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Tentative Title: Exploring the Influence of Social Media on NFL Fandom

Social media have become increasingly popular since the early 2000s and is used by millions of people worldwide. It has become so widespread that it has begun to shape the way that many people see the world. With platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and TikTok, social media is spreading, especially to the younger generations. Users of social media often receive news, information, entertainment, and the ability to connect with one another through the platform. Although many people use social media for these purposes, many use it to follow the National Football League (NFL).

The NFL comprises 32 teams, each with their own presence on social media. The use of social media in the NFL has been rapidly increasing in the past several years. Fans can now follow their favorite teams easily through social media and can learn updates, news, statistics, and view highlights through these platforms. The main objective of this study is to determine the different ways in which fans interact with NFL teams’ social media platforms, as well as how those interactions shift the ways in which fans view the league.

By using both the agenda-setting and cultivation theories, this paper aims to further explore the complex relationship between the usage of social media and fans of the NFL. Cultivation theory will help explain how social media impact fans' decisions to follow that team. Whereas the agenda-setting theory will elaborate on how social media impact the ways fans view the league.

The data set being used for this study will be a qualitative analysis of different NFL teams' Instagram accounts. Specifically, the diverse types of content being posted, as well as how fans engage with said content. Whether that be through comments, likes, shares, or follows, fans of the NFL engage with content on social media every day. Through this data set, I aim to analyze the different demographics of fans engaging with content, particularly the age group in which the fans are a part of to determine which fans are more likely to gather their information through social media.

**Literature Review**

The concept of the agenda-setting theory began during the 1968 presidential election at Chapel Hill, North Carolina by Maxwell McCombs, and Donald Shaw (McCombs, 2005). This study was first known as the Chapel Hill study, and it compared the media's attention on public concerns and political communication with the public's attention (McCombs, 2005). The theory has since developed into a broad theory with three main levels (McCombs, Shaw, Weaver, 2018).

The first of these three levels is known as basic agenda-setting, which studies the influence of the media agenda on the public’s attention relating to issues, political figures, and other objects of attention (McCombs, Shaw, Weaver, 2018). Attribute agenda-setting is the second level of agenda-setting, and it focuses on the impact of the media agenda on the public’s attention relating to the attributes of these objects (McCombs, Shaw, Weaver, 2018). Whereas the third level is network agenda-setting, which focuses on, “the impact of the *networked* media agenda of objects or attributes on the *networked* public agenda of object or attribute salience,” (McCombs, Shaw, Weaver, 2018, pg. 782). The third level is saying that whatever is emphasized in the media will influence what the viewers find important.

According to McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver, “central to understanding the strength of agenda-setting effects is the concept of need for orientation, which details the psychology of each individual’s encounter with the media,” (McCombs, Shaw, Weaver, 2018, pg. 782). The three have claimed that recently, dual psychology paths have been linking the connection between exposure to the media and agenda-setting effects.The concept of need for orientation (NFO), as McCombs and Weaver call it, was created in the early 1970s; NFO is a combination of both relevance and uncertainty (McCombs, Shaw, Weaver, 2018, pg. 783). Meaning that low levels of relevance and low levels of uncertainty meant low levels of NFO (McCombs, Shaw, Weaver, 2018, pg. 784). Whereas high levels of relevance and uncertainty meant high levels of NFO (McCombs, Shaw, Weaver, 2018, pg. 784).

However, in 2014, McCombs and Stroud concluded that NFO is only part of why agenda-setting occurs (McCombs, Shaw, Weaver, 2018, pg. 786). They concluded that the psychological processes, such as accessibility and applicability, have effects that lead to agenda-setting (McCombs, Shaw, Weaver, 2018, pg. 786). Since the studies in the early 1970s, researchers have elaborated and expanded upon the research of agenda-setting and NFO. “It’s also becoming increasingly clear that agenda-setting can occur from casual or passive exposure to media mainly through the accessibility process and also from more active information seeking and reasoning through the applicability process, and that the role of NFO in predicting these psychological processes differs depending on the type of media use and the kind of agenda-setting effects being predicted,” (McCombs, Shaw, Weaver, 2018, pg. 786). Since media are everywhere in today’s age, agenda-setting can occur through both casual and passive exposure to the media.

In a study conducted in the early 2000s, John A. Fortunato was eager to apply the agenda-setting model of theory to the NFL programming schedule (Fortunato, 2008). He began this study years ago when the NFL made considerable changes to their programming schedule in 2006 (Fortunato, 2008). The NFL had just moved Monday Night Football to ESPN, and NBC would begin televising Sunday Night Football games (Fortunato, 2008). His study examined the 2006 NFL season, and looked at the different programming schedules, television agreements, and audience viewership throughout the season (Fortunato, 2008). Fortunato concluded that the NFL not only used this model to increase the public salience for the topic, but because it also helped, “...influence the behavior of audience viewing that translates into revenue for the networks the sports league,” (Fortunato, 2008).

Although this study is different from Fortunato’s, it still uses the agenda-setting theory in the context of the NFL, just in separate ways. Fortunato’s study was conducted years ago when the change in television programming was a much larger deal. Which is not to say that it is less of a deal now, however, with the recent implementations of social ve into the league, there are different topics to explore. This study seeks to use agenda-setting theory to showthe effects that social media have on NFL fans and their perceptions on the NFL.Not only will the agenda-setting theory help explain the connection between social media usage and the countless fans of the NFL, but cultivation theory can also be of use to this study.

Cultivation theory was created in the 1960s and 70s by George Gerbner and his colleagues (Hermann, 2023). They were determined to explore the relationship between television viewing and audiences’ beliefs about the world (Hermann, 2023). As Hermann puts it, “cultivation explores how long-term, heavy exposure to the consistent and pervasive images and messages of television fiction helps sustain common beliefs, assumptions, and worldviews among large, heterogeneous audiences,” (Hermann, 2023). Gerbner developed cultivation theory as an alternative to the typical media effects theories that were dominant at the time (Hermann, 2023). Those media effects theories typically focused on attitudinal or behavioral change, often involving before and after experiments (Hermann, 2023). However, Gerber created cultivation theory to examine how mass-produced cultural stories create a cohesive cultural mainstream (Hermann, 2023).

There have been many studies examining cultivation theory and its effects in non-US contexts, however, the initial theory was about the influence of US media and the way they shapes US culture (Shrum, 2017). One of these studies was the cultural indicators project, which had three main parts: an institutional process analysis, a message system analysis, and a cultivation analysis (Shrum, 2017). Of these three parts, the cultivation analysis has been the primary focus of most media research (Shrum, 2017). A cultivation effect is the relationship between the beliefs that people hold about the world and the amount of time those people watch television (Shrum, 2017). As people spend more time watching television, their perceptions of the world align with the narratives shared through television broadcasts. This gives the storytelling messages of television much power as it directly affects its viewers (Shrum, 2017). Tests of cultivation theory were done, and it was shown that “television viewing is positively correlated with estimates of societal violence, anomie, fear of walking alone at night, and perceived danger,” (Shrum, 2017, pg. 2). Cultivation theory has been proven to be a strong theory through cultural, social, and psychological tests (Shrum, 2017).

Cultivation theory will be used for this study to examine NFL fans interacting with their favorite teams' content on social media. It can help create a sense of identity among fans interacting with their teams. The interactions that fans have on social media, such as discussing the game or their favorite players, could contribute to the cultivation of a shared fan identity as well as a sense of belonging to a community with similar interests as them.

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