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Justin Scott

Western Michigan University, justinorin94@gmail.com

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Honors Thesis - Studying the Effects of High School Athletics Social Media

Justin Scott

Dr. Scott Cowley and Dr. Ann Veeck

Western Michigan University

Fall 2017

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Part 1 – Analyzing Social Media in High School Athletics	3
Abstract	4
Introduction	5
Literature Review	7
Hypotheses	8
School Communication Quality	9
Sporting Event Attendance	9
Academic Mission Alignment	10
Methodology	11
Sample	11
Survey	13
Findings	14
Discussion	18
Limitations	19
Part 2 – Analysis of Current School’s Athletics Facebook Page	19
Methodology	20
Findings	20
References	23
Appendix	27
Facebook Post	27
Interviews	28
Interview Questions	39
Survey Questions	40

Part 1 – Analyzing Social Media in High School Athletics

Abstract

This research project focuses on high school athletics social media pages and their relevance to high school communication audiences and institutional communication goals.

I conducted two in-depth interviews with school officials from a large Michigan high school, a survey of the high school sports social media followers, and an analysis of data from that high school's Facebook page.

I was able to determine that seeing social media content from high school athletics pages had a positive relationship with how the school's quality of social media communication was perceived, intentions to attend athletic events, and an increased awareness of the school's academic mission.

It was also determined that engaging with a school's social media content from high school athletics pages had a positive relationship with how the school's quality of social media communication was perceived, intentions to attend athletic events, and an increased awareness of the school's academic mission.

Additionally, my content analysis found that high school Facebook posts with academic accomplishments about student athletes had a significantly higher engagement rate than other types of content put out. Content with academic and athletic accomplishments tended to outperform other types of content on the Facebook page as well.

Introduction

Social media is used by a large number of organizations around the United States. In a 2014 study, 88 percent of businesses with at least 100 employees in the United States used social media in some form to promote their business (Bennett, 2014).

High schools are important educational institutions that cater to student academic needs. They also have the unique opportunity of having athletic teams for students to enjoy playing sports as an extracurricular activity. High school sports has become a major part of the daily functions in high schools around the United States. Almost 8,000,000 American high schoolers play at least one sport (NFHS, 2017). This research looks at American high schools on social media, not from the education side, but the athletics side. The use of social media from schools to communicate high school sports has only recently become popular. An analysis of Michigan high schools I conducted in 2016 showed that over 200 Michigan high schools had an active presence on Twitter. Social media can be used to communicate athletics news, scores, and information for a high school. This research looks at how high schools utilize social media to report on athletics and academics. I not only want to look at how high schools use social media, and the best way to effectively use it, but also the benefits of doing so.

In an interview with the researcher, Cindy Johnston, the public relations and social media manager for Lowell Area Schools in Michigan confirms that communication through social media is important. “Media, in terms of online is number one because the budgets are so tight now and all I need is relatively inexpensive,” added Mrs. Johnston when asked about the school’s communication strategies. Regarding what the district seeks to gain through social media she said that establishing a “relationship” was key. Lowell High School’s athletic director and assistant principal Dee Crowley, agrees, seeing their objective be “keeping our fans and community informed, and sharing as much positive news as we can.” High schools use social media to inform primarily. There is little research in this area though whether high schools inform successfully, or whether social media is related to actions or opinions in this field.

A lot of high school social media communication revolves around high school athletics. There is uncertainty about how athletics social media content relates to the institution's communication goals. The goal of the high school is to focus on academics, not athletics. According to administrator interviews goal of the high school is to focus on academics, not athletics. If high schools are putting the time and resources into athletics communication, are they effectively meeting school objectives, or just athletic ones? As brought up in my interviews, the goals of the institution include highlighting student accomplishments, keeping their audience informed, and building relationships. This is the first research to take an in-depth look at this subject.

This research explores the relationship between high school athletics social media communication and communication objectives by the institution. The questions my research seeks to answer include what engagement and exposure to athletics social media do for a school? I looked at how it relates to increased perceptions of the school, the school's communication quality as well as looking at the relationship between exposure and engagement on attitudes and behaviors. I also wanted to do an analysis of different content forms.

My research was answered through a multi-method approach which included existing literature on the subject, survey of parents and students through Facebook, two semi-structure interviews with school administrators, and analysis of engagement on a Facebook sports page.

Literature Review

The two primary effects of social media are the effect on mood and attitudes toward the content source (De Vries et al., 2012). Every Facebook page, nonprofit, for-profit, education, athletics, is engaging in some sort of appeal to their Facebook fan base. Social media exposure would positively affect our thoughts about a particular brand because by seeing content posted in a positive light, we are going to have good feelings about that brand.

A study that gave an example of derived attitudes being formed from social media use comes from looking at musical festival attendees and how they interacted with the marketers of the music festivals (Hudson et. al, 2014 and Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Sashi, 2012). It was determined that when the attendees interacted with the brand on social media, it had a direct effect on their emotional attachment. Their interaction was either through comments, likes, or shares which is broadly defined in this research simply as engagement. It means that social media interaction can lead to attachment and a high level of emotional involvement with that brand.) Social media can influence attitudes as these studies have shown. With social media affecting our attitudes in these ways, some schools are making social media a part of their daily routine.

When it comes to mood, a controversial Facebook study showed there was a correlation when users received a timeline with negative news and positive news and the moods of their Facebook statuses (Morrin, 2014). They determined those who saw the positive posts wrote more positive statuses. Those who saw more negative posts, posted more negatively. This means that social media can have an effect on our mood. Social media affects attitudes. Content from social media has a direct effect on attitudes toward the brand (M. Laroche et al., 2013). This is important because a brand's social media post has a correlation to how people feel about that brand. If they are consistently providing poor or controversial content, there is a higher likelihood their followers and those who see their content are going to have a negative attitude towards the brand. Exposure to sports social media content would therefore be positively associated with feeling informed.

A well run social media effort can have a direct positive effect on brand trust (M. Laroche et al., 2013). A school's athletics social media efforts would help establish trust in the school that they are invested in the school's success. Brand trust is especially important for

schools, as parents are sending their children to get an education there. This doesn't work well if the school isn't trustworthy. Adding on, there is that engagement with consumers not only directly affects consumer attitudes towards brand relationship outcomes. It also has this impact on positive traits. These traits include satisfaction, trust, affective commitment, and loyalty (Brodie et al., 2011b). This concept works not just with businesses, but with nonprofits and schools as well. A school getting engagement can benefit in all of these areas. Exposure would have nearly the same effect as engagement. Exposure, meaning how often content is seen, is a step below engagement, where the user is actually interacting with the content.

Does sports social media visibility matter more or less than social media engagement on positive attitudes toward the school? In my interview with Lowell High School's athletic director and assistant principal, she said that the ultimate goal was for those who followed the school's athletics page on social media to gain "pride in our community, our student-athletes, our teams, coaches, and their work ethic." They also wanted their social media platforms to be "A good information base, and if need to find information they know where to go and are comfortable finding it." Whether these fans are simply seeing the content or are engaging with the content, and whether that has a difference on the school's perception is something I seek to look at. Based on previous research, I hypothesize that seeing content would certainly have an effect on positive attitudes (M. Laroche et al., 2013). I believe that engagement would have a greater effect. Social media also has an effect on behavior. A Facebook study showed online messages impact our emotions which would relate to emotion expressions through our own status updates. This would be considered a behavior (Kramer et al., 2013).

Hypotheses

Exposure and engagement with social media content from the high school can be associated with positive attitudes towards high school athletics and event attendance. Specific attitudes are only likely to change in response to specific content. The literature supports the idea that both social media exposure and social media engagement are related to changes in attitudes and behaviors. This is a positive when the social media is providing value which they are. High schools promote positive attitudes and behaviors through social media.

School Communication Quality

Communication quality is how effective the organization is at achieving their mission goals through social media and other means of communication. Communication is important as it represents a way to establish trust, establish and/or maintain relationships, and to keep people informed. Communication quality can be determined by relevance to the individual and the timeliness in which it is presented (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Schools like other organization seek to achieve certain results through their communication strategy. Social media is a part of the communication quality.

Engagement with a school's sports social media page is similar to exposure. The more someone engages with a social media page, the more likely they are to care about the product (Hudson et. al., 2014). Social media is largely algorithmic, especially Facebook. The more somebody interacts with a certain page or account on Facebook, the higher the likelihood content from that page is seen. Engagement and exposure are not quite the same though. Exposure is the frequency of communication, timeliness which can lead to a higher perception of communication quality, which lead to positive attitudes like trust. Engagement is how the audience responds to or acts towards the communication because of how it relates to them. This means that they considered the communication valuable, so their engagement has a relationship to how they feel about the communication quality.

H1: Sports social media exposure is positively related to perceived school communication quality.

H2: Sports social media engagement is positively related to perceived school communication quality.

Sporting Event Attendance

Schools gain revenue through the attendance of their home athletic events from ticket sales and concessions. Schools utilize social media in order to positively influence game attendance. High schools can use social media in order to increase the value of attending athletic

events by signifying their importance, promotion of the event, and in some cases offering incentives to attend. This marketing of athletic events allows a chance for the school to increase overall attendance. Sport media consumption is directly related to intention of attending a sporting event (Cunningham and Kwon, 2003).

H3: Sports social media exposure is positively related to sporting event attendance intentions.

H4: Sports social media engagement is positively related to sporting event attendance intentions.

Academic Mission Alignment

Athletics is important to high schools, however athletics are always secondary to academics. The high school's mission as determined by my interview with two school administrators is first and foremost academics. "You have too many people that really focus on wins and losses and I understand that's a huge part of athletics but I see athletics in a high school's educational perspective," added Lowell High School athletic director Dee Crowley. This information came out through my interviews with school officials. Utilization of athletics can further their commitment to academics however. Through athletics social media posts, schools can cover athletics, but also highlight the academic achievements to improve perceptions of the school's academic focus. Sports accounts can do this by talking about items such as the team's GPA, individual student-athlete accomplishments in the classroom, running segments like a student-athlete of the week segment, and just reinforcing the idea that grades are important. By being exposed to academic content through social media, this can only help further the perception of the school's academics. An organization's mission can be prominently displayed through social media (Walker et. al. , 2012).

Individuals who see content from schools that neglect academic relevance and focus on only athletics and other activities are more likely to see academics as a low priority to the school. Individuals who see academic content are more likely to agree with the school's mission, being

that they are focused on academics first. This is a model that allows for consistency in showcasing the school's mission including promoting athletics in addition to academics.

H5: Exposure to academic news through sports social media is positively associated with perceptions of academic mission alignment.

H6: Engagement with academic news through sports social media is positively associated with perceptions of academic mission alignment

Methodology

The methodology for this research included two in-depth interviews with administrators at Lowell High School in Lowell, Michigan (see Appendix for transcripts), which helped inform a survey which I administered to parents and students to understand perceptions and activities associated with sports social media from the high school.

This research is important in American life because no research has looked at high school sports social media before and the relevance it has within schools around the country. The impact social media has had on high schools has also been written about very little.

Sample

There was a sampling method used that was focused on four key groups of people I was interested in studying. As long as the subject identifies in the survey they are a part of these groups, I will use their survey responses. These groups are parents of a current Lowell High School student, parents of a former Lowell High School student, recent Lowell High School graduates, and current Lowell High School students.

My definition for recent high school graduate is within the past 10 years. I believe this is a good definition because those who have graduated within the past 10 years are less likely to have a child within another school district and thus have changed their affinity to which school they are more likely to follow on social media. I believe these four groups are most important

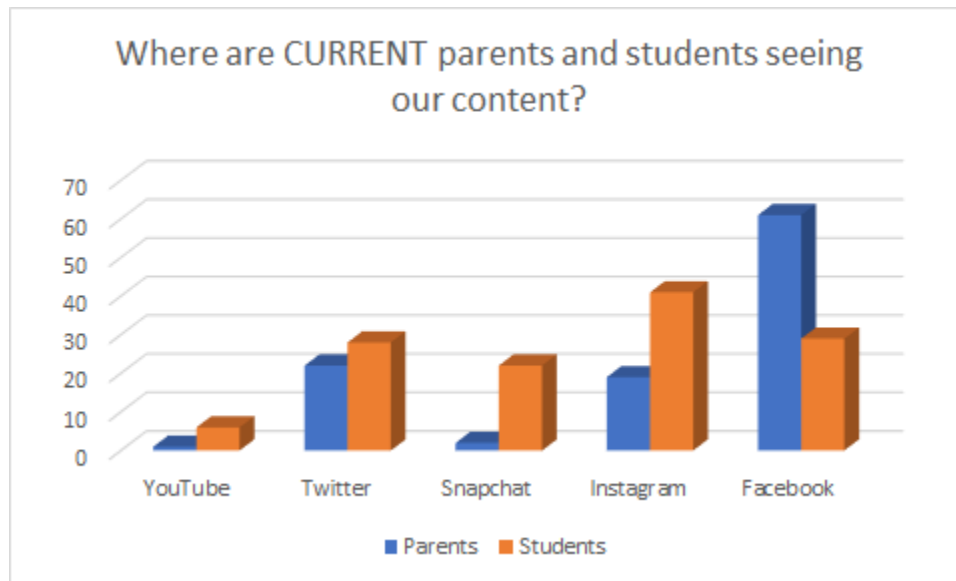
when it comes to athletics social media because these are the four groups the school said through interviews they were interested in engaging.

I recruited these participants through a Facebook post on Lowell High School's athletics Facebook page. The page had 6,300 likes at the time of this research with a reach on average of 6,000 per week. This post is included below. I boosted the post in order to get more people to see it, and incentivized people to take the survey by offering an opportunity to win two Amazon gift cards for filling out the survey.

I chose Facebook primarily because it is where a majority of the audience the school and district cared about was. At the time of this research there are four social media platforms with significant traction that schools can utilize to meet their communication goals. These four are Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat. YouTube can be used to a lesser extent for sharing video, but generally these videos would have to be reshared through either of the "big four" social media networks. While messaging apps like WhatsApp and Messenger are seeing a huge increase in followers (Dunn, 2017), schools continue to use email and more traditional social media platforms as their main way of communication. In my interview with Lowell High School's athletic director and assistant principal, she confirmed email was still important in communication with students. I believe that schools can best engage students through athletics social media on Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram. Figure 1 below proves she is correct about this. Schools can best reach parents through Facebook, which is shown in Figure 1 as well. The closest social media network that can engage both students and parents would be Facebook. This is based on the demographics that use each social media platform.

My survey consisted of 62 parents of current LHS students, 29 parents of former LHS students, 71 recent LHS graduates, and 48 LHS students. 30 survey results were thrown out due to incompleteness. There was a good mix of my groups I was interested in which included a median age of 31.

Figure 1 – Where Are Parents and Students Following High School Sports Social Media



Survey

I asked questions regarding their exposure to social media content, engagement with social media content, and what types of content they were seeing and interacting then. I also asked questions about how people felt informed by the page, and how well they thought the page was showcasing academic and athletic achievements. I finalized the survey by asking basic demographics questions such as age and gender. The survey was done through a Facebook post which can be found in the appendix as “Facebook Post”.

Questions all included a seven-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) which can be found in the Appendix. To measure perceived communication quality, I included the questions regarding: “I feel informed about high school academic accomplishments based on the Red Arrows athletic social media posts”, “I feel informed about high school athletic accomplishments based on the Red Arrows athletic social media posts”, and “I feel informed about high school athletic events due to seeing posts on the Red Arrows athletic social media pages.”

To measure event attendance intentions, I asked respondents to answer how they agreed with this statement: “I feel more likely to attend an LHS sporting event because of posts I see from LHS athletic social media accounts.”

To measure exposure, I asked respondents how often they saw our content, where they saw it. In addition to measure exposure, I asked respondents if they engaged with our posts by liking, commenting, or sharing.

Findings

Based on the results of my survey, I was able to confirm several of my hypotheses. On 95% confidence intervals through correlation analysis, t-tests and chi-square test.

Table 1 – Correlations of Exposure and Feeling Informed

	Informed – Academic Accomplishments	Informed – Athletic Accomplishments	SEE Senior Student-Athlete of the Week	SEE Athletic Performance Honors	SEE Academic Performance Honors	SEE Community Service Posts
Informed – Academic Accomplishments	1					
Informed – Athletic Accomplishments	.671**	1				
SEE Senior Student-Athlete of the Week	.482**	.532**	1			
SEE Athletic Performance Honors	.450**	.557**	.640**	1		
SEE Academic Performance Honors	.538**	.515**	.618**	.832**	1	
SEE Community Service Posts	.475**	.440**	.495**	.589**	.662**	1

** p < .001 (2-tailed)

It was also determined that H1, exposure with a school’s social media content from high school athletics pages, had a positive relationship with how the school’s quality of social media communication was perceived. I chose four different types of content and did a correlation

analysis with how people felt informed. With a $p < .001$ for all of the correlations above, I determined there was a significant correlation for not only these types of content, but overall as well. For the correlations below, all of my correlations regarding exposure, engagement, and feeling informed were significant at the .05 level. This data supported both H1 and H2. In regards to H2, Sports social media engagement did positively related to perceived school communication quality (highlighted in yellow below in Table 2).

Table 2

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). All P=.000 unless stated otherwise.* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).	I frequently see content	I frequently comment or reply.	I frequently "like"	I frequently share or retweet.	I feel informed about academic accomplishments	I feel informed about athletic accomplishments	I feel informed about athletic events.	Attendance Intentions	Social Media Makes Events Seem Worth Attending	I believe LHS values the academic accomplishments of its students	I believe LHS values the athletic accomplishments of its students
I frequently see content	1										
I frequently comment or reply.	.009, R=.17	1									
I frequently "like"	.283**	.483**	1								
I frequently share or retweet.	.128, R=0.1	.621**	.485**	1							
I feel informed about academic accomplishments	.365**	.326**	.319**	.276**	1						
I feel informed about athletic accomplishments	.341**	.318**	.395**	P=.003, .208**	.671**	1					
I feel informed about athletic events.	.380**	.292**	.454**	P=.002, .218**	.623**	.817**	1				
Attendance Intentions	.277**	.301**	.404**	.362**	.416**	.486**	.483**	1			
Social Media Makes Events Seem Worth Attending	P=.003, .208	.365**	.297**	.351**	.410**	.441**	.400**	.654**	1		
I believe LHS values the academic accomplishments of its students	.359**	P=.001, .231**	.316**	P=.001, .242**	.735**	.607**	.562**	.425**	.456**	1	
I believe LHS values the athletic accomplishments of its students	.262**	P=.002, .222**	.290**	P=.02, .166**	.552**	.711**	.583**	.402**	.391**	.675**	1

** $p < .001$ (2-tailed)

Students were found on a 95% confidence interval to significantly be more engaged than parents and see content more than parents on social media.

I ran a correlation analysis (Table 3) and determined that social media exposure and social media engagement had a positive relationship with intention to attend sporting events ($p=.000$, $r=.277$) and ($p=.000$, $r=.301$), ($p=.000$, $r=.404$), ($p=.000$, $r=.362$). H3, which was Sports social media exposure is positively related to sporting event attendance intentions, along with H4, Sports social media engagement is positively related to sporting event attendance intentions were confirmed. The data supported both H3 and H4.

Table 3

** p < .001 (2-tailed).	Attendance Intentions	Social Media Makes Events Seem Worth Attending	Exposure to Athletics Social Media	I frequently comment or reply.	I frequently like.	I frequently share or retweet.
Attendance Intentions	1					
Social Media Makes Events Seem Worth Attending	.654**	1				
Exposure to Athletics Social Media	.277**	.208**	1			
I frequently comment or reply.	.301**	.365**	.173**	1		
I frequently like.	.404**	.297**	.283**	.483**	1	
I frequently share or retweet.	.362**	.351**	0.102	.621**	.485**	1

** p < .001 (2-tailed)

In terms of academic mission, I again found a relationship. Table 4 shows the correlations involving academic and athletic values. H6, which was engagement with academic news through sports social media is positively associated with perceptions of academic mission alignment was determined to be true (highlighted in green).

Table 4

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). All P=.000 unless stated otherwise.* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

	I frequently see content	I frequently comment or reply.	I frequently "like"	I frequently share or retweet.	I feel informed about academic accomplishments	I feel informed about athletic accomplishments	I feel informed about athletic events.	Attendance Intentions	Social Media Makes Events Seem Worth Attending	I believe LHS values the academic accomplishments of its students	I believe LHS values the athletic accomplishments of its students
I frequently see content	1										
I frequently comment or reply.	.009, R=.17	1									
I frequently "like"	.283**	.483**	1								
I frequently share or retweet.	.128, R=0.1	.621**	.485**	1							
I feel informed about academic accomplishments	.365**	.326**	.319**	.276**	1						
I feel informed about athletic accomplishments	.341**	.318**	.395**	P=.003, .208**	.671**	1					
I feel informed about athletic events.	.380**	.292**	.454**	P=.002, .218**	.623**	.817**	1				
Attendance Intentions	.277**	.301**	.404**	.362**	.416**	.486**	.483**	1			
Social Media Makes Events Seem Worth Attending	P=.003, .208**	.365**	.297**	.351**	.410**	.441**	.400**	.654**	1		
I believe LHS values the academic accomplishments of its students	.369**	P=.001, .231**	.316**	P=.001, .242**	.735**	.607**	.562**	.425**	.456**	1	
I believe LHS values the the athletic accomplishments of its students	.262**	P=.002, .222**	.290**	P=.02, .166**	.552**	.711**	.583**	.402**	.391**	.675**	1

Looking at both, I can see those who were engaged with both informed of athletic accomplishments, they also believed that LHS valued athletic accomplishments as well. The same can be said for those who were merely exposed to the content. A significant correlation ($r=0.593$, $p=0.03$), shows that exposure to academic content on the sports channel is associated with the belief that the school values student academics (H5) The data supported both H5 and H6.

Several t-tests (below) showed no difference between current parents and current students in regard to exposure and engagement.

Table 5

Comparing Students and Parents		Mean	P-Value
Exposure	Parent of a current LHS student	5.32	0.961
	Current LHS Student	5.34	
Engagement - Commenting or Replying	Parent of a current LHS student	3.38	0.170
	Current LHS Student	2.91	
Engagement - Liking	Parent of a current LHS student	5.24	0.141
	Current LHS Student	5.70	
Engagement - Sharing	Parent of a current LHS student	4.08	0.499
	Current LHS Student	3.84	

Discussion

The main findings I find were that high school social media exposure and engagement leads to increased attendance intentions, increased perceptions of the school's communication quality, and increased perceptions of the school's academic mission. These main findings are important to schools and with this information, could change the way schools think about social media.

Seeing this information, schools should devote more of their communication strategy to social media. It is possible schools may want to use Facebook advertising to appeal to those in and potentially outside their district to expand reach for select types of content, especially if it is academic. Schools may also want to dedicate more to social media if they are already using it.

Athletic departments should devote time to social media and be sure to put academic posts in with athletic posts when possible. Schools and districts should be promoting positive posts on social media as well. If they are not on social media, schools would likely be influenced by the findings in this research to get on to social media. Other institutions such as colleges and non-profits could benefit from this research as well, even though they are not high schools and in some cases not involved in athletics.

Limitations

While this research provides new insight and direction into social media use for high schools, there were some limitations. My primary limitation was only being able to measure relationships, not causation like other experiments. This made it a challenge to determine whether social media contributed to attitude and behavior change or was just associated with people who act and behave positively toward the school because they are simply supposed to. Relational data can be beneficial to understand characteristics associated with the organization's ideal stakeholders and provide opportunities for testing. Further research can seek to understand the differences between these challenges and eliminate limitations.

My limitations included the fact I was only to use one school for data. With schools and communities of many diverse demographics around the country, other schools may have different experiences with social media. Lowell High School is a public school and is not extremely diverse so other high schools with more diversity could be different.

To add on, while respondents knew their surveys were anonymous, there were certainly some individuals who have had engagement with me and know who I am, thus they may have been more likely to answer more favorably to some of my survey questions.

Part 2

In addition to my survey, I analyzed Facebook data from an existing Facebook page for a high school athletic department to provide a complementary story to the survey results. This data

combined with the survey results allowed for comparisons, as well as another piece of data to draw on.

Methodology

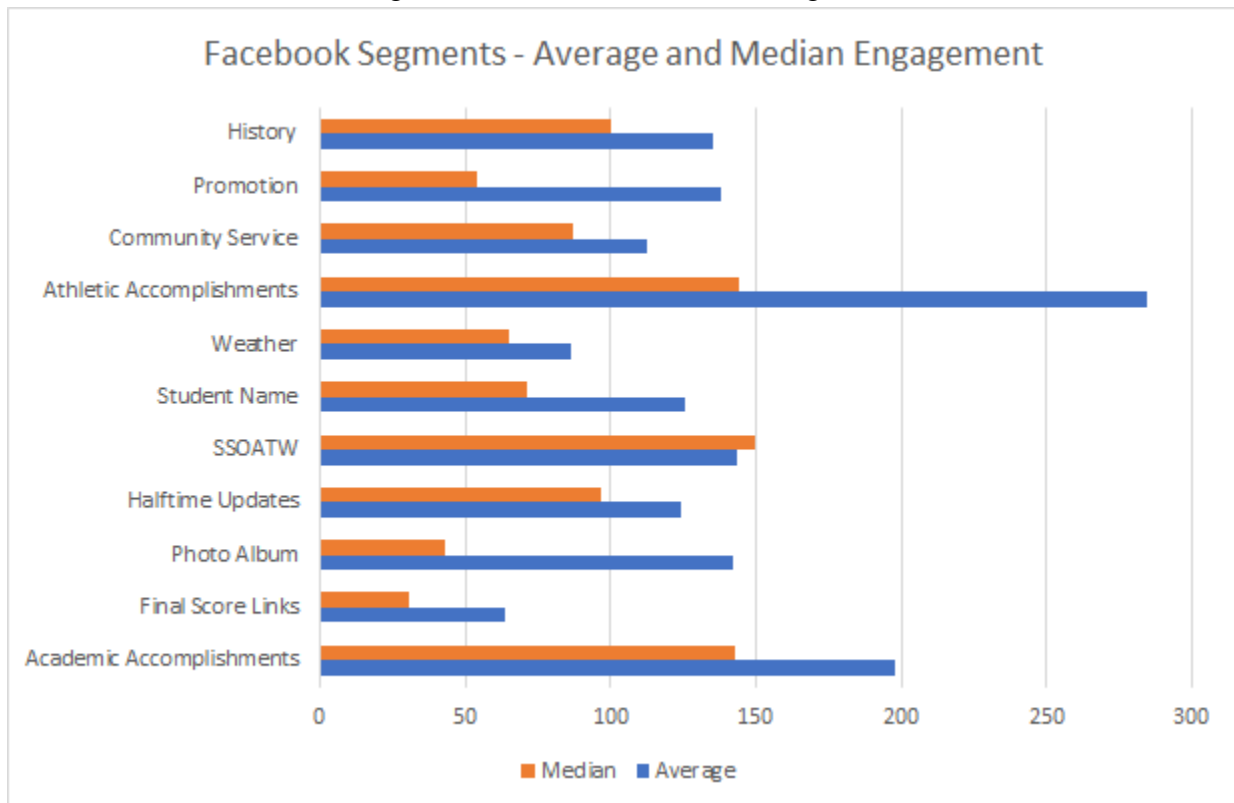
I used three months' worth of data from an existing school's Facebook page which included 330 individual posts. The data I collected was from the Lowell High School athletics Facebook page which is where I conducted the survey and where my interviews took place. I opted to use three months of data, one from each of the school's trimesters so that I had post data from every sport. I performed t-tests on the means of different types of posts to determine if there was a difference between engagement on these different types of posts.

Findings

It was determined that the engagement per segment is based on content. However, certain segments routinely did better than others. Looking at the Figure 2, athletic accomplishments such as broken records, state titles, all-state honors, and academic accomplishments such as all-state honors and academic performance highlights outperformed other segments.

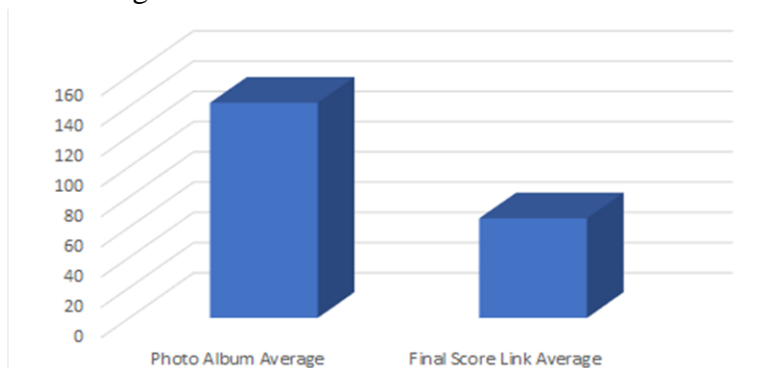
The other segments included athletics history pages, promotion of athletic events, highlights of community service, in-house student weather segments, posts with student's names in them, senior student-athlete of the week articles, in-game updates at halftime, photo albums, and final score links.

Figure 2 – Individual Facebook Segments



I wanted to explore whether photo albums drew more engagement than summaries to game events. While links to photo albums did generate more engagement, the p-value of the t-test was .07, so there was not a significant difference.

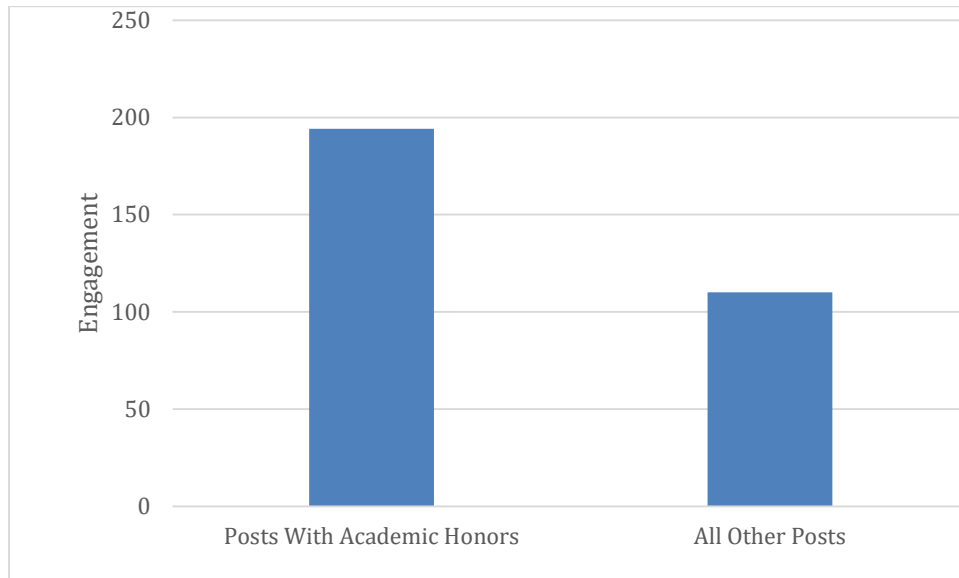
Figure 3 – Photo Alums vs. Final Score Links



I also did a quick check on whether posts with student names in them gathered more engagement than those without student names. It was determined there was no significant

difference between engagement tied to named and non-named posts ($p=0.57$). The most interesting piece of data that came out of my Facebook analysis was posts with academic honors performed significantly better, with a p-value of .045, than all other posts (Figure 4).

Figure 4 – Academic Honors Posts Had Better Engagement Than All Others



It would be recommended to high school social media managers, principals, and those in charge of social media accounts representing the high school utilize posts with academic honors in a high school athletics page. This can be done by incorporating academic honors to team and individual athletic performances. While this can't always be done, it is recommended to be used frequently. Team academic honors and individual academic honors posts are more engaging than posts featuring just athletic honors and other posts.

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Appendix

Facebook Post

Way of Gaining Survey Respondants


 **Lowell Red Arrows** Published by Justin Scott [?] · November 20 at 9:45pm · 🌐

A LHS graduate is preparing his Honors Thesis at WMU about our social media use. Please participate in this quick survey to collect data about our athletic-related social media efforts.


Opportunity to win a \$20 Amazon gift card for completing the survey. Please visit this link to start the survey. [👇](#)





https://wmichcas.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_4ZVNMaFy9b0OArX

Thank you for your time and feedback.



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 3961 people reached View Promotion

 Like  Comment  Share 

Interviews

Interview 2 - Cindy Johnston

Interviewer - "So what is your name and official district title?"

Cindy Johnston - "Cindy Johnson, and I am actually subcontracted through the district. Okay so I do public relations, communications, and marketing."

Interviewer - "So tell me a little bit about yourself."

Cindy Johnston - "Well I am a Western graduate. It was 1991, and I worked in agency life. So I did a lot of work for 8 years at a company called JW Messner (now called MTI Communications, a marketing and advertising agency), I worked in PR, then I moved into nonprofit and from there I worked for Ada Bible Church where I managed four campuses, and then from there I started my own business and I've been doing that for 3 years now and I do I specialize in non-profit and I do social media management and communications and corporate strategies."

Interviewer - "So what are some of your duties that you do with Lowell? I know you do social media."

Cindy Johnston - "I do the social media. I write the weekly Directions Newsletter. I basically try to help the other schools use social media better. So we have the district page of course, and every school has their own page. So I've kind of gone around, more to the elementary schools. I teach them how to do that better. Obviously the high school pages are maintained largely by students if you go to the Lowell Red Arrows ones (our athletics pages) so I don't really need to do anything with those. I've talked with Amy (Principal) and Deanne (Assistant Principal/AD) I help them figure out how to market better to parents, that is really my primary responsibility. It is how do you speak to parents to let me them know how big the district is in terms of the things we do, how we do them, and what attracts other families to the area."

Interviewer - "So what are the types of channels you and the school used to communicate information?"

Cindy Johnston - "Media, in terms of online is number one because the budgets are so tight now and all I need is relatively inexpensive. Then we do prints because there's a big handful of people, especially when you get into the older demographic, that would still prefer to have something in their hands. Then we are still trying to get a few news stations to pick up things that were doing, so like we try to pitch to The Ledger yes, maybe to some other stations about things like Pink Arrow or something that appeals to a larger demographic."

Interviewer - "So when you're doing that what kind of audience are you trying to reach as far as in the district and outside district?"

Cindy Johnston - "Okay so in the district it is parents. Current parents, parents, what is interesting about parents is we have to do communication around the lifetime of the student. So from kindergarten through 12th grade. Not everybody is that way, but we have to walk them through the whole thing and then prepare them for life outside of the district so we have that. In our parents we have a wide demographic which ranges from older parents and younger parents of older students. It can be hard because you have to come speak to everybody almost exactly the same, which doesn't always work well, so trying to find that balance. The other thing is I'm just speaking to the community in general. The things that are happening and all one of those things. Especially with this district, it's unique, it's because we are more of an agricultural base. We have to convince people that the agricultural base is not a negative it's actually a positive so we're speaking to try and eliminate some perceptions that are the don't exist really, it's just a perception.

So we do that and when it comes to speaking to the community that's really just parent-based. My job is not to speak to the students, my job is to highlight the students to their parents, to adults who maybe don't have kids yet, or who have kids and are trying to decide what school district do I want to pump my kids in.

Interviewer - "Okay, so when it comes to those posts and everything, how do you determine whether it was successful or not just based on the post itself?"

Cindy Johnston - It's kind of a standard equation, when you look at a post if it's getting zero traffic, like let's just look at social media because you can't really do that with print right because we don't know what exactly happens to it, and we can't really do that with news because we know it hit this huge market, but we don't know what that did in terms of people deciding to move here and not deciding to move here or whatever, so when you look just to social media we can determine largely based on engagement and likes are good, comments are better, shares are the best so when we look at those things and I can see that there's a lot of shares that goes in the people are really interested about this, so we need to figure out how to elevate this.

to another playing field, and then if we see that there's something that's important but nobody engaged in it. Okay so why are they not engaging in a did we write the copy in a way that is not appealing? Is it not appealing because people really don't understand? we have to drill down further to raise the education level and then we can start talking about the things that are happening so that's how we that's how we decide whether or not something is successful or not and it's a constant shell game. Just move stuff around until we until we see.

Interviewer - "So when it comes to athletics, we have our Lowell Red Arrows pages, and some of your pages, how do you guys use athletics to achieve the goals you want to achieve?"

Cindy Johnston - "That's a really good question. A lot of times what I will do is, it's called borrowing engagement. Are you familiar with the term?"

Interviewer - "Yes, I am."

Cindy Johnston - "So what I will do, and I can't do it with everything because our athletic department is ginormous so I have to pick up what I can. So football obviously as the golden egg of the whole thing, shouldn't be because we have all these other great things underneath, but when I see something I can't pull out all of it it's the unique thing that's happening in the athletic department that I try to capitalize on.

What I'll do is I'll take that one little nugget and then I'll spread that out by not claiming it as my own, which a lot of people do, but by sharing it borrowing the engagement that came from over here to lift it the voice of it over on my page because what that'll do is take all your people over to mine, raise my engagement from the base automatically and then adds all these other people who one may not know about you so it's circular right and it will come back to you. Then it will also get more people paying attention to some of the other things that we're doing. So I use the athletic department, like another unique story would be the shooting team and some of the media attention that they got last year, and so then I will take that up and will capitalize on that a little bit, and then what that does is it gives all this manual exposure to people who may be haven't seen anything that we've done. However, because they're interested in sports and maybe they didn't know that the Lowell Red Arrows page existed then now both of us have benefited from it.”

Interviewer - “So basically what does the district seek to gain through a social media presence that they never had before?”

Cindy Johnston - “Relationship. Relationship. Absolutely relationship. That’s something to that even in my job, but I’m still trying to teach the staff is that you can develop some fairly authentic relationships on social media. It’s foreign to a lot of them but you know, there are people that I have never met that I consider good friends and I met them on social media. So what I’m trying to do is make the district a little more human, little more down-to-earth, change the voice on the district page to less corporate and more like you and I sitting here chatting across the table.

There's a couple of times when somebody else will hop in on the district page and post it, and so I'll use that as an opportunity to go back and say look at this voice and look at this voice and what's the difference between the two and you can see because the engagement is on this voice not very much and on this voice 10 times much higher because we're just chatting having a conversation but when you start talking to people I'm making it very black and white it is never never succeed so we're trying to give the district human face they're trying to make ourselves

approachable, whether is you come from an agricultural background from white collar, blue collar, whatever it is, you can just talk to it and we'll respond."

Interviewer - "Last question how do you balance covering academic achievements athletic achievements and maybe is there a cross in there?"

Cindy Johnston - There is definitely a cross I would say. I'm more on the academic achievement side because the athletic achievement is already being covered so well so. I think the athletic achievement is easier to cover than the academic achievements. Not so much as you may not understand some of the nuances of mine that is an incredible program but to anybody who doesn't understand how that works what are you going to do and I also trying to break down I have all these pieces that you have to break down into this tiny miniscule amount and really not have giant long post

I love Twitter because it's the best editor in the world that 140 characters or not going to do any more than 140 characters because you really have to decide what you're going to say was for it sports is great and now it's so very easy because the basics of the games are so easy to understand, but not so much for the academic so I would say that is my primary concern with athletic helping me give voice to the academics."

Interviewer - "I think that's all I have but yeah I need you do such a great job."

----- Note after this mostly just chat. -----

Cindy Johnston - "I've been at it for 25 years, crazy to think about."

Interviewer - "Wow 25 years, Well I'm just I'm starting to get into there I'm a sports management and marketing major , and I work over Addix .just down the road and I help a bowl still so and just yeah yeah and so

Cindy Johnston - "What do you want to do with them?"

Interviewer - "So I'm part of the marketing team and we're growing pretty quickly and I'm close to Lowell so maybe I can still help out with them since I'm right here. So basically at Addix, I just help with their marketing efforts so their social media, running their webpage, helping kind of with the where are we going vision and everything.

Cindy Johnston - "Well it has changed so much, my degree was in organizational communication and journalism, social media wasn't even around back then can be something else so you just have to stay with it and keep your ear to the ground and figure out how it changes but good luck to you thank you for inviting me.

Interviewer - "Well you guys did the academic so well and we try to get the Athletics much we can

Cindy Johnston - "It's a pretty good partnership. It's a pretty good partnership. Yeah the hardest part for me is, pictures tell the story right, there's one person who takes pictures in the many schools, we have, what is it 6? Yeah so it's really hard, I tried to build a volunteer team of people just shoot me your stuff, so I can tell the story with that. My next idea is podcasts. There's not enough time for parents to attend meetings these days. So if we just had Greg record a 5 minute podcast each week, the parents could listen to him give a state of the district kind of address.

Interviewer - "Yeah, that's a great idea."

Interview 1

Interviewer - "So what is your official school name and your official school title?"

Mrs. Crowley - "Deanne K. Crowley, my official title is assistant principal and athletic director."

Interviewer - "Alright so what are some channels you and the school used to communicate relevant School news."

Mrs. Crowley - "Let's see email, our website, Twitter, Facebook. I would say relative information when it's just amongst coaches is texting."

Interviewer - "So tell me about the types of content you deliver it to these communication channels."

Mrs. Crowley - "Let's see schedules, schedule changes, game reports. basic team information, team pictures, scores, awards and all-conference honors, all-state state information. I think if we went down the website and you know looked at the Red Arrows HQ menu you could list everything there. Athletic parent meetings, parents information, forms for coaches, forms for parents directions, but I can't open up the website to narrow down through everything but yeah."

"Tell me a little bit about the ways you communicate with parents is there a specific Channel you use specifically for them."

Mrs. Crowley - "We can do email blasts you know through central office or through Mrs. Bowhuis, Mrs. Maki just sent out letters to all the soccer seniors via email with a letter attached about senior parent night. All the information that's on the website for parents. We'll put things on Facebook, more you know information for parents."

Talking more the type of communication that would be more like game changes and scores, score updates. If it's relative you know like to a particular team that might go through the channel, depends on what type of information needs to get out there.

We don't do a whole lot through snail mail anymore or U.S. postage, so I would say the majority of it is digital whether it's email, social media, for our website. I don't know if there was anything to you through snail mail anymore.”

Interviewer “I remember when I was in school I got a few things but not much. Maybe a newsletter once in awhile but not too much.”

Mrs. Crowley - “ I do sometimes every season like highlight pages for each sport, and then that goes out to all students in the high school. Mrs.. Pallo, she does a weekly newsletter but that's more you know she'll put some things in there about sports sometimes. But there's a weekly news email that goes to all parents and then every Friday, so that would be attached to that. So I can't think of anything that I snail mail anymore.”

Interviewer - “So with the half days we just had, do you find emails a better way to communicate that or is social media becoming just as good of a way?”

Mrs. Crowley - “The email part of it I did with the coaches so I emailed all the coaches you know that's a Sunday night and Monday night, and email all the coaches:

“Hey we're going to have a half day again please let Betsy and I know your practice schedule,” and then I have them communicate it with their players and parents, so we say *“please communicate with your players and parents regarding your plans.”*

And then what you saw what we put on Facebook just *“Hey we have a half-day coaches will communicate regarding practice plans,”* just trying to get the information out there.”

Interviewer - Alright, so same kind of questions tell me all the way by the way you communicate with students and is there a specific channel use for them?

Mrs. Crowley - "Twitter as of right now and probably Instagram is more of a where students are involved more/ I don't see as much student involvement in Facebook you know they're always looking for the next best thing.

Also like this summer I was hosting a captain's training and through our Google account I'm able to email any student that I want to so I had like 50-60 students, so I just did a group email to those 50-60 students saying you're invited to this captain's training here's the information, we'll provide pizza. So I am able to communicate via email with students as well/

Interviewer - "Do they check that pretty frequently?"

Mrs. Crowley - "I don't think this much during the summer and they do during the school year but it is all have a Google account and it's pretty easy I just start putting in their name and the names pop up so I can select the right one."

Interviewer - "So what ways do you personally use to evaluate whether a school's social media post is successful?"

Mrs. Crowley - "I would I guess the number of views, the number of shares. I guess that would be the biggest thing to go to if you're talking about you know. Individual posts, that would be the number of shares number views number of comments for. Talking about the actual site itself would be how many followers on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. What's the interaction you know how many likes. I mean what's the interaction number.

Interviewer - "So when it comes to athletics were some specific goals when it comes to communication regarding that?"

Mrs. Crowley - "Just keeping our fans and community informed, sharing as much positive news

as we can. For example the academic all-state recognitions, the OK all-conference information, the success of the teams may be away from the court or the field. How they're involved in the community, updates on results schedules. You know. I think our community is getting much more involved in social media and the website to find information about our team's you know. We still did them this year, but a lot less we do the small calendar somewhat too.

Interviewer - "I like those."

Mrs. Crowley - "There is still a part of the community that wants those, but I'd say we ordered half of what we used to you know those little pocket schedules that have all the fall teams or winter team schedules, but there's still people that want that that's good to hang in the refrigerator or something see.

Interviewer - "What effect do you want the promotion of athletics to have as a whole like on the community?"

Mrs. Crowley - "Positive. that it's not just the results on the field, but in the classroom. That our student-athletes you can be proud of them in many different ways. Our student-athletes are working hard in the classroom. Our student-athletes are working hard in the community. They're giving back to the community. They are you know helping to do things here. So not just always the results of the wins and losses, but just that they can be proud of our student-athletes for all of their accomplishments.

Interviewer - "Alright so what effect would you say school image on social media has at least from an administrative side?"

Mrs. Crowley - "From an administrative side I like to showcase athletes, I enjoy sharing the successes. Being able to put out there, you know, the academic success that we have been putting out there. Promoting a positive image not just for our athletes but for our kids. So they know that our kids are good kids. So just a very positive image of the overall picture. The big picture of our athletics. You have too many people that really focus on wins and losses and I understand that's a

huge part of athletics but I see athletics in a high school's educational perspective. Athletics in the high school environment not just traditional athletics.”

Interviewer - “and then I think this last question what do you want parents and students to gain from a school social media presence over.”

Mrs. Crowley - “Pride in our community pride in our student-athletes pride in our teams are coaches their work ethic that it's a good information base they need to find information they know where to go and are comfortable finding it.

Interviewer - “Okay I think that's everything yeah it does know thank you.”

Mrs. Crowley - “In smaller communities, the high school is the base of the community or is the is the main entertainment in some of these smaller communities Friday Night Football, Friday night basketball weekday games, volleyball, baseball. that is the activity in their small communities so that's what it's based around.”

Interview Questions

What are some channels you use to communicate school news?

Tell me about the types of content you deliver through these channels (print, email, social media, etc.).

What type of audience do you wish to reach as a school administrator when sending out information through media?

Talk a little bit about the ways you communicate with parents. Is there a specific channel you use more?

Talk a little bit about the ways you communicate with students. Is there a specific channel you use more?

What ways do you personally use to evaluate whether a school's communication effort was successful?

How has social media changed the school's communications efforts?

When it comes to athletics, what are some specific goals when it comes to communications regarding athletics?

What effect do you want promotion of athletic events to have?

School image is no doubt important. What effect does social media have on a school's image from an administrative side?

Survey Questions

Question 1 - What best describes current relationship to Lowell High School? Dropdown

- Parent of a current LHS student
- Parent of a former LHS student
- Recent LHS Graduate
- Current LHS Student
- Fan (None of the above connections)

(If participant is a "Fan"): You answered that you are a fan (None of the above connections). Thank you, but you are not qualified to participate in this survey.

Question 2 - Where do you follow Lowell Red Arrows athletics on social media? (Click all that apply)

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- Snapchat
- YouTube

Questions 3 - Please rate your agreement with with these statements (1 = not at all, 2 = very little, 3 = not often, 4 = occasionally, 5 = often, 6 = very often, 7 = all the time)

I frequently see social media content posted by Lowell Red Arrows sports social media pages.

Questions 4 through 7 - Please rate how with with these statements on a scale of 1-7 (1 not at all, 2 very little, 3 not often, 4 occasionally, 5 often, 6 very often, 7 all the time)

I frequently comment (or reply) on content shared on Lowell Red Arrows sports social media pages.

I frequently "like" content shared on Lowell Red Arrows sports social media pages.

I frequently share content posted by Lowell Red Arrows sports social media pages.

Question 8 through 17 - Please rate how often you SEE our individual Lowell Red Arrows sports social media segments on a scale of 1-7 (1 not at all, 2 very little, 3 not often, 4 occasionally, 5 often, 6 very often, 7 all the time)

- Live updates from games and events
- Senior Student-Athlete of the Week
- Game/Event summaries

- Promotion of upcoming games/events
- Weather segments (Snow-day predictions, forecasts, blogs)
- Photo albums from sporting events
- Athletic performance honors (i.e., all-state, school records, awards, team performance)
- Academic performance honors (i.e., academic all-state, team academic accomplishments, etc.)
- Students engaged in community service
- Lowell athletics history pages

Question 18 through 27 - Please rate how often you ENGAGE with (like, comment on, share) our individual Lowell Red Arrows sports social media segments on a scale of 1-7 (1 not at all, 2 very little, 3 not often, 4 occasionally, 5 often, 6 very often, 7 all the time)

- Live updates from games and events
- Senior Student-Athlete of the Week
- Game/Event summaries
- Promotion of upcoming games/events
- Weather segments (Snow-day predictions, forecasts, blogs)
- Photo albums from sporting events
- Athletic performance honors (i.e., all-state, school records, awards, team performance)
- Academic performance honors (i.e., academic all-state, team academic accomplishments, etc.)
- Students engaged in community service
- Lowell athletics history pages

Questions 28-36 - Rate your agreement with these statements on a scale of 1-7 (1 extremely disagree, 2 disagree, 3 somewhat disagree, 4 neither agree nor disagree, 5 somewhat agree, 6 agree, 7 extremely agree)

I feel informed about high school athletic and academic accomplishments based on the Red Arrows athletic social media posts.

I feel informed about high school athletic events due to seeing posts on the Red Arrows athletic social media pages.

Based on the posts on the Red Arrows athletics social media pages, I believe LHS values both athletic and academic accomplishments of its student-athletes.

Question 37 and 38 - Rate your agreement with these statements on a scale of 1-7 (1 extremely disagree, 2 disagree, 3 somewhat disagree, 4 neither agree nor disagree, 5 somewhat agree, 6 agree, 7 extremely agree)

I feel more likely to attend an LHS sporting event because of the school's sports-related social media posts

LHS sports social media makes events seem worth attending.

Question 39 - What should Lowell continue to do with its sports-related social media posts?
(Open-ended)

Question 40 - What would you like to see changed about LHS sports-related social media posts? (Open-ended)

Please answer these demographics questions.

Question 41 - Do you currently live in Michigan?

- Yes
- No

Question 42 - What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

Question 43 - What is your age?

Question 44 - Gift card question at the end: "If you would like to be entered to win one of two \$20 Amazon gift cards, please provide a valid e-mail that we can use to contact you."