferent towards ethical concerns

and instead blame ‘fan sites,’ social media, and the constant pressure from athletic departments and subscribers for the current landscape of the recruiting industry, as “a necessary evil” (p. 16). That training becomes arguably more important as the subject of Rivals.com’s coverage, student-athletes who are legally minors, becomes younger. The evaluation process by college coaches, and by recruiting websites such as Rivals.com begins as early as middle school, over student-athletes who have not even experienced puberty. Cook (2015) surmised, “It’s ridiculous to expect a rating of a sixth-grader to mean anything, except that a player and his family have officially been sucked into the professionalized maw of big-time recruiting (para 2).”

While journalists are generally expected to write and report unbiasedly (Schudson, 2001), ethical concerns also include inherent bias on the part of recruiting reporters (Winemiller, et al., 2020). This stems from a lack of training, as well as pressure from stakeholders such as coaches and staff members of college athletic departments. Though cozying up to sources is viewed as making the work of sports journalists not credible, recruiting reporters have deemed it necessary to obtain the information their subscribers clamor for and also part of the “increasingly entrepreneurial positions” they now also maintain (Winemiller, et al., 2020, p. 17).

It is apparent from the ‘about us’ page on the home page of Rivals.com, that the network seeks to be viewed as reputable. It calls its reporters and those who work for the network, “the best in the industry” and attempts to substantiate this with the statement: “Rivals is frequently sourced in major daily newspapers across the country and appears regularly on ESPN, Fox Sports, and other national and regional sports programming”

(Rivals, 2016). Those who work for Rivals.com also stress the importance of unbiased reporting and journalistic integrity in their work, so as to remain viable, though they've struggled to do so (Winemiller, et al., 2020).

For the network itself, it achieved the perception of a “legitimate business” with the advent of its Five-Star Challenge Camps (Burke, 2013). These camps, in which coverage is exclusive to those who work within Rivals.com, feature more than 100 of whom the network considers to be the top high school football players in the country who are seniors and juniors. This creates a gatekeeper role for recruiting journalists that signifies their importance (Winemiller, et al., 2020), somewhat akin to the role journalists long have had in disseminating information that is then reported to an audience (Schwalbe, et al., 2015). Still, criticism has arisen from an inherent conflict of interest in which student-athletes who attend the camps are given preferential treatment in the rankings over those who do not (Winemiller, et al., 2020). This, however, has been accepted as part the aforementioned “necessary evil” and of the business model Rivals and its competitors have created in which they set agenda with their rankings and interpretations of student-athletes, then cover the landscape that results from those rankings and interpretations.

Though Rivals.com's rankings directly translate to on-field success and increased revenue, the secret to success is somewhat of a dilemma, as winning tradition correlates most with both recruiting and on-field success (Hill & Qu, 2019). In order to win, athletic programs must recruit well, which is determined most by a winning tradition. And programs that have a previous history of winning are more likely to win in the future. For

those who do not have a history of winning and for those who seek to continue a winning tradition, the most effective approach is to have recruiting success (Caro, 2012). That can result in coaches, athletic administrators, boosters, and other stakeholders pressuring those associated with Rivals.com to cast their recruiting additions in a positive light (Winemiller, et al., 2020).

In sum, Rivals.com, its team sites and writers, as well as its competitors, have struggled to find an identity with regards to journalistic standards. Niesen (2019) describes the conundrum as “Many Rivals and 247 writers believe they’re able to tap into fans’ passion in a way the local newspaper’s beat writer can’t because most sites fall somewhere between traditional, objective journalism and fan service. The most successful sites have employees who hold themselves to the same standards as newspaper writers, lamenting the selfies some recruiting analysts post with the teenagers they’re covering.”

In part due to stakeholder pressure, Rivals.com long has been criticized for lack of transparency in its rankings process, in addition to its reporting (Yanity & Edmondson, 2011). That could be changing at least somewhat, in regard to how recruiting reporters interact with audiences. Those reporters who work for Rivals.com recently said they have allowed their subscribers to become more of a part of the news process, including asking questions that are, in turn, asked to coaches and other sources (Niesen, 2019). This also reflects a trend away from some long-held journalistic notions, towards more transparency and openness in stance.

Shift to journalistic transparency

Transparency, or “making public the traditionally private factors that influence the creation of news” (Allen, 2008, p. 323), has been inserted as a new journalistic norm (Bennett, 2014; Deuze, 2005; Phillips, 2010). This is in part due to the influx of online sources, many of which are increasingly inaccurate (Vargo, et al., 2017). Advocates have also argued that transparency aids in gaining and maintaining public trust (Craft & Heim, 2009), establishing credibility (Coddington, 2014), and invites the public to see the news-making process (Diakopoulos & Koliska, 2017). They view transparency as a remedy for the struggles of news media in the recent past. Rainie and Perrin (2019) report for Pew Research that 61 percent of Americans believe news media intentionally ignore stories of importance. One in 10 surveyed by Pew believe the news media focus on sensational and divisive topics and are in large part to blame for a growing, general distrust that Americans have of their country and fellow Americans. Transparency has been lobbied for by researchers for its ability to increase sincerity, fact-checking, and accuracy in journalism (Phillips, 2010). It especially has been adopted by bloggers as an ethical practice (Singer, 2007). Still, because of the tendency for bloggers and other online sources to spread news cannibalization (i.e. unattributed reporting) (Phillips, 2010), many journalists have dismissed transparency as increasing criticism rather than public understanding (Allen, 2008).

Many who took part in the research by Rainie and Perrin (2019) believe the news media are biased in their reporting, depicting only certain people as trustworthy, and publishing misinformation. Journalistic transparency could be one solution to fixing these

public perceptions. Largely through social media, journalists have adopted interaction with audiences (Molyneux, et al., 2018), though journalist motive in doing so includes enhancing their celebrity appeal (Olausson, 2018), establishing expertise in their field (Pirolli, 2017), and impressing future employers (Carpenter, et al., 2017).

Research has shown that audiences are overwhelmed with the choices they have, but also unsure of what they need to know, where to go for news, and who they can believe and trust (Coleman, 2012). Cases in the media of poor ethical standards, plagiarism, distortion, and inaccuracies also have fueled audience perception of an untrustworthy news media (Broersma, 2013; Fisher, 2016). But while critique of sports journalism (Rivals included) has been widely examined, little research has taken into account not only why individuals use sports media, college sports recruiting websites, specifically, but also what gratifications these people seek and how they view conduct deemed as troubling by many scholars. This study will do so by employing a uses and gratifications approach, to examine a variety of individual perceptions and experiences.

Uses and Gratifications

Katz (1959) was among the first scholars to question communications research to that point. He asked, not ‘what does media do to audiences?’ but “What do audiences do to and with media?” (p. 2). This laid the foundation for what would become the Uses and Gratifications approach. Until this point in time, the predominant mode of thinking by researchers assumed that audiences were passive and absorbed information like a sponge, including the hypodermic needle model or ‘magic bullet theory’ (Lasswell, 1938). This was the result of research on what German Nazis accomplished with media propaganda

before and during World War II. The hypodermic needle model proposes that media figuratively shoot information directly into the minds of consumers, who are then directly affected by it. Katz himself, just two years earlier, proposed the two-step flow of communication, which suggested that audiences were influenced by opinion leaders, who disseminated information they received from media (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1958). To this point, gratifications studies examined what people received from consuming media (Herzog, 1942; Berelson, 1949), but few, if any, delved into why (uses) people consumed media and each study assumed passive audiences that had no control over media consumption.

The basic tenets of the Uses and Gratifications approach give credence to more powerful audiences and the influence of the choices they make. There are five basic assumptions of Uses and Gratifications: a) audiences are active, b) audiences have the ability to choose which media they wish to consume, c) media compete with each other and other sources for consumption by audiences, d) individuals are self-sufficient to report the needs and gratifications they seek and obtain, and e) researchers should set aside pre-conceived notions about the needs and gratifications people have until individual motives are thoroughly studied (Katz, et al., 1973).

The basic framework leads to the importance for researchers to consider individual differences and individual behaviors of audiences in their media consumption. According to McQuail, et al. (1972), audiences choose the media they do based on a) ability to increase knowledge, b) personal identity, c) social identity, d) interactions it provides, and e) as a form of escape or diversion. In other words, people want to feel like

they have learned something from media, to create or maintain their personas, to socialize with others and form relationships based on media they have consumed, and they want to feel like they are getting away from the monotony of everyday lives.

In examining the gratifications that audiences obtain, Katz, et al. (1973) found 35 gratifications and placed them into five groups: a) affective, b) cognitive, c) personal integrative, d) social integrative, and e) tension. Yet there is a difference between the gratifications people hope to gain from media consumption and what they actually obtain. Palmgreen, et al. (1985) posited that the gratifications people seek from media are not necessarily indicators of what they receive, which leads an individual to decide whether he or she will continue to use a specific type of media and helps explain which media are effective and why. Such is the case with television shows, for instance, as people have expectations for what they will see and what needs will be met from consumption. If those needs are not met, it will lead to poor show ratings, and ultimately, negative consequences, such as cancellation of the show (Webster & Wakshlag, 1983).

Lin (1999) provided an update of the primary reasons people consume media to include: a) entertainment (seeking fun), b) surveillance (to know what is going on in the world), c) information (learning something insightful or useful), d) diversion (turning attention away from reality of media), e) escape (getting away from tasks or problems), f) social interaction (communicating with other people), g) parasocial interaction (one-way communication to media personas), h) identity (ideologies or people to associate with), i) pass time (boredom and way to use time), and j) companionship (combatting loneliness).

Rubin (2009) provided an update of the original five assumptions that accompany a Uses

and Gratifications approach to posit that: a) audiences are somewhat active and have the ability to choose which media they wish to consume and how they wish to consume it, b) communication behavior is motivated and purposeful, c) there are many societal and personal factors that help dictate what gratifications people seek what they obtain, such as race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, level of education, etc., d) media compete for consumption with other media and other sources, and e) individuals are more influential than media in terms of effects processes. Like Katz, et al. (1973), the update from Rubin assumes that audiences are active, have the ability to choose media to consume and how to do so, that media compete, and that a person is in a democratic society and has the ability to choose media freely.

Previous literature has called for conceptual and methodological changes in how uses and gratifications studies are conducted (Rubin, 2009; Ruggiero, 2000) as a result of the effects of evolving technologies. Lin (1996) for instance, suggested that the Internet could have a significant impact on what people want and has created new needs and desires that did not previously exist. Rubin (2009) asserted that “changes in technology alter how we communicate” (p. 155) and uses and gratifications studies should reflect those changes by allowing for individual reflections about technology use. Ruggiero (2000) posited that, “we must also be prepared to expand our current theoretical models of U&G to include concepts such as interactivity, demassification, hypertextuality, asynchronicity, and interpersonal aspects of mediated communication” (p. 29), which are not addressed in many previous studies that account for technological advances. Stafford, et al. (2004) noted that online media can have their own social environments, because

much of what an individual can do offline, can be done online and there is often a merging or overlap of the two. For instance, a person can earn a college degree online, become an ordained minister in many states online, shop, and date other people.

Conceptualization of gratifications has grown out of research examining other studies of older media, in that previously developed scales have continuously been applied to new studies. Sundar and Limperos (2013) challenge the idea that all gratifications are born out of innate need and that advances in media technology can shape user needs. They reason that there is a possibility that new types of media (such as Rivals.com) create new needs, which people then attempt to gratify and that many uses and gratifications studies simply use previously existing scales that do not account for how changes in technology over time affect individuals, before making generalizations. This is not a recent critique, as previous scholars (Lichtenstein & Rosenfeld, 1983; Rubin, 1981; Rubin, 1993; Ruggiero, 2000) have argued that social and environmental influences, such as emerging technologies, have not been considered in many studies that claim to employ a uses and gratifications approach. According to Sundar and Limperos (2013), qualitative methods are first needed in order to understand the factors that shape an individual's gratifications. Sought gratifications from media not obtained by users (Palmgreen, et al., 1985) could at least partially explain why technologies evolve in the first place.

There are several reasons that individual experiences and perceptions of media are important. One is that individual interpretation of media messages could be completely different from their intended interpretation by the sender (Stevenson, 1997). Further,

research of online media should examine individual behaviors and opinions because users often communicate and act online in different ways compared to face-to-face or telephone interactions (Dicken-Garcia, 1998). In order to understand what gratifications users seek and obtain, it is then necessary to examine how they construct those desires.

One particular piece of qualitative work, similar to the current research, has taken the uses and gratifications perspective into account. With an approach in the same realm as the current research, Mudrick and Lupinek (2015) used 15 interviews with college sports recruiting website subscribers of three networks, including Rivals.com, to conclude that social identity elements define users' decisions to consume the websites. They found that feelings of community, in addition to fans' interest in college sports recruiting as an extension of their fandom were major factors in fans' decision to subscribe to Rivals. Participants in the study sought high school student-athletes whom they believed would not only make their preferred team better, but also their university as well, by exemplifying positive traits such as demonstrating a high regard for academics per a student's grade-point-average.

Social Capital

Part of one's social identity involves connections (including those perceived) among members of a community, a concept known as social capital (Lesser, 2009). The concept of social capital is comprised of three components: the nature of members' relationships, the dynamic interactions among members of the network, and the shared commonalities of members (e.g. language and context). Relationships consist of both the direct connections individuals have with each other (i.e. strong and weak relationships)

and the position the individuals are in within the network (Sandefur & Laumann, 1998). Strong relationships occur with family members, close friends, and close co-workers and knowledge is easily passed among individuals because they share common bonds, context, and trust, while weak relationships take place among friends of friends and other individuals with whom people are more loosely associated. Strong or successful ties are the result of intimacy, level of emotional intensity, time devoted, and services reciprocated within the individuals that make up a relationship (Granovetter, 1973). According to Granovetter, however, it is these weak or loose connections that are most useful in obtaining new sources of information, because those whom people are closest to often know the same information, while new or loose acquaintances provide information from outside of that network. These weak ties in many ways determine the amount of social capital a person has, as many associations with individuals make for a diverse network capable of generating information, as opposed to a small, close-knit network with like-minded individuals.

The larger the network is, the more likely it is to have weak ties (Eveland, et al., 2013). Weak ties are also useful in obtaining a more accurate sense of popular opinion, as the result of exposure to more diverse opinions (Sohn & Geidner, 2016). Rather than a closed, idiosyncratic viewpoint, having an array of weak ties allows one to better realize majority opinion. In the past two decades, however, more researchers have posited that a combination of weak and strong ties is needed for people to be more influential (Burt, 2005; Eveland, et al., 2013; Diehl, et al., 2016). According to Eveland, et al. (2013), strong ties are needed for information to move efficiently, while weak ties are necessary

for a person to expand their knowledge. If a person has only weak ties, however, the level of trust and contact are low, which would result in little social influence.

Social capital has been used widely by businesses and organizations to gauge the success of its networks and known information (Sandefur & Laumann, 1998; Burt, 2005; Lesser, 2009; Chilenski & Summers, 2016). It is viewed as a property of both individuals and groups and among the outcomes, has been used to assess a variety of interactions, from the belonging and significance a person feels (House, et al., 1988), to a person's mental health, specifically anxiety and depression, that correlated with negative or low levels of social capital (Riumallo-Herr et al., 2014). In journalistic research, social capital has been used to illustrate the need journalists have to develop and maintain sources, even as technology redefines the industry (Perreault & Ferrucci, 2020). Without social capital, journalists could not obtain the information they need to then disseminate what they have acquired to their audiences and likely would not be employed long. Social capital also has been employed to show journalists' branding and promotion via social media, as many of them ask other users to send them story ideas or tips (Hanusch & Bruns, 2017), thus expanding their networks in order to obtain more information.

Specifically examining the uses and gratifications approach, social capital particularly has been used to show the relationships people seek and obtain via social media, for example, the amount of knowledge acquired playing a large role in measuring success (Phua, et al., 2017). Twitter gave the perception of more acquired relationships or social capital due to a variety of users (i.e. celebrities, politicians, journalists, etc.) than its competitors, Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat. In examining the effects of social

capital and uses and gratifications on cinema attendance, Tefertiller, et al., (2020) found that post-viewing was most affected, as individuals reported via survey that they felt more compelled to post about their experience at a theater on social media than to watch a movie in a theater because of what they saw on social media. The authors surmise this is in part due to the perceived social capital sought and acquired from other social media users. Individuals believed others would perceive them as more knowledgeable if they saw a movie in a theater and posted about it. Finally, both social capital and the uses and gratifications approach revealed that people pay for local online news organizations more when journalists were visible in the community and engaged with them via social media (Goyanes, 2020). Participants also reported they were more likely to subscribe when they had a fear of missing out (i.e. FoMO) on information in their community, which helped them feel as if they belonged more to their community.

Journalistic Cultural Capital

While social capital refers to the relationships and networking that people acquire, cultural capital refers to the assets people possess in a society in order to enhance their mobility. While there is no consensus on use of the term, the generic understanding of cultural capital is that it is a cultural trait, such as the perception of authority a person has towards another with an award or degree (Davies & Rizk, 2018). While a degree provides capital towards attaining a job or entering into a profession, it also provides the person who has the degree perceptions of knowledge and experience. Cultural capital especially was noted by Bourdieu (2005), who asserted that education, which encompassed knowledge and skills, provided an advantage in determining societal status and power.

According to Bourdieu, there are three types of cultural capital: embodied cultural capital, which is the knowledge people acquire through socialization, objectified cultural capital, which is something a person creates that is then financially sold, and institutionalized cultural capital, which is the formalized acceptance of a person's academic and professional credentials typically from an organization.

According to Siapera and Spyridou (2012), in journalism this consists of implied and skills-based knowledge (embodied cultural capital), produced knowledge or that which is printed, published, or viewed by others (objectified cultural capital), and educational knowledge or accrued through experience, training, and school (institutional cultural capital). In terms of journalistic work, cultural capital encompasses valued competencies in the field, such as being recognized for good work (Perrault & Ferrucci, 2020). An example is the annual awarding of the Pulitzer Prize, which in journalism is given by Columbia University to journalists whose work the prize board considers to be exceptional in more than a dozen categories. Some cultural capital is easy to gauge, as a journalist's articles that are printed in a newspaper are tangible and objectified (Siapera & Spyridou, 2012). For online work there can be less of a barometer, as there are more technical skills involved, such as being skilled in various software that is needed to produce work, but that is not seen in the final product.

According to Perrault and Bell (2020), cultural capital is a key concept accrued by digital sports journalists, albeit in a different manner than those in legacy media roles, such as newspaper and broadcast. In other words, digital sports journalists reported that rather than breaking news or creating news, they monitor what sports figures post via

social media, say on broadcasts and podcasts, and what other journalists report, then react to that information. The cultural capital for these journalists is dependent on the speed in which they grasp the information, then disseminate it to their audiences and positions them more with the practice of team media. In some ways, the roles of these sports journalists and team media have reversed, as team media in many instances have exclusivity in disseminating news within the team or organization (Daum & Scherer, 2018).

Summary and Research Questions

In summary, this chapter provides a synopsis of the theoretical and conceptual foundation for this dissertation. For decades, there has been a mutually beneficial, or symbiotic relationship, that has cultivated between sport and media. Both have seen points of exponential growth as a result. On a micro level, the growth of college athletics has contributed to the rise of the Rivals.com and its member sites, while the network itself has factored into the growth of college sports. These sites also exemplify the tension that exists for many sports journalists, between professionalism and access, the juggling of adhering to journalistic norms at the expense of gaining access to sources who possess information, and catering to these sources in order to be the first to obtain information, at the expense of journalistic credibility. And as the long-standing symbiotic relationship has fractured, forcing sports journalists to adapt, digital entities such as Rivals.com have held steady and continue to wield considerable influence in college athletics.

Previous research has examined facets of Rivals.com, including its reporting methods and the perceptions of its reporters in terms of ethics and objectivity. This dissertation seeks to advance these studies, to inform future practice by way of the audiences that determine the financial fate of media with their subscriptions. To that end, I will incorporate the Uses and Gratifications approach to make sense of audience perceptions of journalistic notions, such as credibility. This will provide a snapshot of how and why subscribers use Rivals.com and how their needs and gratifications are met, which ultimately determines their decision to subscribe. To that end, I will advance two research questions grounded in the above literature:

RQ1: What do subscribers to Rivals.com value about the site?

RQ2: How do subscribers to Rivals.com perceive the credibility of the organization's reporters?

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methodology

To address the posed research questions from the preceding chapter, this study employs a qualitative methodological approach. This consists of in-depth interviews to explore how current and recent subscribers to Rivals.com utilized the website and their motivations underlying their decisions to subscribe, based in part by their perception of team sites and reporters within the Rivals.com network, as well as the credibility of those reporters. Data collection and data analysis procedures include a set of ontological and epistemological assumptions. These will be summarized in the following sections.

Guiding Assumptions

The qualitative turn is marked by assumptions about reality that depart from positivism and postpositivism. The former assumes an “actual, verifiable nature... That reality is a singular, *a priori*, and objective state of existence. It occurs independently of our efforts to know it” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017, p. 7). Researchers have dissented from the positivist and postpositivist frameworks, in favor of more ‘natural’ settings, or away from laboratory or manipulated settings because of the idea that ‘meaning’ or ‘reality’ is socially constructed. This allows the researcher to understand individual processes and logic that help people define and value something. In this case, I am not assuming there is an objective measure of credibility or definition of how people view Rivals.com reporters and the sites they work for. Rather, using a qualitative lens allows me to assess the shared reality of individual subscribers and how they define concepts such as credibility and

how they relate that to Rivals.com reporters and the team sites they work for. Given this fundamental assumption, qualitative researchers prioritize studying the interpretation of reality and meaning, and especially note, “understanding cannot be separated from context” (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004, p. 123). It is through qualitative research that researchers can understand human behavior and interaction, including the complexity of both (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004).

This research is grounded in the sociocultural tradition, an ontological position that examines the roles and rituals of people on a micro and macro level (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Specifically, it aligns with symbolic interactionism, or the formation of individuality and social community through personal identities and communication (Craig & Muller, 2007). The research questions sought by this study, for instance, each acknowledge perceptions on a wide scope and on a personal level. Participants were asked to place Rivals.com in the sports media spectrum and compare the network to other forms of sports media. This was accomplished directly through questions asking them to correlate Rivals.com with its competitors, such as 247Sports.com and more broad entities such as ESPN. Participants also indirectly were asked to do so, by asking them to prioritize from where they receive information on their favorite college athletics programs. Research questions also probed for perceptions of how the participants placed themselves within the network, specifically the team sites they currently or recently subscribed to. For example, message boards constitute a significant portion of a subscription because of the array of features they provide, such as a place to debate, achieve status, and even buy and sell tickets.

Given that this study aims to investigate perceptions of Rivals.com content and the related meaning-making process by which individuals make sense of, and evaluate that content, a qualitative approach best addresses the goals of the current study and is where I locate myself ontologically and epistemologically. Instead of predicting the conditions by which a social phenomenon may occur as quantitative research addresses, qualitative research answers how it occurs (Berg & Lune, 2012), by giving credence to individual meaning-making.

In order to conduct research, it is necessary for the researcher(s) to first position themselves according to ontology, the nature of reality (Yilmaz, 2013), or what is real (Baptiste, 2001). A qualitative position acknowledges reality as being constructed by the individuals who take part in the research (Creswell, 1994). “Thus, multiple realities exist in any given situation: the researcher, those individuals being investigated, and the reader or audience interpreting a study” (pp. 5-6). Realities develop over time, as people make sense of what they encounter and determine the best response (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). This is plural because of the perceptions that can exist as a result of activities people are involved in. For instance, within Rivals.com, because there are many facets within the site, individuals might have a perception or reality of a message board, how reporters write about the teams they cover, and how they talk about high school football recruits. The qualitative paradigm, then, provides the best fit, because it assumes that “reality is subjective and multiple, as seen by participants in the study” (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 316).

Based on ontological assumptions, the researcher(s) also positions their research by epistemology, how they know the world, and their relationship with the known

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). According to Baptiste (2001), “Epistemology deals with the nature, sources and processes of knowledge and knowing” (p. 8). This is how the researcher determines the methods that will be used for research. Specifically, I will examine the realities that Twitter users have developed through their lived experiences and communication with others, which is symbolically communicated for others to interpret (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Methodologically, qualitative research employs field work, such as ethnography, observation, and interviews. This is because, “since we can only enter another person’s world through communication, we depend on ethnographic dialogue to create a world of shared intersubjectivity and to reach an understanding of the differences between the two worlds” (Tedlock, 1991, p. 70). Ethnographic dialogue refers to the ability of the researcher to become part of the research, in order to understand the point of view of the participants. Interviews in many ways are a dialogue, or conversation between researcher and participant.

Researcher as Data Collection Instrument

Not only does qualitative research celebrate individual perspectives and experiences, the fundamental assumptions of a socially constituted reality implies that the points of view, experiences, and roles of the researcher should be acknowledged as playing a role in the production of knowledge (Tracy, 2013). It is imperative for a researcher to be clear about their assumptions because it is one of what Meyrick (2006) refers to as the ‘core principles of quality:’ transparency and systematicity. The former refers to honesty and openness about the research process and includes providing proper citations and disclosure and documentation of activities (Tracy, 2010). The latter refers to

description and justification of data collection and the analytics process (Meyrick, 2006). Each of these terms provide trustworthiness and guard against error.

It is also important to acknowledge, through self-reflexivity or self-as-instrument (Tracy, 2010), my own experience, as a Rivals.com publisher and journalist has greatly influenced this study. This experience is valid because it allows me to be honest, authentic, and transparent with how I know about aspects of Rivals.com, such as message board communities, that those who have not had my experience, would not know. At the same time, it is important, when asking participants about aspects I am personally familiar with, to allow for their own experiences. For instance, I could be familiar with one aspect from my time as a publisher, but hear from participants that it is a result of something I did not realize. It is important to note, as well, that in acquiring participants through Twitter, these interviewees were able to access my own Twitter account, which displays my affiliation with Rivals.com. Multiple participants referenced my connection during interviews, a nod to Chesebro and Borisoff (2007), who contended that in qualitative research, it is common for the researcher to be perceived as a participant themselves. It is largely because of this experience that I understand the value of audience perceptions, which allows me to incorporate my knowledge into the interviews (Baptiste, 2001). This includes knowing how to ask questions and when to clarify participant answers. Qualitative research takes into account context interwoven with theoretical and empirical works, the immersion of researchers in what is being examined, and is practical in nature (Tracy, 2013).

Constructivist Framework

This research will employ underpinnings of interpretivism as well as constructivism, based on my ontology and epistemology. Interpretivism is the ontological paradigm, while constructivism is the epistemological route taken in this study.

Interpretivism gives way to the constructivist standpoint, which views reality as forming from “the meaning-making/sense-making/attributional activities that shape action (or inaction)” (Lincoln & Guba, 2011, p. 167). Constructivism was formed by Jean Piaget, of which the key concept is “what we call knowledge does not and cannot have the purpose of producing representations of an independent reality, but instead has an adaptive function” (Von Glasersfeld, 2013). People ‘adapt’ to their environment and learn from it by internalizing and reconstructing their external realities (Doolittle & Camp, 1999).

Mental constructs, or how a person defines and associates something, are formed based on experiences and observations. Individuals ‘construct’ knowledge from their previous experiences, which are informed by social and cultural environments (Piaget, 1971; Rawls, 1980; Duffy & Jonassen, 1992; Fox, 2001). Constructivism is also grounded in the notion that individuals create knowledge and meaning through social interaction (Lincoln & Guba, 2011). According to Piaget (1971), when a person is challenged in their thinking, it causes a state of internal imbalance that is only balanced when that person alters their thinking. Often used in education, constructivism is an approach to gauge a child’s level of understanding, how that grows and changes over time, and how the child can put that understanding into practice (Mvududu & Thiel-Burgess, 2012).

The same mindset applies to the current research. And in order to make sense of this consensus reality among individuals, epistemologically, it is necessary to draw from qualitative methodology to understand the process by which Twitter users make sense of Rivals.com content. In particular, I am interested in how individuals perceive journalistic practice of credibility, which includes objectivity and subjectivity by Rivals.com sites and how those perceptions effect individuals' willingness to subscribe to these sites.

Method

One of the key concepts of this study is that of credibility, long a tenet of journalism (Schudson, 2001), but deployed in inconsistent ways by sports journalists (Hardin, et al., 2009). Credibility, however, is a concept that is developed over time. It takes journalists time to show that they adhere to codes and ethics (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014), a process that also develops, for instance, with Rivals.com subscribers. Therefore, to understand the process by which participants develop perspectives on what it means for Rivals.com and its reporters to be credible, I will employ qualitative methodology, specifically in-depth interviews with current and recent subscribers.

In-depth interviews are essentially a conversation between the interviewer (researcher) and the interviewee, in which they both have mutual interests, or at least interests that pertain to what the researcher intends to examine (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). The interviewer seeks to understand the experiences and opinions of a person or group and may enter the discussion with certain questions to be answered, but generally uses a semi-structured, or unstructured technique in asking questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The term ‘interview’ literally means a view of something that is developed between people, it is “a social process, and what emerge from that process is a richly expressive *inter-view* that neither person could have produced alone” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017, p. 220). Interviews are necessary to investigate individual perceptions and the ongoing social processes that underpin the development of those perceptions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The goal of interviews, then, is to deploy them in a way that allows for an assessment of the meaning interviewees have constructed about latent concepts, such as objectivity and transparency, and the process by which the interviewees construct, understand, and share that meaning. Because they provide access to an individual’s lived experience, interviews are an appropriate tool for answering the research questions in this study.

In-depth, one-on-one interviews were used in this study to examine multiple perspectives towards a process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), in this case how users make sense of credibility in Rivals.com content. The goals of these interviews are “1) to clarify the meanings of common concepts and opinions, 2) to distinguish the decisive elements of an expressed opinion, 3) to determine what influenced a person to form an opinion or to act in a certain way, 4) to classify complex attitude patterns, and 5) to understand the interpretations that people attribute to their motivations to act” (p. 229). Concepts and opinions relevant and sought through these interviews include thoughts of what constitutes ‘good journalism,’ whether or not websites such as Rivals.com belong in the same category as legacy media, and the value of the journalistic notion of credibility.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) define in-depth, long interviews in two categories: 1) topical; and 2) cultural. Topical interviews help the researcher access “specific facts, descriptions of events, as well as direct experience with a given social phenomenon, and are valued for their descriptive nature and answering of questions related to what, when, why, or “with what consequence” (p. 32). Cultural interviews are designed around seeking an understanding of “the norms, rules, and values that underlie people’s behavior, their sense of ethics, and/or traditions” (p. 31). Cultural interviews are focused on detecting the understandings, values, and expectations of people with common interests (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The type of interviews conducted in this study will predominantly be cultural because I will use them as a way to understand the “terms, phrases, behaviors, or choices that reflect the norms and values” (p. 33) of the participants. The cultural information sought in this study is the meaning-making process of how individuals perceive Rivals.com sites, including why they follow the sites on Twitter, why they do or do not subscribe, and how their perceptions of objectivity and transparency determine those decisions. By taking an approach grounded in the tradition of Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) notion of a cultural interview, participants will be able to answer questions based on their own knowledge, and provide insight into the process by which Twitter users make sense of their experiences using Rivals.com.

There is a long tradition of interviews in sports studies and communication and sports research and the three following examples illustrate their value as a method in sports communication research. Kaufman and Wolff (2010), for instance, sought to understand why individual athletes might use their sport as a platform to challenge

political and social injustice. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 21 athletes who have publicly done just that. By using the interview method, the researchers illuminated the process by which athletes come to see themselves as activists. In particular, one student-athlete interviewed, explained the process in which he understood social consciousness through multiple meetings with teammates that helped him grasp instances in which they experienced racism. One of those meetings featured former Olympian John Carlos, who is widely known for raising his black-gloved fist on the medal podium at the 1968 Olympics to protest social injustice. This experience also helped the student-athlete recognize the platform he had as an athlete and what it meant to actively pursue social change. For the researchers, they now had an understanding of one particular instance of student-athlete activism and along with the other 20 interviews, could draw themes for why student-athletes choose to be activists.

To understand the ways in which individuals adapt to technological changes in the sports media workplace, Gibbs and Haynes (2013) interviewed 18 media relations professionals, querying them about how Twitter has changed their daily routines and practice. They used a phenomenological approach and semi-structured long interviews to identify the participants' lived experiences with Twitter and the ways in which work routines have shifted to accommodate the then-new technology. Because Twitter was so new, the researchers did not know much about the social media platform, including if and how sports practitioners incorporated it in their work. Multiple participants shared that because of Twitter, they now viewed media outlets such as newspapers and broadcasters as competitors, were forced to learn how to engage efficiently and directly with fans, and

forced the breakdown of hierarchical organizational roles because those within the organization then could voice their thoughts and opinions in a way not previously possible. In the time since this publication, these perceptions have become more of the norm. As discussed in chapter two, many sports organizations have produced in-house media coverage, interacted regularly with fans, and restructured their own roles (from media relations to strategic communications) in large part due to the growth of social media. These interviews, which sought the lived experiences of participants, shed light on these changes.

Mudrick and Lupinek (2015) conducted research using interviews in the realm of the current study by examining fans' motives for subscribing to college sports recruiting websites. Among their findings was a focus on how participation with Rivals.com helped individuals gain a sense of community, segmented information gain, self-esteem enhancement, and increased fandom. Interviews allowed the researchers to understand the process by which subscribers determine the value of the network, for instance, the perception that subscribers of recruiting websites such as Rivals.com are more informed than newspaper beat writers, who they also believe use recruiting websites to report second-hand information. Subscribers perceive they are privy to 'inside information' not available anywhere else, through reports by the sites within the network, but also message boards populated by reporters and other subscribers.

Recruitment

Of the 123 team-specific sites that comprise the Rivals.com network, 20 were originally, randomly selected for this study and one Twitter user who follows each site

was randomly selected to participate. Following IRB approval, I compiled a list of every Rivals.com team site into a spreadsheet, omitting the sites that had not published an item of content in the previous 30 days. Sites were further excluded that did not have an active Twitter page, i.e. did not make an original post in the previous 30 days. To determine which 20 sites would be chosen, I randomly selected these sites on the spreadsheet (`=rand()` function). The list of followers from each of the selected sites' Twitter pages were collected using a script written into R software and compiled into a spreadsheet. A Twitter follower, over the age of 18, on this list was randomly selected and contacted via Twitter and asked to be interviewed for this study. For instance, I determined two Twitter followers who were randomly selected to be high school football recruits and therefore minors, upon further inspection. I presumed both to be minors and therefore ineligible to participate in this study. I determined one account, for example, to be artificial intelligence, according to Symantec's guide and the 'Botometer,' a program developed by the Indiana University Network Science Institute and Complex Networks and Systems Research. This Twitter follower also was excluded from participation.

Twitter affords users the ability to set their accounts to private, which only provides access to view by those who the user has allowed to follow them. In instances where an account was set to private or where the user did not allow others to message them who were not approved followers, a tweet had to be sent publicly to a user in order to initiate communication. To contact the selected followers, who were 18 years and older and not deemed to be artificial intelligence, I tweeted at them (Figure 3.1).



Figure 3.1.
Recruitment tweet example towards potential participant

If a user responded, I then asked that user to follow my account, which would then allow me to send that person a direct message. Other users had not activated any privacy settings and could be contacted directly through direct message. In this case, I sent the same direct message to each Twitter follower (Figure 3.2).

If written consent was given by the Twitter follower, that person was offered incentive (Millar & Dillman, 2011) of a \$10 Amazon e-gift card. If the follower declined to participate or did not respond within an appropriate amount of time, another follower was chosen and the contact process began again. I conducted semi-structured, in-depth Zoom interviews that lasted an average of 52 minutes and one second with each Twitter follower.

Saturation

I conducted interviews until theoretical saturation was reached (Guest, et al., 2006). According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), this is when no new information presents itself, and what I heard from interviewees became repetitive of what was gathered from previous participants. By interview No. 21, I had already been told multiple times by an interviewee, that person felt privy to information from Rivals.com not available elsewhere, that the network and its sites were comparable to traditional media outlets such as newspapers and television stations, and message boards are an integral feature. I believed I was close after roughly 17 interviews, as I had heard much of the same information from interviewees at that point, but wanted to make sure my interviews were balanced and thorough (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In other words, I did my best to avoid gaps in information and allowed for a diversity of perspectives and viewpoints.

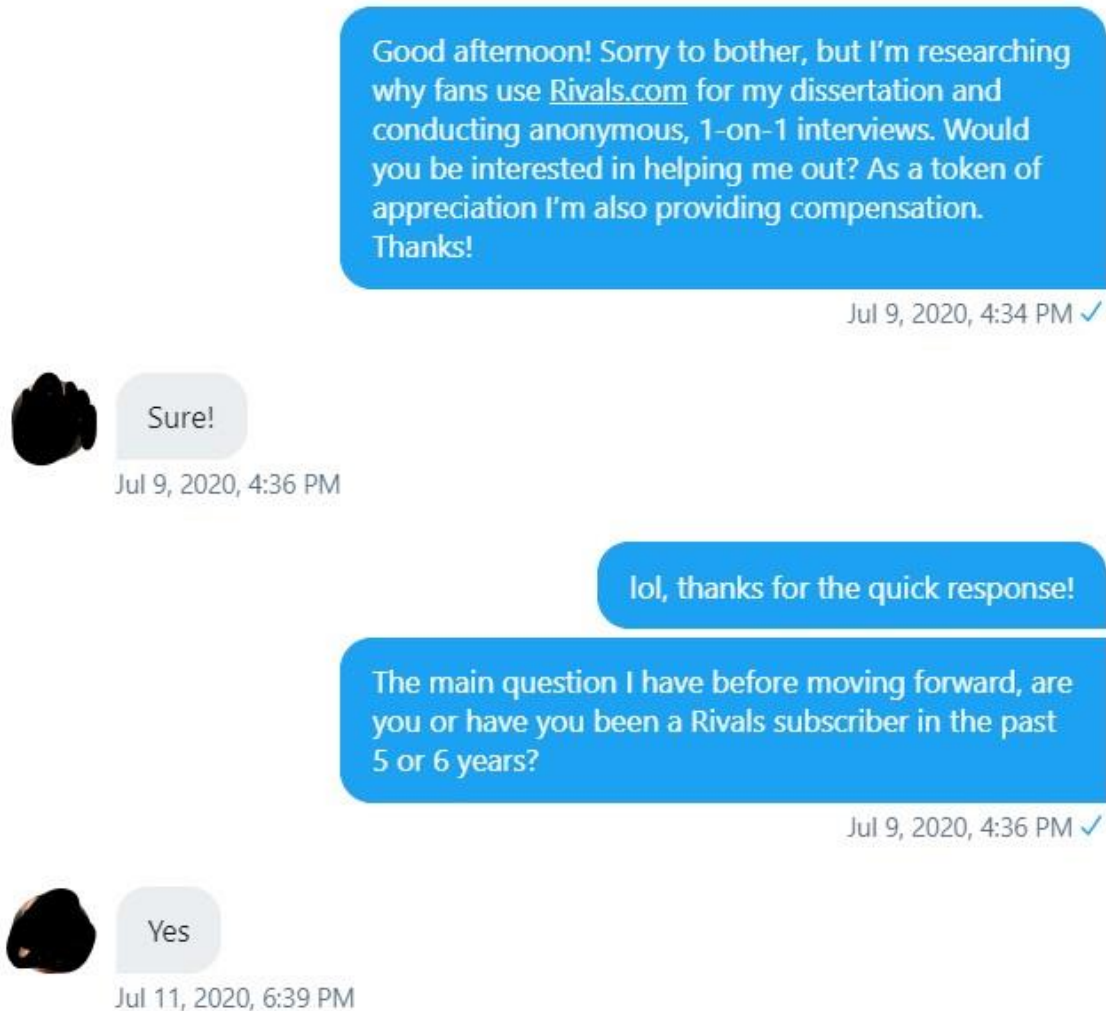


Figure 3.2.
Direct message exchange with participant who agreed to participate

Interview Procedure

I interviewed Twitter users who followed the Twitter accounts of particular Rivals.com sites (Table 3.1). Interview questions addressed various topics, including what each Twitter user remembered from his or her first experience using college sports recruiting websites, how the follower defines objectivity, and how the follower believes these websites compare to other forms of legacy media (e.g., newspapers, local television stations). Because this study was rooted in constructivism, specifically, it utilized the root question of “what is happening here?” as asked by Charmaz (2003, p. 314), in pursuit of answers through the examination of processes. The interview guide was constructed by incorporating grounded theory interview guidelines to lead a directed conversation with the participant, that asks specific questions that pertain to a specific topic, in this case, subscribers’ perceptions of Rivals.com. Main questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) were drawn from previous literature on college sports recruiting websites (Yanity & Edmondson, 2011; Hardin, et al., 2012; Mudrick & Lupinek, 2015; Silva, et al., 2018) and credibility, as well as from my prior experience as a Rivals.com employee.

Throughout interviews, I listened closely for relevant and important concepts in which to ask follow-up questions. For instance, one concept Mudrick and Lupinek (2015) were able to identify through interviewing was *community*. In this sense, *community* refers to the bond and camaraderie that subscribers felt with reporters and other subscribers on the site. I connected this study to that and other concepts from previous research, by asking questions on topics pertaining to those concepts, but also

Table 3.1.*Study participants and Rivals.com site affiliation*

Pseudonym	Site followed (subscribed if different)	Date interviewed
Les	GoWyoGo (JayhawkSlant)	February 17, 2020
Lane	RebelGrove	February 21, 2020
James	BlueWhiteIllustrated	March 5, 2020
Ryan	TigerSportsReport	March 6, 2020
Elijah	PowerMizzou	March 8, 2020
Geoff	JacketsOnline	March 18, 2020
Maria	DuckSportsAuthority	March 19, 2020
Josh	VolQuest	March 23, 2020
Karl	CUSportsNation	March 24, 2020
Lincoln	BluejayBanter (SoonerScoop)	March 27, 2020
Patrick	PantherLair	March 30, 2020
Mack	HeelIllustrated	March 30, 2020
Greg	TheKnightReport	April 4, 2020
Shane	CuseConfidential	May 21, 2020
William	TigerIllustrated	May 22, 2020
Mike	StorrsCentral (Warchant)	June 30, 2020
Craig	GoWyoGo	July 8, 2020
John	BluejayBanter (AggieYell)	July 13, 2020
Neal	WVSports	July 15, 2020
Scott	BluejayBanter	July 17, 2020
Brooke	WVSports	July 19, 2020

listening for other concepts that could emerge through interviews. It is my duty as the interviewer to produce as much breadth and depth from each interview as possible. If a participant only broached a topic and did not expand on their thoughts, but continuously mentioned a concept, it was my job to ask follow-up questions to make sure the participant provides a thorough explanation. For instance, Lane, a subscriber to the Rivals.com site covering the University of Mississippi's athletics, RebelGrove.com, mentioned six times within the first seven minutes of the interview that *access*, was important, and that he wanted reporters who had *access*. Because Lane emphasized the term so frequently, I followed-up with the question, "You mentioned access and I want to make sure I understand your sense of access. What are you referring to by that?" to decipher the meaning he placed on the term. Lane responded that, "having access to coaches and then just the level of sourcing and then having reliable sources that provide continuous and providing consistent information," which meant that he valued not only the ability of reporters to talk with members of the coaching staff, but also others within the program and around it who could provide information. Another example is understanding precisely what participants think about the term 'credibility' and associating the term with Rivals.com. If a participant said 'yes, I believe Rivals.com is credible,' it is my job as the interviewer to probe further, through follow-up questions. The object is not to push for a more pointed response, but to ask follow-up questions in a way that provide an understanding of the values and logic underpinning the participant's definition of a term like *credibility* (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In this example, I would ask, 'How do reporters handle themselves on the message board? Are they credible in that

way?’ This allowed for more in-depth responses that get more at the root of perceptions and more clearly address the research questions for this study.

Another instance of a concept used is by William, a subscriber to the Rivals.com site covering Clemson University athletics, TigerIllustrated, who used the word *cadence* to describe how the reporters and the site post stories. I was familiar with the word, but after the fourth mention by William, I asked a follow-up question: “When you talk about *cadence*, what specifically are you referring to? Just the continuity, with the board or with reporters?” William then clarified that his use of the word meant “expectations of certain levels of information” and that he liked that he could expect articles to be posted at roughly the same time each day, while within the articles, he also knew what to expect. With the latter, William gave the example of one reporter having an article that contained 10 bullet points every Monday morning and he knew that the last bullet point would always contain some nugget of information on a college football recruit.

Follow-up questions were also used to avoid inconsistencies, through contradictions that “can be clues to unraveling research problems” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 154), or that could reflect tensions and double standards. Karl, for example, complained that the current reporters for the site covering University of Colorado athletics, CUSportsNation, “aren't CU connected people.” I followed-up with the question, “you would prefer to have a reporter or somebody to run the site who is connected, like a graduate to Colorado?” Karl responded yes, though a decades-long fan would be acceptable because they would have some type of connection. A few questions later, I asked whether Karl felt like he had a connection with the current publisher of the

site, to which Karl responded that he did not. I used another follow-up question, “Is it more just because he’s not a Colorado guy? Or does he do something that hasn’t made that connection for you?” which Karl said was due to what he felt were a lack of sources and inside information by the publisher. In this sequence, follow-up questions revealed that Karl valued a reporter who could obtain inside information through sources at the university more than simply having a reporter who was an alumnus or attended the University of Colorado.

Along with follow-up questions, probing questions are needed to “keep the conversation on target and encourage the interviewee to provide depth and detail” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 132). Probes provide clarification where needed and allow for management of the conversation. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), probes can be verbal or non-verbal, such as asking, “Could you tell me a little more about that?” or simply expressing interest in what the participant is saying and pausing to allow the participant to gather their thoughts. Probes are classified by Rubin and Rubin (2012) into groups of attention probes (indicators the interviewer is paying attention), conversational management probes (clarifications of ambiguous statements and re-focusing on the task at hand), and credibility probes (revealing of potential bias, participant memory, and solid evidence of statements made). For example, Neal, a subscriber to the Rivals.com site that covers West Virginia University athletics, WVSports.com, said one of the reasons he chooses to subscribe is the simplicity of the site, that features are easily located, whereas “with other sites, it’s just, it’s clunky, it’s not easy to read.” I wanted to know more, as he offered little past that assessment, so I used the probing question, “So, you think the

interface is better with Rivals?” to which Neal responded, “Oh, my God. The interface is 10 times better,” and proceeded to give more detail about specifics with the layout of Rivals.com.

Analysis

Transcription was performed first via Otter, a website that provides speech-to-text transcription. I then verified the transcriptions by listening to each interview and correcting words or phrases that Otter did not transcribe properly. During this time, I also made in-process memos of what each interviewee said. This allowed me to establish “analytic leads and insights early on in the fieldwork process,” and “identifying, formulating, and elaborating the theoretical import or implications of such events and routines” gathered from interviewees (Emerson, et al., 2011, p. 123). I took approximately one page of notes while listening to each transcription, jotting details such as words or phrases used that stood out, facts the participants shared about themselves, and points made that summarized their answers to a question. For instance, when listening to the interview I conducted with s, a subscriber to the Rivals.com site covering The University of Kansas, JayhawkSlant.com, I noted he said that he had previously subscribed to the Rivals sites covering the athletics programs at the University of Wyoming, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, because he had family members attending or working for those schools, and because he also previously lived in Wyoming. Additionally, I noted that Les said he grew up a fan of the Jayhawks, has established a two-way communication with JayhawkSlant reporters, has a twin brother with whom he shares a subscription, and that he previously

wrote for two sites within SBNation, a sports blogging network. Making notes helped me understand the perspective offered by Les and resulted in my use of the constant comparative approach.

Codes provide a guide in which to make sense of the meanings generated from language-based data, such as interview transcripts. Something in the data can be ‘coded’ when it appears more than twice and adheres to at least one commonality of routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships (Saldaña, 2016). ‘Codifying’ the data places it in a systematic order or category, of which themes or outcomes can be drawn. This is the primary goal of the analysis and to achieve it is part of an ongoing process of providing the best way to “capture, record, interpret, and convey that information” (Baptiste, 2001, p. 5). Codes were considered brief summaries of the concept, theme, or attitude of a segment of data, whereas categories were more abstract descriptions of the interaction among frequently identified codes (Charmaz, 2014).

According to Charmaz (2014), the constant comparative approach is “a method of analysis that generates successively more abstract concepts . . . through inductive processes of comparing data with data, data with category, category with category and category with concept” (p. 187). The constant comparative approach is a primary tool for this study, because it allowed me to inductively theorize the data, answer questions that previously presented themselves in analysis, and repeat until saturation was reached (Boeije, 2002). There is no precise way to carry out the constant comparative method, but according to Boeije (2002), “data have to be produced by the researcher in the course of the study” (p. 394), and the procedure should be as thorough as possible. The connections

of codes and categories found in the interview data were unified into groups, while analyses were linked to relevant literature throughout the analytical process (Giles et al., 2016).

I used NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software in a first cycle of coding, which takes place to un-structure the transcripts, to examine specifics of what was said by participants and “breaks down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examines them, and compares them for similarities and differences” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102). This round of coding consisted of *in vivo* coding, which Saldaña (2016) describes as summarizing passages of the transcript into a word or short phrase from the language used directly by the participant to “prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (p. 106). After listening to the interviews, I read over each transcript line by line and when I determined a phrase, sentence, or series of sentences to pertain to the same topic, I assigned them to a similar code. In this first cycle, categories included *better than competitors*, *due diligence*, *fan insiders*, and *bias by Rivals reporters*. For instance, I coded *better than competitors* for the following passage, because the participant alluded to a perception of Rivals.com being superior to competing websites:

I remember when Rivals was like, damn, that was the thing. Then 247 started to come up and get recognized. I think Rivals was going back and forth. Writers go back and forth and stuff like that. But, now, 247 is a respectable site. But Rivals still is more of...if a kid told me he had a 247 page, I would say, ‘okay, do you have a Rivals page?’ I still think Rivals is more respected than 247. Then, they

actually do more work than ESPN. Because ESPN's got so much other stuff going on.

Beyond the first cycle coding and into the second cycle, I used axial coding to extend the work from initial coding and “strategically reassemble data that were split or fractured during the initial coding process” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). In other words, I collapsed codes that were not predominantly found throughout the transcripts into other codes. This method examines relations between codes and subcodes to determine if, when, why, and how something occurs (Saldaña, 2016). The goal is to consolidate those disparate codes developed from prior analysis into logical themes. I made additional passes through the interview documents and in-process memos, refining the codes that were especially prominent during in vivo coding. I employed the constant comparative method by evaluating the salient meanings from different interviews in concert with one another, progressively building the theoretical foundation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). The constant comparative method also allowed me to gain context from my analytic memos. For instance, when I coded a passage by John, a former subscriber to the Rivals.com site covering Texas A&M athletics, AggieYell.com in which he alluded to a *community* on the message board, I scanned my memos from that interview to gain more context. I had noted that John had been a subscriber to the site for 14 years and felt enough of a connection with other subscribers that he had financially contributed to the funeral of one subscriber's mother, despite having never met in-person.

In the axial coding phase, the previous categories that did not directly correspond to a research question were not developed further. This included perceptions of women's

and girls' sports coverage, as well as thoughts on whether politics should be allowed and discussed within the Rivals.com network. In axial coding, the work from the first phase is extended to "strategically reassemble data that were split or fractured during the initial coding process" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). By this, I looked for codes that did not appear to align with other codes generated and either reorganized them with similar codes to categorize them, or after reexamination, removed them from the process altogether if they did not relate to other codes. For example, I initially coded the following excerpt from Neal about Rivals.com's rankings as *perceived bias*, but determined that it pertains more to how he believes the rankings are generated, which does not correspond with any of the research questions posed:

I'm sure they have talks and conversations and they have this massive Excel database or Access database with everyone in there. If I've seen them and you've seen them and Mike's seen them, but Josh hasn't and we're on the same page, hey, he should get bumped up to a four-star. Usually, you go with majority rules, anyways.

This axial coding method examines relations between categories and subcategories to determine if, when, why, and how something occurs (Saldaña, 2016). Here, I continued to use the constant comparative method, welcoming newer, more nuanced categories than those already generated during initial coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). In other words, the goal is to dig deeper, beyond descriptive categories and into those that make sense of participants' experiences with the website and explain why they view Rivals.com a particular way. In this stage of coding, I looked at commonalities of

the codes developed from the first stage and determined which to collapse and combine into other codes or form new ones. I took an initial pass at the codes developed and placed them into categories of *access*, *categorizing as media*, *criticism*, *determinations of credibility*, *draw to Rivals*, *ethics*, *message board interactions*, *rankings perceptions*, *relationship with reporters*, *relationship with site*, *suggestions*, and *tie to university*, as (Table 3.2). As part of my analytical memos, I placed these categories under the research question which I drew comparisons. I placed *categorizing as media*, *draw to Rivals*, *suggestions*, *tie to university*, and *message board interactions* under RQ1, *criticism*, *determinations of credibility*, *ethics*, *access*, *rankings perceptions*, *relationship with reporters*, and *relationship with site* under the second research question. At this point, however, I felt like the categories did not provide enough explanation of the data.

With the assistance of a member check with another colleague to talk through thoughts and interpretations of the codes and categories, it became apparent that there were a few commonalities in the data that needed to be scrutinized further. Many excerpts from participants pertained to perceptions of relationships, bias, ethics, what they wanted from their subscriptions, what they received from their subscriptions, and how Rivals.com compared to competitors and other forms of sports media. These excerpts illustrated uses and gratifications. At this point, there was still a tremendous amount of data that needed to be parsed through. By continuing to look for commonalities in the data to confirm categories or form subcategories, I could better represent perceptions conveyed in the data (Boeije, 2002). In my analytical memos, I also continued to note any movement and collapsing of categories to provide a richer

Table 3.2*List of categories and codes*

Category name	Example	Codes included in category
Comparisons to competitors	“I’m going to Rivals first and then I’m comparing what Rivals had to say to it to the other place. It’s always, you know, accuracy. If Rivals is saying it, you see if someone else is saying the same things. You say, ‘Oh, okay. Alright, well, that’s gonna happen.’”	Better than competitors Same as competitors Worse than competitors One of a kind
Desired attributes of sites and reporters	“Me personally, just because I’m out here on both sides of it, I want it unbiased. Allow the fans to be the homers.”	Plugged in Demeanor Meat and potatoes Objective Supports team Trustworthy
Motivating factors in subscribing	“I’m always trying to talk my friends into it. They’re like, ‘how do you know about all this stuff?’ This is like my birthday present for myself every year. I just renew my account. And I’m telling them, it’s this site. There’s lots of good content.”	Accurate information Alumnus or fan Anticipated routine Cost Follow relative FOMO In-depth analysis Intuitive interface Longevity One-stop shop Timely reporting Value of rankings
Perceived credibility	“Most times you’re not going to tell me how you’re getting that information. Now, if I knew how you were getting and it was in an unethical manner, I would have a problem with that, absolutely. If you were greasing some palms or something like that, I would take umbrage with.”	Established reputation Fans on message boards Reporters on message boards Networking Perceptions of bias Respected professionalism Social media footprint Visibility
Perceived relationships	“Yeah, I’d follow him, probably. It depends. So, if Kenan stayed there and Vernon bounced, I probably would still stay. If they both left, I can tell you, whoop, see ya.”	Family ties Relationship with reporters Relationship with subscribers

explanation of the data. For instance, the category of *rankings perceptions* neither adequately explained that data, nor drew a link to the research questions. I re-examined each code and excerpt from that category to find a more suitable category and then collapsed or deleted ‘rankings perceptions’ after I had noted the movement of each excerpt and code. A newly created code was *value of rankings*, which I had placed under the category of ‘motivating factors in subscribing,’ as many participants had discussed rankings as a primary reason why they subscribed to Rivals.com and its team sites.

From there, I moved to theoretical or “selective” coding, which is where theoretical development occurred. This form of coding considers all codes generated to this point and examines the primary theme of the research, or what Saldaña (2016) refers to as “an umbrella that covers and accounts for all other codes and categories formulated thus far in grounded theory analysis” (p. 250). It is in this step that the uncovered themes were linked to existing literature to determine how my findings could advance existing theory. Themes were mutually exclusive, but also overlapped, as well as comprehensive or partial. I also continued to compare the data, by making additional analytic memos and contrasting with previous categories and subcategories to determine if and where to discard, expand, narrow, combine, etc. the categories and themes developed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Baptiste (2001) suggests numerous questions I considered in this process, such as “Do my categories exhaust the data I consider to be salient? In other words, have I classified all the data I consider relevant? Or are there salient data I have not classified? If so, what other categories might I construct to adequately account for the unclassified

data? 3. In what form(s) is it best to conceptualize my categories: nominal, ordinal, interval or ratio?” (p. 12).

Initially, I looked for commonalities across the categories created and looked for the themes that showed the relationships among each category. I began seeing commonalities such as “visibility,” “trust,” and “reputation,” as well as the need and desire for information and the fear of missing out (FOMO). It was these last commonalities that prompted a member check with a colleague, to determine a better word or phrase to describe the fear of missing out, and in examining the codes and categories, the term *social capital* arose as an explanation for nearly all of the codes and categories constructed. Though there are many definitions for this term, this study will use that offered by Lasser (2009), as “the wealth (or benefit) that exists because of an individual’s social relationships” (p. 4). In other words, those with social capital have access to and are the gatekeepers of information that the majority of others do not possess. Based on my immersion of the data in this study, as well as my experience of working for a website in the Rivals.com network, *social capital* makes sense, as the point of the organization is to build and maintain the perception of knowledge through *social capital*, which subscribers then pay to receive. Those who have access to the network, including both reporters and fans, have a connection to information that subscribers depend on to be disseminated on the team websites. Those who have those connections obtain power and whether or not they disseminate that information, they increase subscribers’ social capital. Hence, *buying social capital* was used as a theme to describe much of the codes and categories from data analysis.

Upon further examination, the concept of *buying social capital* encompasses each of the codes and categories except for one, as the code, *perceptions of bias*, part of the category, *perceived credibility*, does not necessarily always fall under this theme. For instance, if every story a team site publishes about high school football players being recruited by a college athletics program is disseminated as those players love that program, but ultimately do not choose to attend and play there, subscribers might easily dismiss that information as incorrect, which does affect the site's perceived social and cultural capital (knowledge obtained from social capital). In other words, Rivals.com attains social and cultural capital, wants subscribers to think this, and functions as a way for users to attain this form of capital themselves. But participants also widely mentioned bias that they believe occurs in other instances, most notably the ranking of high school recruits. The only commonality is that three participants cited what they believe to be bias towards recruits who choose to attend and play at The University of Alabama, while others cited bias towards members of the Southeastern Conference as a whole, east coast recruits, those who choose to play and attend The University of Texas, those whom Rivals deems to be among the top 100 recruits, high school football players who participate in Rivals' camps, and bias towards high school recruits from the Atlanta area, as opposed to others in the U.S. southeast. In only one of these instances did the subscriber cite the listed bias as a reason for not subscribing to the network, so it can be argued that *bias* does not necessarily belong under the umbrella of *social capital* and *cultural capital* and should therefore be a theme itself.

Ensuring Rigor

Qualitative research long has faced criticism. Not only is qualitative research perceived as neither credible nor of quality (Creswell, 2007), but it is also seen as not generalizable and reproduceable (Firestone, 1993), lacks explanation in method and data analysis leading to suspect findings (Becker, 2005), and is prone to bias because researchers are subjective instruments of data collection (Chenail, 2011). Whereas much criticism of qualitative research adopts quantitative criteria, such as reliability and generalizability, qualitative research should be assessed in different terms (Morse, 1994). In fact, scholars (Meyrick, 2006; Weick, 2007; Tracy, 2010) have put forth models useful for evaluating qualitative research in ways drawn from the methodological assumptions underpinning the method.

According to Tracy (2013), “The most salient issue to consider is whether the data collected will substantiate meaningful or significant claims” (p. 232). In other words, the more rigorous the research, the more valuable the findings will be. In meeting this goal, Meyrick (2006) identifies factors for ensuring rigor, including being transparent when collecting data and clearly stating the researcher’s theoretical and epistemological stances. Rigor also requires being open and honest about each step of the research process, from conception to data analysis. Doing so instills trustworthiness from participants, readers, and other researchers (Oakley, 2000). For this study, rigor was achieved by being as detailed as possible about each step in the research process. Collecting sufficient data to reinforce my findings, relying on my professional expertise in the research field, adopting appropriate theoretical assumptions, and utilizing

appropriate methods of data collection (e.g., interviewing), are all practices that enabled me to ensure rigor (Tracy, 2013).

Tracy (2010) advises qualitative researchers, “The key is to be truthful with ourselves and our readers” (p. 849). She uses a crystal as a metaphor, in that there are many stakeholders and other facets involved. While there are blemishes, these imperfections are what make the research unique. There will always be critiques of qualitative research, yet Tracy (2010) contends that “the most successful researchers are willingly self-critical, viewing their own actions through the eyes of others while also maintaining resilience and energy through acute sensitivity to their own well-being” (p. 849).

As one of the tenets of the eight big-tent criteria for qualitative research, Tracy (2010) points to rich rigor as a necessity. Of ‘richness,’ Weick (2007) states, “Descriptions and explanations that are rich are above some standard and unstinting” (p. 14). Rigor refers to the thoroughness and precision of research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017) and Tracy (2010) calls for researchers to “evidence their due diligence, exercising appropriate time, effort, care, and thoroughness” (p. 841). Hence, rigorous naturalistic studies should be exhaustive with respect to the data collection process, the selected theoretical framework, and the research context.

To account for rich rigor, Tracy (2010) advises researchers to ask: “Are there enough data to support significant claims? Did the researcher spend enough time to gather interesting and significant data? Is the context or sample appropriate given the goals of the study? Did the researcher use appropriate procedures in terms of field note

style, interviewing practices, and analysis procedures?” (p. 841). In evaluating the proper amount of data, various scholars have offered various suggestions. In using grounded theory, for instance, Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest a minimum of 10 interviews to build effective theory, while others such as Morse (1994) advise 30 interviews, and Creswell (2007) recommends 20 interviews. According to Guest, et al., (2006), the researcher must make a strong argument for saturation, or the point at which no new themes or theory emerge from the data, as it becomes repetitive to what data has already been collected. Their research showed that saturation occurs in 12 interviews, though elements of saturation can occur in as few as six interviews.

Though he does not refer to it as “rigor,” Baptiste (2001) contends that a list of themes, definitions, and glossaries, as concludes many qualitative works, are not enough. By themselves, “they lack the richness, insightfulness, depth of understanding and explanatory potential of stories and theories. And in the final analysis, it seems to me that it is that richness, that depth of understanding that is the genius of qualitative research” (p. 13). According to Baptiste (2001), researchers must produce theory and/or generate stories to assist readers and participants in understanding deeply and extensively, their experiences. That should be and will be an overarching goal of this and all other qualitative research, if qualitative research is to receive credibility, and more importantly, make an inherent difference in the phenomena it examines.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Craig, a White male in his mid-30s, has been a subscriber to GoWyoGo, the Rivals.com site covering University of Wyoming athletics, for six years. He is not a graduate of the university, but grew up a fan of the football team and has been a lifetime Wyoming resident. Craig said he visits the site multiple times a day to check if new information has been posted. On each visit, Craig also checks the site's premium message board, *Hells Half Acre*. He might click on a front-page article if it pertains to college football or high school football players that the Cowboys' football program is recruiting to attend and to play at the University of Wyoming, but that's not where he obtains the information most valuable to him. *Hells Half Acre* is available only to subscribers of the site and is where the site's publisher, Ian McMackin, and other users will post information and comment about the school's athletics programs. Craig considers Ian and the information he posts to be credible because much of what Ian has posted has turned out to be true, though he also believes Ian is biased in the information he posts:

I like that he leans a little bit more towards, he leans pro-Wyoming athletics. At least for myself, I follow everything close enough. I'm aware of the bad things. I'm aware of a person that leaves the program and goes to the transfer portal. I'm aware of the financial struggles of the university. So, I don't mind somebody who, more or less spins things positively, generally.

Craig estimates there are 20 to 30 users who provide information on *Hells Half Acre* that no one else seems to know and he believes they are boosters, work for the

athletic department, or have some type of intimate connection to the athletic department. Through his subscription to GoWyoGo and Rivals.com, Craig believes he has expanded his social network, knowledge, about Wyoming athletics, and connection to the athletics department, and his status has risen with his friends, family, and users on the message board. The feeling of obtaining exclusive information has allowed Craig to choose what information to share and who to share it with, since he believes other Wyoming fans “don’t have a clue of what’s actually going on.” Though the information from other users isn’t always what Craig craves as an avid Wyoming football fan, these users post the type of information that solidifies their status as ‘insiders,’ people with connections who accrue and disseminate information. And it’s why, hypothetically, if Ian left the site for a competitor or other media outlet, Craig said he would remain a subscriber, to gather what he perceives to be classified intel on Wyoming athletics.

In many ways, Craig is symbolic of the characteristics of Rivals.com subscribers posited by Hardin, et. al (2012): he’s male, he’s White, near the average age of 36, has been a subscriber for more than three and a half years, and likely spends more than 90 minutes per day on the site, including the time he spends accessing the Rivals.com national site and network content as a subscriber. Craig also exemplifies the majority of participants in this study: he craves information about the college athletics program with which he associates and wants to build relationships to enhance his fandom. These gratifications are part of a process in which he determines whether the site he subscribes to is credible and worthy of his subscription.

As Craig's story illustrates, Rivals subscribers' motivations for subscribing to the site can be understood within a uses and gratifications framework. The preceeding sections in this chapter take that framework into consideration by answering the following two research questions: 1) *How do subscribers to Rivals.com situate Rivals.com within the wider sports media landscape?* and 2) *How do subscribers to Rivals.com perceive the credibility of the organization's reporters?* The themes located within the first research question are *Value as a Function of Social Networks and Credible Information*, which consists of the sub-themes, *Relationships*, *Factual Information*, *Site Features*, and *Bias is Not a Turn-Off*. The themes located within the second research question are each of the four factors participants used in the process of determining reporter credibility: *Perceived Factual Information Over Time*, *Connectivity*, *Visibility*, and *Reputation*. Each will be discussed in detail.

RQ1: What do subscribers to Rivals.com value about the site?

This question sought to understand what participants perceived as important in their reasons for subscribing to Rivals.com. I have organized my answer to this question by the two themes and four sub-themes.

Theme One: Value as a Function of Social Networks and Credible Information

In offering their evaluations of Rivals.com, Greg, a subscriber to TheKnightReport, the network's site covering Rutgers University athletics, and Mike, a subscriber to Warchant, the network's site covering Florida State University athletics, took differing stances. In addition to the personal relationships valued by Craig, participants also took note of reporters' relationships with sources, from whom they

gathered information. Greg, the father of a son who now plays college football and recently experienced the recruiting process, was exemplary of Rivals as “a good, reputable resource” because of reporters’ original coverage. Greg said he was on-hand at many camps and games in which his son participated and consistently noticed Rivals reporters at the events:

I’ve seen them first-hand, at places, at not necessarily Rivals camps, but other camps, talking to the coaches, talking to the student-athletes. So, you know, they’re getting first-hand information and it’s not them making up something. I see ‘em after the camps. I see ‘em after games sometimes and they’re talking to coaches. They’re talking to students. They’re getting that information first-hand. I’ve witnessed it first-hand.

When thinking of other media entities (e.g. 247Sports, blogs, and other independent sites), Greg said he has “never seen them. But yet they have information.” This has led him to believe that other sites take the information disseminated by Rivals and repackage it as their own. And this has led Greg to perceive that Rivals is at the top of the heap of media organizations that cover college athletics and recruiting, thanks to information he perceives as factual and authentic:

You can see information from other sites that have ratings or comments about certain players, but they’re not evaluating themselves [sic]. They’re not getting the information themselves[sic]. I think that they’re getting information from a Rivals, from their sites, and just kind of compiling their own opinion based on what they

read. So, I'm going to definitely say it's the quality of writing, quality of content, why I chose Rivals.

Mike, meanwhile, has been a subscriber to Warchant and Rivals since he was accepted and chose to attend Florida State in 2006. In re-evaluating his decision to subscribe, he has "been thinking about switching to 247 lately." This is because he believes 247Sports' rankings of high school football players to be more indicative of those student-athletes' talent levels. Mike also thinks Rivals has been less innovative in site features, as it has "tried to emulate certain things" such as 247Sports' Crystal Ball with a FutureCast. These features allow reporters and national analysts within each network to predict which schools high school recruits will choose to attend and play football, and the success rate with these picks are then noted by publicly accessible percentages. And while Mike initially cited the years of experience Warchant's reporters have as a positive, he later cited that same quality as a drawback:

I mean, 247 consistently is faster to the punch for stuff. But, I think age has something to do with that. They've (Warchant reporters) been doing it for a long time. You know, you're not as hungry, maybe at that age, to get the freshest scoop you can get.

Specifically, Mike believes Warchant reporters have been "out-scooped" because they take too much time in verifying information before disseminating it:

Probably doing their due diligence, trying to get both sources, good sources on record before they before they put anything out. But, I don't think everybody's doing that anymore, just with the pressure of being first.

While the judgments of Rivals made by Greg and Mike differ, what they have in common are that the process both participants made towards those judgments was the result of their perceptions of Rivals' relationships with sources and factual information. In each instance, the value they assign to Rivals is based on beliefs about the site providing a way for users to build meaningful social networks. This is the basis by which participants determined gratifications have been met and in turn, how they rate Rivals.com.

Relationships

Participants were not in agreement about whether Rivals.com was better or worse than competitors, but they saw its value in part dependent on the site's ability to foster relationships between the users and reporters and among the users themselves. When participants feel like they can enhance their own social networks, by tapping into Rivals reporters' connections themselves, they also reported positive assessments of the site. Lane, a subscriber to RebelGrove, the Rivals.com site covering the University of Mississippi athletics, said he enjoys the site because he feels like he can relate to the reporters, based on the "candor" and "personalities" exuded by the reporters:

I like their humor. They're from the region, they're from the south, so I can get, I like the humor. I like their level of engagement, especially with their followers, as well. And some of the content that they put out just for their style of writings. But, their personality is a is a piece of that.

In assessing the relationship, they feel like they have with reporters, participants also pointed to a reporter's ability to interact with users on the message board. For

example, William said he feels as if he knows two of the reporters for TigerIllustrated because of what the reporters post on the site's message boards:

I think they do a great job of getting in front of everybody and interacting with people. It's not like they throw an article up and then disappear. I think they're both good for different reasons. Larry's more, he's more likely to get in a thread and joke around and be sarcastic and poke and prod and have fun with people. And I think Paul's good from almost being like on the opposite end, where he's super objective, but just able to provide more insight. Say he posts something about a position group that Clemson's looking at for the next year. If somebody asked about a player he doesn't talk about, he's good about getting in there and just fleshing those side tangents out.

In William's case, however, his relationship with the reporters is strictly based on what he sees on the site and he has never met them in-person. For some participants, the relationship is a tangible one, as they cited communicating with reporters by a method other than the message boards or social media, such as in-person or by telephone. Lincoln, a high school basketball assistant coach and subscriber to SoonerScoop, the Rivals.com site covering University of Oklahoma athletics, said he has seen and enjoyed speaking with handfuls of Rivals reporters at games and camps. He also communicates with them via telephone and Twitter direct messaging when they call him "trying to just check on kids that are in the state." The relationship he's developed from those many meetings, phone conversations, and messaging has played a large part in his overall perception of the site:

That's something that's big to me and that's why I said I really respected Rivals a lot, because I constantly ran into, not just (Rivals.com analyst Eric) Bossi, but a few other reps who were actually on the ground and at a lot of the events that we were playing at.

Another example is Neal, who alluded to how he speaks with the publisher of WVSports outside of the message board, through a mutual acquaintance in the city the publisher lives:

He and I talk. He talks about his step-kids and stuff like that. My aunt was married to a very prominent lawyer in Charleston, where Vernon lives. And she was married to him for a long time. My aunt worked at the state bar in West Virginia, so when you're that big of an attorney, you sort of know people, you know what I mean?

Participants also spoke frequently about their interaction and perceived relationships with other users on the message board. If participants felt a connection to other users, there was a pull to subscribe to the site. Karl, a subscriber to CUSportsNation, the Rivals site covering University of Colorado Boulder athletics, described how the strength of one relationship can overcome perceived deficiencies with another. He feels little to no connection with the reporters of the site in part because he does not feel like they have strong connections with the athletics department or university that has resulted in unique, original information. Still, Karl said he has subscribed to the site for "probably a decade" and feels like he has a strong bond with users on the message board despite not interacting with them because of the type of information, humor, and

other personalizations in their posts. This causes Karl to feel a connection with the site overall:

It's this weird thing where you could name a poster's name and I almost feel like I know them from reading, you know, posts dating back many years. But no, I don't post myself. But I'm still very interested in the message boards, probably more than anything on the site.

For many, that relationship is strictly online in that they never meet in-person. Still, this can be a strong bond, as illustrated by John and his decision to financially contribute to the funeral of another user's mother. John said he felt a responsibility as a member of the site to contribute, but also because he felt a connection to other users in part because they were all Texas A&M supporters:

It was like a mini version of the Paul Finebaum show [discussion show on SEC Network]. It really was. That's really what it is. You have all these different characters that were well-known, then you'd have a couple of random people post. But you had this collection of all these characters that were well-known, they would post and you immediately knew what was gonna happen or what they were posting about. It was just very entertaining. And there were a lot of really good things. It wasn't just entertainment. We had a guy that lost his mother. And he was a prominent poster on there, a good guy, real good guy. A lot of guys knew him personally. Lost his mother, he had just graduated, he didn't have much money, and a lot of us pulled together and paid for his mom's funeral. Something like that. It's a community where you can do things like that. It got to be where,

on Aggie Yell, in doing that, a tradition was born where every Christmas, as it got close, we would pull together and choose a cause or a charity that we would make a big donation for. We would do something. It may not even be a big donation. It might be something where we come together to buy something, like a custom wheelchair, for someone that someone else knew was in need. We would pull together all these ideas and make the selection and come together and make a contribution and go from there. It was an annual Christmas good deed. That was a fun aspect of being in a community aspect like that.

Participants also reported fostering in-person relationships as well, through organized tailgate barbecue events centered around football games. This is the case with Les, who said he participated in multiple pre-game tailgates and enjoyed getting to fraternize with the people behind the usernames he'd grown accustomed to reading on the message boards. Through the site-planned events, "all the posters have really got to know each other on a personal level, but they didn't know one another beforehand." Though the risk would certainly exist to lose that feeling for relationship and strong social capital after meeting in-person, for Les, it only strengthened that perception:

It makes you feel like you definitely are more part of the community of that site. Because there's a lot of people, as you know, when, even when they're working, they spend a lot of their time and life, involved with their teams, with their university. And so, the ability to actually meet up with one another and your site administrator, from a personal level, I mean, that's a good thing.

Les said he believed the tailgates also were successful because of the presence of the site's reporters:

I guess the majority of the time, if you if you're running one of those sites, the site administrator or the long-standing, main posters are going to be all amongst one another. So, that probably negates if there's any issues because they're probably there to have a good time and, and everything like that.

Factual Information

Determining whether the information disseminated by Rivals.com reporters, as well as with message board users, is reliable, is a process built over a period of time, for some very quickly, in a few years, others for a decade or more. Participants take note of whether they perceive the information disseminated by Rivals to be truthful and accurate, and if they do, the aforementioned relationships are validated. For instance, Greg said he has built a level of trust with TheKnightReport and the Rivals network because the information he has received has largely turned out to be factual:

I'm going to Rivals first and then I'm comparing what Rivals had to say to it to the other place. It's always, you know, accuracy. If Rivals is saying it, you see if someone else is saying the same things. You say, 'Oh, okay. Alright, well, (that event is) gonna happen.'

Others, such as Geoff, a subscriber to JacketsOnline, the Rivals.com site covering Georgia Tech athletics, said he knows the information reported is factual because he has verified it himself. Geoff has one son who played his redshirt freshman season in college in 2020 and another son who was a four-star recruit in the 2021 recruiting class. Though

he did not listen to every interview his sons participated in, Geoff said he heard enough to make the determination that Rivals reporters were “pretty comfortable in their skin” and did not fabricate answers. He knew the number of scholarship offers each of his sons had received from college football programs and believed Rivals was more accurate because of the numerous interviews its reporters did with his youngest son, for instance:

If you go to Rivals and you look at the write-ups, I think [my son] Jordan got almost 30-something different write ups, from where people have covered him and everything else. You go to 247, you may see one or two. My point is, Jordan’s my son, but they don’t know Jordan’s my son. When I see what type of content and how they’re covering and everything else, there’s a clear difference.

Much of participants’ overall perceptions of whether a site produces factual information stems from their perception of the information disseminated by other message board users. Though they are not compensated by the site as reporters are, other users and the information they post, also highly factor into how participants view the site overall. The only outlet users have to post within Rivals.com and its network of team sites are free message boards that are open to anyone who registers for an account, and premium message boards that are open to subscribers only. Participants evaluate the knowledge other users post and the connections these users claim to have. Though participants like Josh are generally still skeptical, they largely believe the other users unless they have a reason not to, such as if participants deem information to be outlandish. Josh said he takes note of important claims, but believes many are false:

Everyone will claim that they're an insider and it builds up. You build up trust with that, some over time and vice versa the other way. Everyone's cousin's mom is the secretary for the high school for a certain kid and he's coming to Tennessee, that kind of thing. So, you've kinda got to weed through that. I'd say I take most of that with a grain of salt.

The general feeling was that participants largely value the presence of users who pose as 'insiders' or 'gurus' for information regarding recruits an athletic department's teams pursue, or information within the athletic department itself. When participants believe there is enough valuable information from other users, they hold the site in a higher regard. William, for instance, said he believes most message board users "chirp and chime in anytime something isn't positive about the school," but enjoys seeing users who are willing to share knowledge. He believes having anecdotes from users he has no reason not to trust, add value to his subscription:

It's definitely good from an interesting standpoint. They don't necessarily promote who they are, but I know there are former Clemson players on the Clemson site. And it's kind of fun to just get a different level of insight into some of that stuff. Funny, I say I don't check message boards a ton, but it was funny because I was actually looking on there last night. And there was some three or four-page long thread about the scandal that just happened at Kentucky with the Kentucky gymnastics team. And there was, I guess this lady, who's a Clemson fan whose daughter cheered at Kentucky. She just had all of this behind the scenes, un-reported on information of just what happened. It's like, I don't care

about gymnastics. I don't care about Kentucky, but it's just interesting to read because it's just perspective that's super personal and somebody's directly involved that just isn't in the limelight.

Overall, the information gathered via Rivals was seen as a point of pride. Some participants, such as Craig, said they bragged on the information they received, to others:

I'm always trying to talk my friends into it. They're like, 'how do you know about all this stuff?' This is like my birthday present for myself every year. I just renew my account. And I'm telling them, it's this site. There's lots of good content.

Site Features

In addition to factual information and relationships, participants noted other various features afforded to them by the site that enhanced their perception of the site overall. That includes rankings of high school football and basketball players, podcasts, and the ability for them to contribute to the site via message boards. Every participant weighed in on the rankings and, in each instance, their assessment on those rankings impacted their overall perception of the site. For example, when asked to assess the site overall, Scott, a subscriber to BluejayBanter, the Rivals.com site covering Creighton University athletics, talked about his belief that other sports media organizations are “not in the same realm” as Rivals because of its rankings:

I've looked far enough at other people out there. And every time I look at them, I go back to Rivals. I think they just do a better job overall, of grading kids. I know they do a better overall job of presenting who they are, and keeping up day by day, even hour by hour, a lot of the time. Every time I've looked at somebody

else, I just come back to Rivals and say, ‘you know what, you guys aren’t as good.’ It’s that simple.

Not all participants agreed that Rivals was superior to other sites due to its rankings. That was in large part due to a perceived lack of transparency of how those rankings are developed. Craig was among those who questioned the determined differences between recruits:

How do they even come up with who’s a three-star, who’s a two-star, who’s no stars? You’re looking at some of this stuff, the intangibles seem very close or the same across the board. The level of competition seems the same. How are they picking out who’s three and who’s two? Or, who’s four and who’s three, out of those guys? What criteria are they specifically looking at that drives that decision?

That was echoed by Mack, who questioned the effectiveness of rankings for so many high school student-athletes across the country:

The guys who are top 30, 40, 50 players, they see ‘em at multiple camps, multiple events, and multiple analysts have seen them. The guy who covers the Memphis basketball camp, might have seen nobody else, but there was some kid there who he really liked and it’s like, okay, but nobody else has seen him. So, maybe your opinion of him is inflated. You know, maybe it isn’t. I think (Rivals does) a good job of the top 50 or so players and how they rank. I don’t think they overanalyze them. I don’t think somebody’s pushing one more than the other. But that does happen. You might think a guy who’s rated tenth is really better than that, or really worse is really number 20. How do they get that final determination? I

don't know. But, somehow a player ends up 15 and you're like, 'okay, what's the difference?'

Many reporters offer a podcast as an extension of their coverage, which are linked or embedded within the site. While personality, as already mentioned, was a factor, many participants, such as Lane, cited the convenience of podcasts, as well as the mobility:

I'm finding that I'm starting to consume more podcasts because it's easier to do, it's easier to follow. I can download it and listen to it live on the plane or while I'm in the office. Maybe that's not the best place to do it, but while I'm doing other work and kind of, as other listening.

For Rivals sites that do not offer podcasting, participants such as Karl wondered, "I'm not sure why Rivals isn't doing that." Many participants believe podcasts have become so common in sports media that they expect Rivals sites to offer them. James, for instance, cited convenience, but also the ability to hear more coverage and clarification from reporters:

I tend to drive around a lot for my job. I'm in and out, or even, when I'm making food or taking a shower, whatever. It's an easy way to consume media. It's different. And you follow the right ones. Especially, I've listened to a lot of journalists do podcasts, and they're fantastic. There's entertainment value, but it's also informative.

In addition to podcasts, participants cited their ability to contribute to the Rivals team site's content through the message boards. Unlike other sports media sites, Rivals.com consists of message boards, which allow users to create a role for themselves

and for some participants, that provided a sense of ownership. This allowed them to enhance their feelings of self-worth, as users such as Craig, Lane, Neal, and William valued other user contributions of factual information and gave them the aforementioned ‘insider’ title afforded to a small fraction of users. Nearly all participants said they do not believe they possess exclusive information and go to the message board to enhance that knowledge and build their social networks. For example, Neal believes he is an “insider,” because he posts information about recruits. A self-proclaimed “die-hard” fan, Neal explained that he’s a long-time West Virginia football season-ticket holder and his seats are directly behind the section in which the football program seats high school football players and their families who visit for games. Before, during, and after games, Neal said he introduces himself to these student-athletes and their parents and asks them questions, such as where they’ve visited, where they’re visiting next, what they like about West Virginia football, and what they do not. He then takes this information and posts it on The Blue Lot, where other users interact with his comments. But for Neal, the primary reason for what he posts, everything he does on Rivals.com and partly why he views the site positively, centers around the praise, recognition, and perceived status he has:

If you bring something good to the table, the board, they respect the hell out of you. I think that’s awesome. I think that’s super cool. I mean, sense of community.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are those who regularly peruse the message board for information, but post little to no information themselves. Many participants labeled themselves ‘lurkers’ to define this role and Lane, specifically, noted that rather

than post thoughts or opinions, he likes to “just observe and consume” what other users have posted on the message board. One of the reasons he said he likes Rivals.com is because its message boards “allow people on the forum to have a platform” and he likes to contribute in this way:

There may be a time when I, on Twitter or something, I’ll give a thumbs up or I’ll say, ‘This is a great article. This is a great story. Maybe we should wait and see what happens.’ So, I’ll do just small comments, but I’m not really a person that’s very active on commenting on stories and articles. Beyond just ‘liking’ or thumbs up or thumbs down.

In describing why he takes this approach, Lane compared it to “rubbernecking,” when drivers nosily stare at the scene of a traffic accident. Though he’s not directly involved, he wants to see and know what has transpired:

It’s kind of like I sometimes like to watch a train wreck. I like to peek over, you know, curiosity gets you. You just like to peek over at it or click on it.

RQ2: How do subscribers to Rivals.com perceive the credibility of the organization’s reporters?

This question sought to understand the perceptions participants have towards the people who work for Rivals.com and its team sites, in respect to how credible they believe those reporters and the team sites to be. This determination is made based on four factors that participants reported they use: 1) perceived factual information over time (and the sub-theme: Bias is Not a Turn-Off); 2) connectivity; 3) visibility; and 4) reputation. These factors, which make up the themes in response to this question, reveal

that for many of the participants, while users are equally important, if not more important than reporters in bringing value to the site, reporters have a higher bar to cross in validating themselves to users as credible.

Theme Two: Perceived Factual Information Over Time

This theme expands on the sub-theme, *factual information*, described in response to the first research question. Users expressed a need to see information the reporters have posted repeatedly come to fruition before validating reporters as reporting factual information. Mack, a subscriber to TarHeelIllustrated, the Rivals.com site covering athletics at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, said he develops an expectation for factual information after repeatedly seeing it from the site:

The more you read them, the more you see that okay, the stuff they're saying is turning out to be true. You know, that rumor did end up being true or, this recruit isn't leaning towards North Carolina because of some reason. The articles over time bear true more truth than rumor.

While participants did value breaking news, they also valued error-free information, as the result of reporters' fact-checking. This includes Josh, for example, who said he believes reporters at VolQuest put in the necessary extra work before publishing:

I think that they're very credible. Like I said before, they don't miss stories. You don't see them having to pull stories or something because they just missed it, they had it wrong or whatever. I appreciate that. Sometimes, they'll even wait a little bit, where someone else may be reporting it, just so they confirm it to make

sure that it's true. And in their business, I totally understand that because again, everyone has their own agendas. You can be told by someone straight to your face one thing and they can be using you for another purpose. And so, I think they double check their sources. They're good. If something pops on their website, I know I can trust it.

Elijah, a subscriber to PowerMizzou, the Rivals site covering University of Missouri athletics, said he's seen so much factual information reported by the site over time that he associates the site's publisher, Gabe DeArmond, as being the top media source in the market. Elijah compared DeArmond to two of ESPN's most well-known reporters, who cover the NBA and the NFL:

I think the most credible reporters, and this is Rivals or national or whatever, let's say I hear a rumor on Twitter about something. My first reaction is to go see, okay, what did Adrian Wojnarowski say about it? What did Adam Schefter say? Or Missouri's case, what did Gabe DeArmond say on it, right? If Gabe hasn't tweeted it yet, I don't believe it yet. I'm still gonna hold out.

Reporter Bias is Not a Turn-Off

For many participants, bias from reporters towards the team they covered, was welcomed and/or begrudgingly expected. Some participants viewed Rivals more as a fan site, while others preferred to think of it as more journalistic and compared it to other recognized media outlets such as ESPN and The Athletic. Maria, a subscriber to DuckSportsAuthority, the Rivals.com site covering University of Oregon athletics, did

not explicitly refer to the site as a fan site, but said she wanted “pro-Oregon” information from DuckSportsAuthority reporters:

It’s like when someone brings up exactly how this specific person can benefit the team, rather than, ‘oh, this is their accomplishments now.’ It’s like, well, how is that going to benefit us? And that’s a big thing that I look for. And so, I’ve noticed a few reporters, I’m not sure what their names are, but you can tell the differences when some are more focused on how they can actually help the team rather than just getting the story out.

Many, such as Lincoln, said he considers Rivals.com and its team sites to be credible and journalistic. As a subscriber, he said he wants unbiased information:

Allow the fans to be the homers. You as a writer, being completely unbiased, you just state the facts and be completely honest with what the factual, the numbers or whatever the situation is and allow the fans to come in and kind of sell the program and be homerish with it.

The majority of participants, including Brooke, for example, believed there was bias, but it was not enough to sway them from subscribing to Rivals.com. Brooke said she believes all reporters have “an agenda to a point,” but she does not believe it affects the reporting and does not affect her decision to subscribe:

They’re still gonna write what they feel like they should be writing. I don’t feel like that’s going to change much, what you say. Maybe if you call them out for something that’s just a blatant lie, or something like that, that would be different.

But I don't feel like I've ever had to do that. Otherwise, I don't know that it's mattered to me.

Still, participants noted that they believed bias was inevitable. Geoff, for instance, cited that many Rivals reporters cover the athletics programs at the same university at which they attended or graduated from. But Geoff believes this situation gives the reporters more "ownership" in what they report, pushes them to uncover exclusive information, and provides an advantage because of prior relationships made while they attended the university:

The perception (of bias) can always be there, because of your knowledge and understanding of that program, more so than others. If I'm on the outside looking in and I'm looking at your content and how you're covering things and the detail, I could see where there could be some perceived biases. Because of the knowledge and the detail and knowing the kids and the coaches in and out. I could see how that perception can take place. But I think it's all about individual perception.

There was only one instance of a participant who cited bias as the reason for canceling a subscription. John said he believed Rivals.com was biased against high school football recruits who verbally committed and signed to attend and play at Texas A&M, and biased and "catering" towards those who committed and signed to attend and play at The University of Texas. He chose to unsubscribe and instead subscribe to one of the primary competitors of the Rivals.com site that covers Texas A&M athletics, an independent site called TexAgs.com. John did not specify that he felt that TexAgs was

biased towards recruits targeted by Texas A&M, but did say he believed the site, which is owned and operated by alumni of the university, was not biased against Texas A&M recruits. In the 'meet the staff' page on TexAgs' website, 25 of the 34 listed staff members either are alumni or currently attend Texas A&M. John understands and welcomes that innate bias:

I mean, they're close to where, they live and work, where they report. So, they're going to have their finger on the pulse of what's happening a lot more accurately than a national reporter would. Now, as far as, a lot of them are former students, or graduates of the institutions and the programs they cover. So, there is a bit of potential bias there and opinion there. But, that's to be true of really any media outlet that you find throughout the country and any reporting you're going to find, whether it's a new site or whatever.

John, however, said he did prefer some level of bias by Rivals.com reporters. In describing this preference, he likened the reporters to a team's radio announcers, who report fact, but also explicitly express their affections for the team they're covering:

You want them to get excited whenever something happens well. But you want them to be accurate in describing what they're seeing. You don't want candy-coated anything and you want them to be disappointed when something doesn't go right for you, that that kind of thing. But don't completely go North Korea and just completely pull a curtain over everything and be like, 'oh, it's going well. We got the number two-rated recruiting class and we're gonna be winning championships soon.' Then, you go 4-8 or something like that.

Theme Three: Visibility:

Perceptions of credibility are also tied to visibility, or what participants physically saw, as a gauge for credibility. In this case, participants explained that they were at camps to watch their sons, who were high school athletes, and saw the reporters, either because they wore company-branded shirts, or they knew who they were because they had seen the reporters' photograph via social media or the team site. Shane, an assistant high school football coach and subscriber to GamecockCentral, the Rivals.com site covering University of South Carolina athletics, said he has seen "all the writers on the field" from Rivals at camps. Seeing the reporters first-hand shapes how he views the reporters, their information, and the network as a whole:

I'm gonna say that I seen [sic] them actually out there and looking at the guys and then talking to the coaches and all that good stuff. I've been to Florida camps, where the Rivals guys are there at the satellite camps and things of that nature. I've seen them actually talk to the guys, so I trust 'em.

The visibility of Rivals reporters extends to the basketball side, too. Lincoln, a high school assistant basketball coach and summer league coach, said "the validity of what they were writing" came from not only reporters' presence, but also from brief chats with the reporters who gave him insight on their observations:

I could talk to these guys, I could see 'em. I knew they were at the gyms, I knew they were in there as long as I was. So, they're actually in there truly evaluating talent. Any of the major camps, the NBPA camp or all-American camps, they

were there. They had someone that was present and so it definitely made me want to go actually subscribe and actually follow what was going on.

For those participants who are not coaches, visibility came from attending events from the stands. Mack, for instance, said he's attended basketball games and seen Rivals.com reporters, such as Eric Bossi and Corey Evans, at the games reporting:

I see, where I live at, I live in a small town in Massachusetts, but I live right next to Springfield. Every January, there's the Hoop Hall Classic and you see these writers and the Bossi's, the Evans' and it validates that they're writing it, they're out there, they're seeing these kids and they know what they're talking about.

Theme Four: Reputation

Reputation of reporters includes instances where others see that they adhere to ethical standards, but largely, it alludes to a reporter's prior experience. For instance, participants said they consider a reporter to be credible because they worked for a known brand, such as ESPN, before they worked for Rivals.com. For Mike, both of his parents were television broadcast journalists, and he values legacy media, which also includes newspapers. When evaluating Rivals reporters, he gets a sense that they've been "doing it for a while," when he sees that the reporters' backgrounds includes writing for a newspaper:

These guys have been journalists, at you know, newspapers, before joining Rivals. I can't speak for any other Rivals sites, but as far as Warchant goes, yeah, definitely, I consider them credible. I would say they were credible before they

got there. I think that's what I like about Warchant, is that these guys have pre-established credibility from newspapers.

William said he followed one of the reporters from TigerIllustrated, Larry Williams, when Williams joined the site in 2008. Prior to that, Williams had covered Clemson athletics with the Charleston Post & Courier, a daily newspaper. William said he wanted to follow someone who was "super reliable," and he knew this from familiarity with Larry Williams' work:

I've known about him for years and years at this point. It was kind of enticing to me. I'd enjoyed his work there and followed him as he left the paper and went there. I think he's a big reason, and being a subscriber and seeing the stories and stuff like that they post.

Reputation, however, was not only used in reference to previous employment. Eliah, for instance, said he found the reporters for PowerMizzou, notably publisher Gabe DeArmond to be reputable because of his social media presence. Eliah said he "realized (DeArmond) was the guy" because of the large number of followers DeArmond had on his Twitter account:

I saw that he had a lot of Twitter followers, which like, is kind of a validation to say, 'hey, this guy's pretty important.' And then from there, I started reading some of the free content that he had. And I liked that and I decided to subscribe.

Theme Five: Connectivity

Social media can also illustrate how connected a reporter is. While the number of followers signifies reputation, specifically who is following a reporter can signify how

connected that reporter is. For instance, Ryan, a subscriber to TigerSportsReport, the Rivals site covering athletics at The University of Memphis, said he specifically looks at who CBS Sports columnist and analyst Gary Parrish follows on Twitter because “if he’s following you on Twitter, it’s for real:”

It’s all based on social media because there’s no relationship here. I don’t know these guys. So, I have to use my best judgment, like, who’s following these guys on Twitter? Who follows them? Because you can always tell, you know, a reporter may only have 500 followers, but if 100 of his followers have a verified checkmark next to their name, and they also work in the same industry, then obviously there is someone there that’s got a good reputation.

Participants also determined how connected a reporter is based on how many reporters from other sites within the Rivals network verified or added to that reporter’s information, either on social media or the message board. For example, Neal said seeing posts by analysts from the national site, such as director Mike Farrell or regional analysts Josh Helmholdt and Chad Simmons, “validates” what WVSports reporters have written:

(West Virginia football) really went after Georgia (recruiting) one year, Georgia and down south. So, you have Chad come on a lot. You have Josh come on from the Midwest, because they snagged a few kids from the Midwest and stuff. And it’s cool to see a fresh of breath air. You don’t only see, Keenan writing, or Vernon writing, or Patrick, one of the guys that, he’s a writer, too.

Finally, connectivity is assumed based not only on having access to other reporters in the network, but also on the other roles reporters have. Lane, for example,

cited RebelGrove podcasts in which the reporters have “interactions” with other sources. Another example is Josh, who believes the site’s publisher, Brent Hubbs, is well-connected because of his role outside of the site as the football sideline reporter and spotter for The Vol Network, the university’s radio and television network that broadcasts the football program’s games:

Everyone that covers the team has different connections to different coaches as coaches change sometimes. It’s good or bad. But, Brent works for the Vol Network, so he’s always gonna have a connection to the school that’s gonna get him some access more so than some of the others.

In sum, participants have a list of metrics they use to determine not only whether they enjoy Rivals.com and its team sites enough to subscribe, but how credible reporters who work for those sites are. These results have provided multiple interpretations, which I will dive deeper into, in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

After reviewing topics such as message boards, coverage of high school recruits, and the credibility of reporters, the final question I asked Craig was whether or not he felt like he got his money's worth from his subscription to GoWyoGo. Craig paused and looked straight ahead, away from the camera as if deep in thought:

Yeah, I think so. I think that's twofold. I'm extremely invested in the site, from the amount of time I've been here and been using it. That makes it worth it for me. Also, the inside information that I get from people that are members, that I definitely wouldn't get anywhere else.

Not only does Craig epitomize the typical Rivals subscriber based on previously reported characteristics (Hardin, et. al, 2012), he's also what, as a publisher and reporter for Rivals, I hoped to find in a subscriber: someone who's loyal and "extremely invested" in the website, as Craig put it. Attracting those types of users is easier said than done, as, in order to keep subscribers, the site must fulfill the gratifications sought by its users like Craig. This chapter provides insight to the findings from the previous chapter and explores how they relate to prior research in the field of sports journalism. First, I will interpret the findings of this study, to make sense of the gratifications sought and obtained by participants, which can offer valuable understanding of how Rivals and similar media entities may reach desirable audiences. Second, I will argue that cultural and social capital have key roles in participants' perceptions of Rivals and are crucial components that should be accounted for by any online media outlet. The chapter

concludes with a discussion of the project's theoretical and practical contributions, as well as a discussion of the limitations of the project and directions for future research.

User Relationships Matter

In interpreting the findings to the first research question, *How do subscribers to Rivals.com situate Rivals.com within the wider sports media landscape?* it is apparent that participants perceive Rivals as a reputable sports media outlet that is a blend of factual information and community, a combination that differentiates the site from typical legacy media outlets. While media organizations such as newspapers and news sites offer plenty of information, they lack the community aspect previously noted by scholars such as Hardin, et al. (2012) and Mudrick and Lupinek (2015). This is important to note, as one of the key takeaways from this study is that users want to feel like they have some type of relationship with the site. These relationships are largely achieved thinking in terms of the concept of social capital (Lesser, 2009), or the access that participants have to reporters and other users on the message board, in order to build connections and social networks. This study merits discussion of social capital because participants then use that capital obtained to enhance their social status, feeling of power, and self-fulfilled sense of fandom. Social capital is perhaps best understood through Craig, who uses his connections from the site to enhance his social status, or position he views himself (Sandefur & Laumann, 1998), both on and away from the message board. As an 'insider,' Craig has a role of authority on the *Hells Half Acre* message board, as well as with his friends, with whom he brags on the connections he has on the site that they do not, because they are not subscribers. When he said other Wyoming fans on other sites "don't

have a clue of what's actually going on," he is displaying the superiority and level of enhanced fandom thanks to the social capital he has obtained from GoWyoGo. In other words, Craig believes he is more of a fan because of the capital he has obtained. His "weak ties" expanded his information, and that information was deemed credible, which keeps him loyal to the site. Social capital is also apparent with participants such as Neal, who bragged throughout his interview, 'you sort of know people' through not only his family connections, but also due to his presence on the message board. He also was quick to explain how the placement of his season-tickets next to the recruit section at football games allowed him to meet high school football players and their parents, which he then tells other users on the message board, another example of social capital. The comment that perhaps spurred the connection with this study and social capital came from Neal, who explained he communicates with the recruits and then reports back to the message board that he spoke with them because, them knowing he has talked to sources causes them to "respect the hell out of you." For Neal, that validation speaks to the reason why he seeks to socialize with recruits and their families and why he covets the 'insider' role he has.

For participants who felt like they had established relationships with reporters and message board users, this equates to a high level of social capital. These relationships were cited as central reasons why they chose to subscribe to the site. Participants such as Lincoln, Karl, and Craig each spoke of the need for (i.e gratification sought) having some type of relationship with the site to which they subscribed. This can be achieved with reporters, other message board users, or both, but each participant who remained a

subscriber referenced a meaningful relationship with one or the other. Lincoln said he talks with Rivals reporters at and outside of camps and games and called those relationships “big to me,” which led to why he “respected Rivals a lot” and attributed to his decision to subscribe to the site. Karl said he feels like he has little to no relationship with the reporters of CUSportsNation, but he subscribes to the site because of the bond he feels like he has with other message board users from reading their posts and “almost feel(s) like I know them.” In each case, the idea of relationship as a gratification was not only sought, but achieved. Each relationship also served as a form of social capital, as Lincoln, for instance, is seen by others talking with Rivals reporters, which enhances his status, and is self-fulfilling when reporters initiate contact by phone or direct message. Karl is one of many participants who labeled themselves ‘lurkers,’ or users who reported making few to no posts on the message board because they felt as if they had no information to offer, but were rather interested in the information other users disseminated, as well as the camaraderie it offered. Despite not posting, Karl’s perception of a relationship with other message board users is an example of what Granovetter (1973) referred to as a *weak tie*. These acquaintances are considered the most important to obtain new information because they are from outside a user’s inner circle that generally knows the same information. Granovetter also maintains that these relationships are the best gauge of a person’s social capital. With that in mind, as well as the many users considered ‘insiders’ on the message board, it is easy to see why participants value Rivals’ message boards. These forums can facilitate the establishment of connections for a user to enhance their own social capital, which makes Rivals itself so

valued overall by participants. A mix of insiders, lurkers, and those in between then form a community in which participants such as Craig and Karl both can access and develop the social capital they sought.

It would be naïve to believe participants only value the message board and those who encompass it purely for the relationships. Participants said they want access to *what* those connections know. To that point, the message boards, and the site in general, provided an avenue for users to acquire cultural capital. Much like how those who have a degree are afforded the ability to attain certain jobs (Davies & Rizk, 2018), those users who have the ‘insider’ moniker attached to them are afforded a status on the message boards. Craig, for instance, said he enjoys the status he has attained as an insider (Sandefur & Laumann, 1998), while his presence and the continued supply of cultural capital, in addition to having access to his posts, attract other users such as Karl, who cited users such as Craig as a central reason he subscribes. Karl has enhanced his own social capital because he has access to insiders such as Craig, and has enhanced what Bourdieu (2005) refers to as embodied cultural capital, or the knowledge acquired through that social connection. Craig subscribes because of both the enhanced status he enjoys, but also because, like Karl, he enhances his own cultural capital with the knowledge obtained from other message board users. This avenue to providing social and cultural capital could be a new way of thinking about the kind of services sports media organizations should offer. Both Karl and Craig are long-time subscribers and that loyalty is something that legacy media outlets are struggling to establish and maintain in a digital environment where paying for news is something audiences are still reluctant to do

(Bellamy, 2006; Suggs, 2016; Sherwood, et. al, 2017). But both have remained due in large part to their perception that Rivals provides a way for them to enhance their social and cultural capital.

One interesting benefit of Rivals is the opportunity some of the network's sites give users to meet outside of the message board, in-person, a way for users to enhance their capital. Les spoke of attending multiple pre-game tailgates sponsored by the staff of JayhawkReport, Rivals' affiliate covering University of Kansas athletics. What Les described is similar to what I did as the publisher of HokieHaven, in which many of the site's users attend and fraternize. Dicken-Garcia (1998) warned of the pitfalls of these situations, as users can have a different persona and communicate differently online than in-person. If this occurs, a user could perceive another user previously respected and considered an 'insider' to be less-reputable and possibly terminate their subscription. Les, while the only participant to mention these tailgates, however, spoke positively of them. For him, meeting users face-to-face only strengthened the perception he had of other message board users. Les also cited the tailgates as a way to enhance his social network, what I have referred to as social capital, because he felt "more part of the community." What contributed to this was that Les mentioned the presence of the site's reporters and it is safe to assume that he used these opportunities to hobnob with them and develop that relationship. Les did not specifically state what he did with this capital, though based on other participant responses, he likely used it to intensify his perceived level of fandom and perhaps, to flaunt that fandom in other social circles and increase his status in that

other group. Both would add value for Les and give him motivation to subscribe to Rivals.

Finally, it is important to note that thinking in terms of uses and gratifications, what other gratification these sites, and the message boards included within them, afford users. Sundar and Limperos (2013) argued that the needs of users can change, based on the advancement of technology. Such appears to be the case with Rivals and at least, the message board features recently added. These message boards now resemble social media in many ways, in that users can post emojis, embed tweets, YouTube videos and other multimedia, and as Lane described, ‘like’ posts. This addition allowed Lane, who described himself as a ‘lurker,’ to feel as if he contributed to the site when he simply ‘liked’ a post. The architecture of the site, as Sundar and Limperos (2013) show, created a need that could be fulfilled through engagement with it. This simple tool is another way Rivals has separated itself from many other media organizations, which do not afford users this ability to feel as if they have contributed.

Reporter/Audience Engagement Matters

The importance of community cannot be underscored, though it goes beyond simply interactions with other message board users. Hardin, et al. (2012) noted that users enjoyed interaction on the message board, but utilized it for information, not socialization. Mudrick and Lupinek (2015) followed that with the finding that users do value the social aspect of the message boards and seek to bond with other users who have similar interests, predominantly, college athletics. This study, however, demonstrates that the central actors in this community are the site reporters themselves. Participants noted

feeling included in a community, in part, when they felt some type of relationship not only with message board users, but also reporters. Sports journalists previously largely have communicated with their audiences via one-way communication (Pederson, 2014), as legacy media traditionally have not developed personal relationships with their audiences (McGuire & Murray, 2016). Participants in this study spoke to the importance of developing some type of bond with the reporters, whether purely through the message board or in-person, through the tailgate events as Les described, and through in-person run-ins at games and camps as Lincoln described. This points to the need reporters have to fully participate in what Pederson (2014) calls a digital media convergence, and be well-versed in multimedia and other internet tools (Veglis & Pomportsis, 2014). This includes the necessity that reporters now must be active and positively engage with users via social media and in the case of Rivals, on the message boards. The reason is that accessibility to reporters by users may be a way for users to meet the gratifications sought of enhancing their social capital and cultural capital. After all, reporters should be well connected and have their own high levels of social capital (Perreault & Ferrucci, 2020), as well as high levels of cultural capital obtained through those connections (Siapera & Spyridou, 2012). By developing relationships with reporters, users can access that capital and use it for their own benefit, whether that be to enhance their status within the social groups they associate, or to increase their own level of fandom. Participants such as Lane and William assessed the site positively in part by referencing the relationships they believe they have with site reporters, which was largely based on how the reporters interacted with users on the message boards. William referenced how active

TigerIllustrated reporters are on the message board, with both factual information posts and commentary. In this way, he likes how reporters not only post news updates, but *socialize* with other message board users. For participants in this study, this type of interaction led to positive feelings toward both the reporters and the site.

The interaction with fans also extends to other multimedia elements referenced by Veglis and Pomportsis (2014), most notably podcasts. These were mentioned widely by participants as a valuable commodity for the site. In the case of Lane, podcasts were the primary vehicle that drove him to the site. He said the information from the podcasts, in addition to the “candor” and “personalities” exuded by the reporters led him to subscribe to the site, of which he has been a part for one year. It is notable that for Lane and others, they saw the podcasts as an avenue to both acquire information and develop a relationship with the reporters by receiving insight into the reporters’ personalities. These comments, combined with how participants rated and valued reporter engagement on the message boards point to a role that Rivals reporters must play that encapsulates both “reporter” and “fan.” On one side, they are expected to deliver accurate, timely information. But on the other hand, they are most valued when they interact with users, show personality on the message boards and in other forums, such as podcasts. In short, this study shows that users want to enhance their social capital specifically from a relationship with reporters. Not all Rivals reporters and sites produce podcasts, though those who do not should quickly begin. Most notably, Karl stated, “I’m not sure why Rivals isn’t doing that” after he said he consumes multiple podcasts and said the site he subscribes to, CUSportsNation, does not. Message board interaction and podcasts also

satisfied participant desire for something extra as Rivals subscribers, that separates the site from competitors. While there was little to no complaint on the cost of a subscription, participants wanted something that they believe added more value to a subscription. Podcasts and message board engagement by reporters appear to meet that sought gratification.

Simultaneous Reporter Bias and Factuality

The second research question asked, *How do subscribers to Rivals.com perceive the credibility of the organization's reporters?* The short answer is that through a process over time, participants use four metrics to determine what they see as a credible reporter: 1) how factual they believe the information to be during this time, a nod to cultural capital; 2) how connected they believe the reporters are to sources who provide that information, a nod to social capital; 3) how much they physically see reporters at games, camps, and other events; and 4) what others, such as well-known sports media personalities, think of the reporters, as well as the reporters' experience prior to their employment by Rivals.com. If reporters check each of these boxes, participants deem them as a credible source of information. Participants who perceived Rivals reporters as credible then placed them alongside well-known media personalities, such as ESPN's Adrian Wojnarowski and Adam Schefter, as Eliah described.

The long answer is that there are more layers to these metrics and at the forefront of this meaning-making process is how participants view bias. Many journalists are taught throughout their high school and undergraduate education to be objective, unbiased, and factual. The common conception, as is prefaced by the Society of

Professional Journalists' code of ethics (2014) is that journalists cannot show favoritism and be considered legitimate or factual sources. Academic scholars especially have been critical of sports journalists for violating these conceptions, including showing favoritism that creates conflicts of interest toward sources (Bourgeois, 1995) and labeling these journalists as subjective, biased and indistinguishable from fans (English, 2016; Hardin, 2005; Hardin, et. al, 2009; McEnnis, 2013), all of which violate the norms established by codes of ethics. Online sports journalists, including those with Rivals, have been further demonized by legacy media sports journalists, as those online have admitted to bias and a lack of other norms (McEnnis, 2020). Findings from this study, however, show it is time for not only online sports journalists, but all journalists to re-evaluate their practices and what is considered legitimate. After all, journalists have an obligation to give communities what they need.

Participants acknowledged bias by Rivals reporters, but largely embraced it. Bias was the way participants achieved a sense of community. That the participants felt like the reporter was one of them and not an outsider added to participants' positive assessment of that reporter's credibility. There are some instances in which participants simply want factual information, such as about student-athletes a college athletics program is recruiting, as Mack described, and in coaching searches, as Geoff pointed to. But largely, participants are either okay with, or want reporters who show bias in support of their team. Brooke, for example, was indifferent towards reporter bias because she perceives the information reporters provide as factual. Some participants, like John, wanted some bias, akin to a university's radio announcers, while others such as Maria

want information disseminated that is “going to benefit us.” One likely reason for desired bias is that users want information from someone they believe has similar interests (Mudrick & Lupinek, 2015), just as they do with message board users. And because reporters are on the message boards and give commentary as many other users do, participants expect reporters to act somewhat as a fan would. Another explanation could be that users simply want to reaffirm their social identity (McQuail, et al., 1972), or their level of fandom, as Mudrick and Lupinek (2015) reported was the reason why fans consumed Rivals. But that level of fandom could be deep enough that bias is also acceptable, as long as a user feels like a reporter still relays factual information about their team. For some users, they feel like the team is part of themselves (Thorne & Bruner, 2006). A negative statement about the team feels like a negative statement towards themselves, which would cause them to have negative perceptions of the site. Finally, not all users utilize Rivals in the same manner. While some use the site as a one-stop shop in which they gather all of their information about the university’s athletics programs (Hardin, et. al, 2012), for others, Rivals is simply one of many media organizations accessed by users to gain a holistic picture of their favorite athletic program. Other media entities, such as newspapers, could be where users go for a full report, including news that could paint a university’s athletics program in a negative light such as arrests and crime-related stories. Rivals could be where users expect only positive information, though its information encompasses more than a school’s official athletics website, which is only team related news.

Rivals reporters are thus in a unique position in which they are expected to portray the roles of both fan and reporter, or at least think in terms of how a fan would. This is a line Rivals asks its reporters to walk that strays from what many journalists and academic scholars think of as acceptable journalistic practice, but is part of continued new job responsibilities (McGuire & Murray, 2016) now expected of any journalist. In essence, the findings in this study show that it is possible for journalists to be both biased and credible. Participants such as Craig embraced a reporter who they believed was biased because the metrics to determine credibility were all checked. And as Craig said, he is aware of negative information reported about Wyoming athletics, so he likes that Ian, the publisher of GoWyoGo, is someone “who, more or less spins things positively.” Rivals reporters are in a rare position in which they can cover games, press conferences, and provide analysis as legacy media do, post positive information as university strategic communications departments do, but cover recruiting as those departments cannot, due to NCAA rules that prohibit communication about a student-athlete until the athlete has signed an NLI (NCAA, 2021). They also have the benefit of message board insiders who provide tips and other information. Still, the expectation of Rivals reporters to be both fan and sports journalist is not without expected tensions. These reporters have long struggled for acceptance with their sports journalism peers for reasons ranging from lack of formal training (Suggs, 2015), to lack of ethics in practice (Yanity & Edmondson, 2011). Only within the past decade did Rivals reporters finally gain enough recognition by university athletics departments to widely gain credentials to games (Suggs, 2016) and only recently did these reporters express a feeling of acceptance from their sports

journalism peers (Winemiller, et al., 2020). The expectation that Rivals reporters be both a fan and a journalist may continue to put the status of Rivals reporters, as assessed by their peers, on unsteady ground. In particular, the expectation among users that the site's reporters share their personality, engage as fans on the message boards, and be transparent about showing a form of homerism reflects McEnnis' (2020) assertion that digital sports journalism is the "toy department within the toy department." It is difficult to ignore the continued success of Rivals.com, however, most recently shown by its inclusion in a \$5 billion purchase by Apollo Global Management for 90 percent of the company (Gottfried & Fitzgerald, 2021). And based on previous studies (Hardin, et al., 2012; Mudrick & Lupinek, 2015) as well as this one, Rivals boasts a substantial, loyal subscriber base that largely does not disagree with its practices. Ultimately, for Rivals reporters, although meeting user expectations in a way that satisfies the gratifications sought by its users may simultaneously grow the site, it may also weaken reporter's own status among peers (Winemiller, et al., 2020).

Lastly, bias is also associated with boosterism, another term that fits squarely into this discussion because of its sometimes negative connotation in journalistic practice. This refers to the financial support individuals and companies give to universities and their athletic programs (Hardin, 2005). While athletes can face major repercussions for accepting financial gifts from boosters (a separate debatable topic), Hardin also has described the admittance of sports journalists to being boosters, or financial supporters of the teams they cover. This widely has been seen as a conflict of interest and bad practice that tarnished these journalists' reputations because their actions were "compromising

journalistic integrity” (p. 67). Like bias, this study does not disparage previous critiques, but it does raise the possibility that participants do not view these previous perceived grievances as harshly. Because of participants’ sought gratification of cultural capital, having a reporter who is also a booster could make them more of an insider, as it could allow them to be privy to more information. There was certainly pushback within this study, such as from Lincoln, who expressed his wish for reporters to “allow the fans to be the homers” and remain unbiased. But the window is at least open for reporters to be boosters and their audiences condone it.

Conclusion

It is time for online journalists and media organizations to think not only in terms of informing their audiences with compelling, useful information, but also to do so in a way that allows audiences to develop their social and cultural capital. These forms of capital are the root of participants’ gratifications sought and obtained. In other words, Rivals.com and other online media entities should emphasize not only the information they provide, but also relationships. Currently, not all media organizations have the means to allow for user acquisition of both social and cultural capital due to their technological platforms. To that end, media organizations should study the platform offered by Rivals for guidance in constructing their own, in order to provide for user gratifications. For participants, relationships are vital, as they cited the need to develop them not only with other message board users, but reporters, too. This is easier said than done, as reporters already juggle many roles, which has turned many away from the industry. This means reporters must strike a balance in positioning the task of becoming

more accessible to users within their current workload, much as social media duties are now commonplace. In hindsight, I did have this form of user accessibility in mind, as it factored into my decision to hold a HokieHaven.com tailgate prior to every Virginia Tech home football game from the 2013 season through 2016. I wanted subscribers to feel welcomed, to take ownership in the site, and to maintain the perception of my own connections and knowledge with the various guests I invited to participate in the tailgate. The high school football players being recruited by Virginia Tech added to that perception, but did aid in my own capital, by fostering relationships I had developed. It is these relationships that can prove especially valuable, as access to these athletes dwindles after they enroll and begin participating in football activities at the university in which they sign their letters of intent. Though these student-athletes cannot be cited easily during this time due to communication policies within the university athletic department, those prior relationships still translate to exclusive information for reporters. There were many times when I developed a bond with a student-athlete who was in high school, continued communication to maintain that relationship, then learned or confirmed information from the athlete when that athlete was on the university's football team and cited that person as an anonymous source within the program.

One of the looming questions from this study, however, is how much control reporters have over their credibility. Even if they adhere to the suggestions mentioned, credibility is a subjective process that varies among individuals, much like the very rankings Rivals.com is known for. From my own experience, I once covered the commitment announcement of a four-star football player, Jalen Dalton. My sources

indicated he would choose to play and attend Virginia Tech, which is why I attended the announcement. I set a story to post shortly after the time of the impending announcement, that he would choose Virginia Tech. Dalton instead, chose the University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill. Due to poor cell service and an inability to access the site, the story still automatically published on HokieHaven.com. Though I was able to access and delete the story some 30 minutes later, the damage had been done. Years later, I was still reminded of this gaffe on the message boards and told of other sites that mentioned it as well. My credibility suffered as a result. Still, based on findings from this study, if reporters and sites adhere to the guidelines provided by participants, they should be able to establish credibility and sustain financial success moving forward. Where Rivals has succeeded is developing relationships and engaging with its users, by having reporters do more than simply report and write articles.

Finally, though this study provided clarity on user acceptance of bias, there is still the question of how much bias is acceptable. There was not uniform acceptance of reporter bias by participants, as some welcomed it, while others expected reporters to adhere to traditional standards such as those provided by the Society of Professional Journalists (2014). Still, findings support the notion that reporters simultaneously can be factual and biased and remain a credible information source. Much of this decision of how much bias reporters should exert also lies in what type of site they want their team site to be. While many Rivals reporters and publishers spoke to adherence to traditional journalistic standards (Winemiller, et al., 2020), not all did. From personal experience, Rivals allows its team sites a considerable amount of autonomy, in which reporters can

experiment somewhat with this balance. Not all users will be satisfied either way, but reporters should strive to find the mix of journalistic standards and fandom that work in harmony with the standards of journalists, university athletic departments, sources, and users. But it is important to remember that user subscriptions are what provide the most financial backing in the Rivals model.

Practical Implications

The results of this study should provide a guide for journalists and media organizations in how to reach their audiences, as well as how to adapt to continually changing demands and standards. First, participants outlined gratifications they sought and obtained as subscribers to Rivals.com and its team sites, giving a clearer picture of what should be provided in an online setting to achieve financial success, or economic capital. There were specific suggestions provided, such as launching a site podcast if there is not one, providing more multimedia content such as videos, and providing more transparency with the ranking of high school athletes. Reporters also now should conduct more engagement with their audiences. It is clear audiences are not passive and, more than ever, want to participate in the journalistic process. Perhaps most importantly, reporters are faced with more dilemmas in terms of how they should conduct themselves ethically, though this study offers more clarity on what reporter behavior is acceptable for media audiences.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is not without its limitations and further research is needed to expand on the foundation presented by this dissertation. The first limitation is this study

examined only one website, Rivals.com. While other websites such as ESPN and 247Sports.com could yield similar findings from their subscribers, that is not certain. For one, the business models of Rivals.com and 247Sports, for instance, differ in that Rivals operates predominantly through site subscriptions by users, while 247Sports relies on more click-throughs and advertising revenue (Niesen, 2019). This could net differing audiences, as each model differs in its goal to generate economic capital. Future research would do well to examine other sports media organizations, then compare results to those generated from this study to determine what audience variations, if any, exist.

Second, the gender of participants from this project contained only two who identified as women and the other 19 as men. My estimation is that the randomly selected participants are well-representative of the subscriber base for Rivals.com, based on my previous experience as reporter and publisher. Among the participants were coaches, parents of high school student-athletes and current college athletes, and diehard sports fans. Previous research (Hardin, et al., 2012) also substantiates the low number of female site members by concluding that subscribers are predominantly white males. Yet assuming this remains the case is not a given. As the media landscape has evolved and shifted, so too have audiences. Demographic segments have been drawn to various media that meet their gratifications. For example, Facebook users report using the platform more for connecting with friends and family over other social networking sites (Phua, et al., 2017), in part due to more older demographics also using Facebook more than other platforms. That differs from the intended audience when Facebook was launched in 2004: college students at select universities. To address the concern of a lack of female

representation, future research should make it a point to be inclusive to both men and women, as well as other demographics, such as race and age.

Finally, this study used Twitter as a vehicle to reach users who had been subscribers in the previous five years to Rivals.com and one of its team sites. An assumption cannot be made that this method is inclusive of all subscribers to the network. Future research should consider other social media platforms, in addition to other communication vehicles, in order to reach more subscribers and be more representative of the users who subscribe or recently subscribed to the network.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview Guide

- 1) What made you want to subscribe to **(insert Rivals site here)**?
Possible follow-ups: Are you a **(insert university covered by Rivals site here)** graduate?
- 2) Walk me through when you get on **(insert Rivals site here)**. What do you typically do while you're on there?
- 3) How long have you been a subscriber?
- 4) What were the reasons why you cancelled your subscription?
- 5) What specifically does **(insert Rivals site here)** do differently that maybe other sites don't?
- 6) Mention credibility with **(insert Rivals site here)** Are they credible? In what way?
- 7) How important is it to you that the reporters of **(insert Rivals site here)** are supportive of **(insert university covered by Rivals site here)**?
- 8) What makes a good Rivals reporter? (touch on credibility and legitimacy)
- 9) How much do the reporters specifically impact your decision to subscribe to **(insert Rivals site here)**?
- 10) Would you be likely to cancel your subscription if any of the reporters left?
- 11) How innovative is **(insert Rivals site here)** in its coverage? Podcasts, etc.
- 12) Do you go to Rivals or traditional media to find out news on **(insert Rivals site here)**?
- 13) In that sense, how does **(insert Rivals site here)** compare to other sports media?
- 14) Do you consider the work by Rivals.com and **(insert Rivals site here)** journalism? Why?
- 15) How likely are you to browse **(insert Rivals site here)** when **(insert university covered by Rivals site here)** is winning?

- 16) How likely are you to browse **(insert Rivals site here)** when **(insert university covered by Rivals site here)** is losing?
- 17) Are coaching searches something that bring you to Rivals.com?
- 18) How often do you browse **(insert Rivals site here)** during a coaching search?
- 19) What is most important to you about Rivals?
- 20) How important is it to know information about **(insert Rivals site here)** before anyone else?
- 21) What do you think about the rankings of players created by Rivals.com?
- 22) What do you think of the ratings of players created by Rivals.com?
- 23) Do you believe the rankings of players created by Rivals.com are fair?
- 24) Are you active on the message board?
Possible follow-up: Are you more just kind of like, observe and see what's being said on there?
- 25) How important is being known for something, on the message board important to you and why?
Possible follow-up: How important is it to have a 'guru' or 'insider' on the message board?
- 26) Do you feel like there's a community on the message board?
- 27) Other folks have mentioned a mailbag. Is it on **(insert Rivals site here)**? Ask about fan feedback?
- 28) There's some mixing of sports and politics in other arenas. Should it happen on the site?
- 29) Do you want women's sports coverage?
- 30) What would you like **(insert Rivals site here)** to keep doing?
- 31) What would you like **(insert Rivals site here)** to stop doing?
- 32) What would you like **(insert Rivals site here)** to do more of?
- 33) If you're not currently a subscriber, do you plan to re-subscribe at any point?

Appendix 2. Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Document

Homers or journalists? A uses & gratifications approach to who follows college sports recruiting websites and their perceptions of credibility

Introduction to Study:

You have been invited to participate in this study because you have identified yourself as a subscriber of Rivals.com. The purposes of this study are twofold: to gain a greater understanding about how and why you use Rivals.com; and to explore your perceptions of the journalistic notion of credibility and how that effects your willingness to subscribe.

Information about Your Role as a Participant in the Study:

After agreeing to participate in the study by signing this informed consent document, a research investigator will conduct a face-to-face interview with you at your convenience, either by telephone, or via virtual meeting software (e.g. Zoom, Skype, FaceTime). The approximate duration of the interview is estimated to last 60-90 minutes. This interview will be recorded using digital recording devices or computer software. This interview will be transcribed into a written document and analyzed for themes relevant to the study's purpose.

Risks:

Specific risks related to participating in this study include: potential emotional distress activated by interview questions about ethical and social issues related to the occupation, and potential loss of confidentiality. To avoid personal distress, you may choose not to answer a question at any point during the interview process, or withdraw from the research process at any point. Regarding loss of confidentiality, most research involves some level risk to the privacy of your response and it is possible that someone could find out your involvement based on the specific information given in your interview. However, the investigators believe this is unlikely because of the following procedures we will use to protect your information, available for your review below in the Confidentiality section.

Benefits:

In exchange for your participation in this study, after completion of your interview with the researcher, you will be given a \$10 Amazon gift card. You will be asked to provide an email address in order to receive the e-gift card.

Confidentiality:

Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym known only by persons conducting the study. Any additional identifying information, such as specific dates or locations, will be excluded from any subsequent oral or written reports about the study. Audio and

transcribed interview files will be stored securely on a private Google Drive operated by the University of Tennessee, and will be accessible only to persons conducting the study unless you specifically give permission in writing to make your interview file available to other parties. Again: no identifying reference will be made which could link participants to the study in any oral or written reports about the study.

_____ Participant's initials

Contact Information: If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact one of the investigators: Jason Stamm by email: jstamm1@utk.edu, or Dr. Erin Whiteside by email: ewhites2@utk.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-7697 or at utkirb@utk.edu.

Additional Notes about Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary; you can decline to participate or end your participation at any time, though this will exclude you from the opportunity to receive a \$10 e-gift card. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

Consent

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature: _____

Date: _____

Investigator's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 3. IRB Approval



January 22, 2020

Jason Stamm,
UTK - College of Communication and Inf - Journalism/Electronic Media

Re: UTK IRB-20-05619-XP
Study Title: Homers or Journalists? A Uses & Gratifications Approach to Who Follows College Sports
Recruiting Websites and their Perceptions of Objectivity

Dear Jason Stamm:

The UTK Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your application for the above referenced project. It determined that your application is eligible for expedited review under 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1), category/ies (6) and (7). The IRB has reviewed these materials and determined that they do comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects.

Therefore, this letter constitutes full approval by the IRB of your application (version 1.1) as submitted, including the documents listed below that have been dated and stamped IRB approved. Approval of this study will be valid from 01/22/2020 to 01/21/2021.

Rivals.com Subscriber interviews consent form- Stamm v. 2.2
Stamm Recruitment Email Script (1) v. 2.1
Stamm Transcriber Confidentiality v.1.1
Stamm Interview Guide v. 1.0

In the event that subjects are to be recruited using solicitation materials, such as brochures, posters, web-based advertisements, etc., these materials must receive prior approval of the IRB. Any revisions in the approved application must also be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. In addition, you are responsible for reporting any unanticipated serious adverse events or other problems involving risks to subjects or others in the manner required by the local IRB policy.

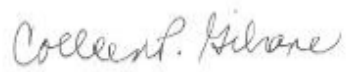
Finally, re-approval of your project is required by the IRB in accord with the conditions specified above. You may not continue the research study beyond the time or other limits specified unless you obtain prior written approval of the IRB.

Institutional Review Board | Office of Research & Engagement
1534 White Avenue Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
865-974-7697 865-974-7400 fax irb.utk.edu

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Flagship-Campus of the University of Tennessee System 

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Colleen P. Gilrane".

Colleen P. Gilrane, Ph.D.
Chair

VITA

Jason Stamm is a doctoral candidate at the University of Tennessee in the School of Journalism and Electronic Media in the College of Communication and Information. He serves as the president of the college's Graduate Student Association and as a graduate assistant in the Adam Brown Social Media Command Center. Jason's research interests include college sports recruiting websites, journalism practice, media audiences, fandom, and social media. Prior to pursuing his Ph.D., Jason graduated in 2017 with his M.S. in Corporate and Professional Communication from Radford University and in 2007 with his B.A. in News/Editorial Journalism from Western Kentucky University. He spent four years as the publisher of HokieHaven.com, the Rivals.com site covering Virginia Tech athletics and recruiting, and one year on the same beat for TheVTZone.com in the Scout.com network. Jason also spent one year as the sports editor for The Oldham Era, four years as the editor of InsideHilltopperSports.com in the Rivals network, and three years as editor of The Sporting Times monthly magazine. Upon completion of his doctoral studies, Jason will continue his career at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as an Assistant Professor in Sports Media and Communication.