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It's going to be our year! An investigation of expectations and online behaviour among sport fans

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Abstract: Social media has empowered publics to take a more active role in the organizational-public relationship. As a result, studying active publics' online activity has important implications for public relations scholarship. The growing relevance of fandom and participatory culture requires scholars to look at the problems and opportunities of social media using a variety of theoretical perspectives. To that end, this study draws on situational theory of publics and expectancy violations theory to examine how an active publics' online activity is influenced by their expectations for the organization. Results from a study of college football fans found that online activity remains consistent throughout the season whether or not the team performs according to fan expectations. The results also demonstrate finding information as a primary online activity of sports fans and Twitter as the choice source of information throughout a season. Theoretical and practical implications of this research are discussed.

Keywords: social media; active publics; fandom; situational theory of publics; expectancy violations theory; sport public.

1. Introduction

The work of public relations is changing, and that is in large part attributed to the ubiquity of social media and active engagement among publics online. Social media provides a voice to the public, who was once merely the recipient of one-way messages from mass media. People can now efficiently communicate with organizations using the two-way communication features of social media, and thus have become an empowered public. As Hutchins and Tindall (2016) argue,

...because of social media and participatory culture of online communities, publics are taking a more active role in the production and co-creation of messages, communication, and meaning. They have significant power in the relationship dynamic between the message, the communicator, and the larger audience... (p. 5)

While not a truly democratic, equalizing voice, social media does provide publics with a method for providing direct feedback to organizations not available with traditional legacy media, which can move publics to become more engaged with organizations of interest. It is the work of modern public relations professionals to create and maintain relationships with this more engaged and active public on social media (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016). As such, it is important for public relations scholarship to also examine the nuances and implications of the more interactive, online relationship dynamic.

The active publics empowered by social media fit the definition of a fan (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016), which according to Duffet (2013) is "a self-identified enthusiast, devotee, or follower of a

particularly media genre, text, or activity” (p. 293; also cited in Hutchins & Tindall, 2016). Fan activity falls under the purview of participatory culture. Key features of participatory culture include accessibility to civic engagement and artistic expression, a supportive environment for sharing content, mentorship, and social connection with others (Jenkins, 2007; Walden, 2016). This study focuses on a specific aspect of participatory culture – sport fans.

Sport and sports fandom represent an important aspect of participatory culture (Watkins, 2016), and the nature of sports provides a unique perspective for studying the relationship building component of public relations work (Walden, 2016). On one hand, sports organizations rely on an active fan base for support, while on the other, sports fans are among the most active and engaged groups of fans. Sports fans are among the most recognizable fan groups because they look for ways to publicly express fandom, which often leads to higher levels of loyalty, increased likelihood to spend money on team merchandise, and increased brand value through shared experiences with the team (Dwyer, Greenhalgh, & LeCrom, 2015; Meng, Stavros, & Westberg, 2015).

Sports fandom has theoretical roots in social identity theory, which posits individuals choose to identify with an organization when they feel a sense of belonging, are able to categorize into in-group and out-group status, and individuals in the group tend to adopt similar attitudes and beliefs in group settings (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). In a sports setting, scholars have termed this phenomenon fan identification. Fan identification is defined as a “personal commitment and emotional involvement customers have with a sports organization, incorporating both psychological and behavioral aspects of identification” (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001, p. 3). The more one identifies with a group, or in this case a sports organization, the more likely they are to adopt beliefs and behaviors that are consistent with other fans (Christian, Bagozzi, Abrams, & Rosenthal, 2012). As such, views related to the team (i.e., expectations for team success) are filtered through the lens of identification with the team (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Underwood et al., 2001).

Stevens and Rosenberger (2012) suggest that fandom is a continual searching process where fans desire to seek out information about the team on a regular basis. As the intensity of sport fandom increases, so does the desire for involvement with the team (Heere & James, 2007; Stevens & Rosenberger, 2012). Sports fans then frequently turn to social media to find information and connect with their favorite team. Therefore, it is necessary for public relations scholars and practitioners alike to understand the characteristics and information needs of sports fans.

Considerable research has examined how sports fans use social media, but to date there is limited research that looks at the online behavior of sports fans, and more specifically what precipitates online fan activity. Drawing on situational theory of publics and expectancy violations theory (EVT), this study examines online fan behavior over the course of a sports season to offer insight into how expectations for the team can influence online activity. As such, this research can be of interest to those working in sports public relations because it provides a framework for better understanding how fan expectations align with organizational performance to influence online behaviors.

2. Literature Review

Situational Theory of Publics

The situational theory of publics grew out of excellence theory, which argues that effective public relations is a two-way symmetrical communication process between organizations and stakeholders (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). The situational theory of publics is also one of the most useful theories for understanding why publics communicate and when they are most likely to do so (Aldoory & Sha, 2007). A “public” is defined by the Public Relations Society of America as “any group of people tied together by some common factor or interest” (PRSA, 2017, p. 18). In the context

of this study, the public is sports fans, tied together by their interest in the team they choose to support. It is important, however, to note that publics are inherently different from audiences because audiences receive messages without a common connection to one another (PRSA, 2017). So, merely watching a game does not make someone a sports fan or a part of the active public known as sports fans for a team.

Understanding what constitutes a public is essential to the situational theory of publics. The theory asserts that there are three factors used to predict communication behavior, attitude change, and behavior change (Grunig, 1978; 1983; 1997). The three factors are: problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement. Level of involvement is arguably the most important factor because involvement increases the likelihood of individuals paying attention to and retaining information (Grunig, 1987; Pavlik, 1988). People with higher levels of involvement seek more information and analyze issues more often (Heath, Liao, & Douglas, 1995). Problem recognition refers to the extent to which individuals recognize a problem facing them (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In sports, this could pertain to your team's performance or the team's management, for example. When problem recognition is present, information seeking is increased, even among low-involvement individuals (Major, 1993). The final variable, constraint recognition, is the extent to which individuals perceive factors that inhibit their ability to move to action or change behavior (Grunig, 1983). High constraints tend to reduce communication. Active publics have low constraint recognition and high problem recognition and involvement. These publics actively seek information and sometimes share information as well. These three factors can help explain how and why team-related online activity might change over the course of a season, leading to the research question posed in this study:

To what extent does team-related online activity change over the course of a season?

Responding to Expectations

Expectancy violations theory (EVT) was first posited by Burgoon (1978) to explain how people respond to unexpected communication encounters especially with regard to proxemic violations. This theory centers upon expectations, defined by Burgoon (1993) as an enduring pattern of anticipated behavior based upon norms. Expectancies represent shared understandings and rules for communicative encounters and serve as framing devices used to define and shape interactions. People plan their communication according to the communication they expect from the other (Burgoon, 1993). Moreover, expectancies serve as perceptual filters, which influence how social information is processed (Burgoon, 1993).

EVT assumes that people hold expectations about their social interactions based on norms. However, one norm is the violation of expectations in social interactions, including within sports communication. An expectancy violation is any deviation, either positive or negative, from a held expectation (Burgoon, 1978). For instance, in a sports context team performance can be a form of nonverbal communication with fans in that it demonstrates team preparedness and overall functioning of the organization relative to its competitors. In effect, through performance, the organization is communicating with fans, albeit nonverbally. According to EVT, teams performing exceptionally better than normal can be a positive expectancy violation, whereas the team performing worse than expected can be a negative expectancy violation. Violations activate fans' interest or attention and arouse coping mechanisms to process, evaluate, and help manage unexpected outcomes and situations (Burgoon, 1978). Violations, especially negative, can lead to increased levels of uncertainty (Afifi & Burgoon, 2000) and have communicative consequences like a reduction in communication or engagement.

After a violation has occurred, people first interpret what happened and then evaluate the violation (Burgoon, 1978). It is during this cognitive sequence when people decide whether what happened is better or worse than what they anticipated. People make this determination using two

primary factors: valence and communicator reward value. Valence helps determine the outcomes of a situation and helps people decide how to respond. Valence is interdependent to communicator reward value, which is the concept that people possess characteristics that influence the extent to which interactions are rewarding. Typically, power, intelligence, and status are interpreted as rewarding traits (Burgoon, 1993). As EVT describes, positive evaluations are influenced by the degree to which the other person is perceived as rewarding, such that: (a) positively valued messages from a positively regarded source are rewarding; (b) negatively valued messages from a positively regarded source are punishing; (c) positively valued messages from a negatively valued source are not rewarding and may even be punishing; and, (d) negatively valued messages from a negatively valued source are not punishing and may even be rewarding (Burgoon, 1978).

Following the interpretation and evaluation phases of EVT is the behavioral adaptation. EVT assumes that based on the situation, some people will reciprocate the communication, while others will use compensation strategies, depending on the reward level of the violator and whether or not the violator is increasing or decreasing communication with the receiver (Floyd & Voloudakis, 1999). Behavioral adaptations within EVT have also been described as a function of synchrony, or the degree to which communicators match each other's behaviors (Floyd & Voloudakis, 1999). Essentially, EVT predicts that when someone interacts with a rewarding other, they will reciprocate behavior following positive violations, and compensate following negative violations. In a sports context, team performance as a form of nonverbal communication can result in positive or negative violations. In terms of EVT, if team performance positively violates fan expectations, then fans can reciprocate with increased communication with the team and other fans; while conversely, if the team negatively violates fan expectations, or the team does not perform as well as expected, then fans may not seek out as many opportunities to communicate. This is consistent with Burgoon's (1978) assertion that violations can activate a fan's interest.

Although EVT is not typically applied to sports communication, it has demonstrated utility across other contexts including nonverbal behavior (Burgoon & Hale, 1988), communication with friends (Floyd & Voloudakis, 1999), interpersonal deception (Aune, Ching, & Levine, 1996), intimate relationships (Afifi & Metts, 1998) and more recently, organizational communication (Ainsworth & Bonifield, 2010; Kalman & Rafaeli, 2011; Watkins, 2016). EVT provides a theoretical foundation that can assist in interpreting how sports fans respond to unexpected events. Within the context of this study, the sports fans are interacting with a sports team, specifically a college football team. A fan's level of fandom helps to demonstrate the reward value they assign to the team. When the team violates their expectations, fans have to decide whether or not their expectations were positively or negatively violated (valence) and then determine how they will respond. This study seeks to better understand how fans respond to team violations online. Based on the mechanisms of EVT, the following hypotheses are posed:

H1: If a sports team positively violates fan expectations, level of fan online activity increases

H2: If a sports team negatively violates fan expectations, level of fan online activity decreases.

3. Method

This study investigates the influence of fan expectations on online activity use over the course of a season. To address the proposed research question and hypotheses, a series of surveys were developed to track online behavior and expectations with a sports team over the course of a season. The setting for this research was a college football program at a public university in the Mid-Atlantic United States. Data was collected during the 2016-2017 football season. Surveys were administered to respondents at three points during the season: (1) early season, (2) mid-season, and (3) end of season. This method allowed the researchers to track how much time respondents reported spending on team-related online activities as well as whether or not the team was meeting their expectations.

About College Football

The context for this study is college football in the United States. Broadly speaking, colleges and universities, who field football teams, are organized into divisions to compete against one another. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on Division I, since the team in this study competes as a Division I school. Division I schools are then subdivided into what is commonly referred to as the Power 5 conferences (or five individual conferences that house 65 college football teams). Teams play games against opponents in their respective conference and team performance is then used to rank teams nationally, which has implications for who will play in the national championship game. College football has many stakeholders including alumni, current students, and sponsors, among others.

College football season starts in September and ends in January. Each team plays 12 games as part of the regular season. Two teams from each conference compete for a conference championship. The post-season includes the college football playoffs and national championship game along with a bowl season. Four of the high-ranking teams in the national poll are considered for the college football playoffs, which is used to determine the national champion for that season. Teams not in the playoffs have an opportunity to participate in one of the post-season bowl games.

College football teams are managed by the athletic departments of each institution. From a public relations perspective, the sports information director acts as the primary communicator for the athletic department. The sports information director works with public relations and marketing to promote the team. College football in the U.S. is a billion-dollar industry when considering ticket sales, sponsorships, and television licensing rights. All athletic departments report to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), who governs the sport on a national level.

Data Collection

In order to find fans of a team who were engaged in online activities related to the team, online recruiting methods were used to identify participants for this study. Initial invitations to participate in the first survey were posted on team-related message boards and social media websites. Email addresses were used to ensure consistency among participants in the cohort. If a participant was interested in continuing with the study, they were asked to supply their email address. Only responses that used the same email address on all three studies were included in the final analysis. Respondents for surveys two and three were recruited from this initial group of participants. Invitations to continue with the study were sent directly to participants via email.

To incentivize participation in the study, each survey included an opportunity to enter a draw for a \$50 gift card. This was optional and not required. Ten gift cards were given to randomly selected participants at the end of each survey for a total of 30 gift cards over the course of the study. To qualify for the gift card, participants had to supply their email address on the survey.

A total of 460 responses were completed and usable for analysis from survey one. Those who provided an email address were sent a link to survey two in October. A total of 310 usable surveys were collected resulting in a retention rate of 67.4% from the initial survey. Finally, of the 310 respondents invited to complete survey three, 253 surveys were complete and usable for the analysis resulting in an 81.6% retention rate from survey two. The retention rate from survey one to survey three was 43.7%. This process resulted in a final N = 201 usable responses for analysis. Only participants who completed all three surveys were included in the analysis. Failure to complete all three surveys meant the participants responses were eliminated from the data set and final analysis.

Sample Characteristics

The mean age of respondents was 48.91 years ($SD = 14.99$), ranging from 20-87 years. The data skewed male with 81.1% of respondents identifying as male ($n = 165$), 18.4% identifying as female ($n = 37$), and one person declining to answer (0.5%). The racial demographic of respondents was as follows: Asian ($n = 2$, 1.0%), African American ($n = 1$, 0.5%), Hispanic ($n = 2$, 1.0%), White/Caucasian ($n = 191$, 95.0%), and prefer not to answer ($n = 5$, 2.5%).

Due to the nature of the sport context, sport fandom measures were used to segment publics as specified in the situational theory of publics. To that end, the Sport Spectator Identification Scale developed by Wann and Branscombe (1993) was used in this study to identify active publics. Sports researchers have noted that the more identified a fan is with a team, then the more likely they are to find ways to publicly express their fandom, including in an online context (Gantz & Lewis, 2014). This scale consists of six items measured on a 5-point Likert scale and provides an indication of the level of fan identification a respondent has with their favorite team. The scale was found to be reliable according to Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = .651$). Participants were found to be highly identified fans ($M = 4.638$, $SD = 0.46029$). Descriptive information for this scale can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Fan Identification

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Fan Identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1993)	4.3618	0.46029
How strongly do you see yourself as a [team] football fan?	4.92	0.291
How strongly do your friends see you as a fan of [team] football?	4.87	0.393
How often do you display the [team's] name or logo at your place of work, where you live, or on your clothing?	4.10	1.073
How much do you dislike [team's] greatest rival?	4.02	1.000
How important to you is it that [team] wins?	4.01	0.703
How important is being a fan of [team] football to you?	4.25	0.777

Surveys

Participants in this study completed three online surveys over the course of a college football season. Surveys were administered to respondents using Qualtrics. Survey one was administered during the early part of the college football season (two weeks in September 2016). Responses from survey one provided baseline assessments for online activity and fan expectations. Survey two was administered at the mid-way point of the season (mid-October 2016). The second survey followed up with respondents about their perception of the team's performance and how online activity related to the team. Finally, survey three was administered via email at the end of the season following the conference championship game (early December 2016).

Survey Measures

Online Activity. Four online activities were measured in this study: finding information, posting or sharing information about the team, interacting with other fans, and sharing opinions. Participants were asked to indicate how often they engaged in these activities (using a 5-point Likert scale) on the following online platforms: team website, Facebook, and Twitter. These social media platforms were selected because they were the most popular at the time of data collection. This provided a baseline analysis of the online activity of fans before the start of the current season.

Surveys two and three measured the same online activities, but instead of how often participants performed the activity, they were instructed to assess if they were engaging in the activity less/the same/more than previous seasons (on a 7-point Likert scale). Survey two assessed online activity from

the beginning of the season to the midway point and survey three assessed online activity from the midway point to the end of the regular season.

Expectations. Single item measures were used to determine fan expectations for the team (see Kunkel, Doyle, & Funk, 2014). In survey one, participants were asked how many games they expected the team to win this season (responses included 1-3 games; 4-6 games; 7-9 games; and 10-12 games). In survey two, fan expectations were measured with the following question: "Has [team] lived up to your expectations for this season?"; participants indicated: (1) the team has exceeded my expectations for this season, (2) the team has played as well as I expected, (3) not really, I'm disappointed in the team this season, and (4) it's too early to tell. For survey three, fan expectations were measured using the following: "Thinking back on this season, did [team] live up to your expectations?"; and answers included (1) the [team] exceeded my expectations for this year, (2) the [team] played as well as I expected, and (3) not really, I'm disappointed with the [team]. These items were adjusted to account for the progress of the season.

Participants were asked about the team performance in each survey. In each survey, respondents were asked to indicate how they thought the team would perform during the season including: (1) how the team will perform relative to past seasons (e.g., the team will win fewer/the same/more games this season), (2) how the team ranks among the other teams in the conference (worst/average/best), (3) how the team ranks among the other teams in the country (worst/average/best), and (4) the coach's impact on the team (negative impact/no impact/positive impact). Adjustments to the language were made related to the time period in the season. These items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale.

A composite score for online activity and expectations was created by averaging the means for each item on the survey. For example, the means from "find information on website," "find information Facebook," and "find information Twitter" from survey one were averaged to form a composite "find information" score, which was used in the analysis. This process was repeated for each online activity and expectation for each of the three surveys.

Analysis

Data was analyzed using SPSS v. 22. Means and standard deviations are used to answer RQ1, and one-way ANOVA was used to test H1 and H2.

4. Results

Tracking Fan Activity

RQ1 investigates the extent to which team-related online activity changes over the course of a season. Each survey represents a distinct point in time for the respondent to indicate their online activity. The first survey indicated their typical online behavior, while surveys two and three assessed their online activity for the season. Results of survey one provide a baseline analysis of typical online fan behavior. As evidenced in Table 2 by the observable means, the online activity level of sports fans outside of the season tends to be fairly low. Surveys two and three, however, provide an indication of online activity during the season. Based on the observed means, results from surveys two and three indicated that sport fans consistently maintained moderate levels of online activity over the course of the season (see Table 2). Table 2 shows the composite mean for the online activity as well as the mean and standard deviation for each online activity.

An analysis of the composite means for online activities indicated that there is a slight increase in the online activities from the middle point of the season to the end of the season. In survey two, respondents indicated interacting with fans ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.174$) slightly more than finding

information ($M = 4.243$, $SD = .956$), posting information ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.215$), and sharing opinions ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.24$). The same pattern emerged with survey three, respondents indicated spending more time interacting with other fans ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.223$), followed by finding information ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.034$), posting information ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.227$), and sharing opinions ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.023$). As such, we can conclude that online activity related to following a sports team remains consistent throughout the season and fans show slightly more interest in interacting with other fans than other online activities measured in this study.

Taking a closer look at the data, we can also see that fans turn to Twitter more often than they do the team's website (in the case of finding information) or Facebook. The observable means revealed a slight preference to Twitter across all categories of online activity (see Table 2). This finding points to Twitter being an important source of online activity for sports fans.

Table 2. Online Activity by Survey

	Survey 1		Survey 2**		Survey 3**	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Find Information*	2.57	0.88616	4.243	.9556	4.314	1.034
Website	2.96	1.161	3.99	1.289	4.13	1.339
Facebook	2.02	1.172	3.78	1.389	3.93	1.424
Twitter	2.76	1.550	4.96	1.610	4.88	1.647
Post Information*	1.9714	0.991	4.187	1.215	4.2635	1.227
Facebook	1.95	1.157	4.08	1.444	4.06	1.370
Twitter	1.99	1.294	4.30	1.508	4.47	1.497
Interact with Fans*	1.9839	1.03132	4.2778	1.17475	4.3306	1.22316
Facebook	1.94	1.121	4.13	1.308	4.12	1.374
Twitter	2.03	1.326	4.43	1.541	4.54	1.521
Share Opinions*	1.971	1.06451	4.1129	1.23861	4.2208	1.02293
Facebook	1.94	1.182	4.04	1.444	3.98	1.367
Twitter	2.00	1.309	4.19	1.504	4.46	1.498

*composite score **measured on a 7-point Likert scale

Fan Expectations and Online Activity

Hypothesis testing required two steps. First the authors had to determine whether expectations of the respondents were positively violated (i.e., the team won more games than expected), negatively violated (i.e., the team won fewer games than expected), or not violated at all (i.e., the team won as many games as expected). An item in survey one measured expectations for the team's success in terms of games won; results from this survey item were re-coded to determine expectancy violations. The team won nine regular season games; therefore, expectancy violations among respondents were coded as follows:

- Respondents who expected the team to win 0-6 games were coded as a positive violation ($n = 21$, 10.4%)
- Respondents who expected the team to win 7-9 games were coded as no violation ($n = 168$, 83.6%)
- Respondents who expected the team to win 10-12 games were coded as a negative violation ($n = 12$, 6%)

The composite scores for online activity were used along with the team performance expectation to test H1 and H2. A series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in the reported online activity among the three groups (e.g., positive, negative, and no violations). Responses from surveys two and three only were used in this analysis.

Finding Information and Information Sources

Results of the one-way ANOVA indicated one significant difference among the violation groups and using the team website to find information about the team from survey three: $F(2, 198) = 3.356$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .033$. A Tukey post hoc test revealed a statistically significant difference between the negative violation ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.055$) and the no violation ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.351$) groups. In other words, respondents whose expectations were met during the season reported using the team's website to find information more by the end of the season than those who experienced a negative expectancy violation.

Among the remaining analyses, there were no significant differences found. This indicates that respondents reported spending the same amount of time using online resources to find information about the team despite their expectations for the team's performance. As evidenced by the mean scores for each group, respondents indicated spending about the same amount of time finding information on these platforms as they had in previous seasons. Table 3 (below and continued on the following page) summarizes the findings of these analyses.

Table 3. One-way ANOVA Results: Information Sources

	Survey 2			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Find Information Website			1.916	0.15
<i>positive violation</i>	3.95	0.973		
<i>negative violation</i>	4.69	0.759		
<i>no violation</i>	3.94	1.342		
Find Information Facebook			0.383	0.685
<i>positive violation</i>	3.88	0.892		
<i>negative violation</i>	3.92	0.515		
<i>no violation</i>	3.76	1.482		
Find Information Twitter			0.49	0.613
<i>positive violation</i>	4.70	1.453		
<i>negative violation</i>	5.26	1.287		
<i>no violation</i>	4.97	1.589		

Table 3 continued. One-way ANOVA Results: Information Sources

			Survey 3	
Find Information Website			3.356	.037*
	<i>positive violation</i>	3.90	1.221	
	<i>negative violation</i>	3.25	1.055	
	<i>no violation</i>	4.22	1.351	
Find Information Facebook			0.128	0.064
	<i>positive violation</i>	3.98	1.464	
	<i>negative violation</i>	3.00	1.651	
	<i>no violation</i>	3.99	1.387	
Find Information Twitter			2.503	0.084
	<i>positive violation</i>	4.90	1.947	
	<i>negative violation</i>	3.86	1.701	
	<i>no violation</i>	4.95	1.589	

* $p < .05$ *Online Posting Activity*

Results of a series of one-way ANOVA analyses did not reveal any significant difference among the expectancy violation groups and reported posting information related to the team online. Similar to the findings from finding information, results reveal that respondents were consistent with the amount of time they spent posting information about the team online. Table 4 summarizes these findings.

Table 4. One-way ANOVA Results: Post Information

			Survey 2			
			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Post Information Facebook					0.338	0.714
	<i>positive violation</i>	3.83	1.226			
	<i>negative violation</i>	4.08	1.379			
	<i>no violation</i>	4.11	1.41			
Post Information Twitter					0.192	0.825
	<i>positive violation</i>	4.47	1.579			
	<i>negative violation</i>	4.17	1.193			
	<i>no violation</i>	4.29	1.525			
			Survey 3			
Post Information Facebook					1.127	0.326
	<i>positive violation</i>	3.92	1.219			
	<i>negative violation</i>	3.53	0.926			
	<i>no violation</i>	4.11	1.41			
Post Information Twitter					1.277	0.281
	<i>positive violation</i>	4.57	1.798			
	<i>negative violation</i>	3.81	1.437			
	<i>no violation</i>	4.51	1.458			

Interaction with Other Fans

Consistent with findings from the previous two analyses, there was no significant relationship found among the expectancy violation groups in regard to their reporting of interacting with other fans online. Table 5 summarizes these findings.

Table 5. One-way ANOVA Results: Interact with Other Fans

		Survey 2			
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Interact with Fans Facebook				0.081	0.922
	<i>positive violation</i>	4.15	1.236		
	<i>negative violation</i>	4.27	0.446		
	<i>no violation</i>	4.11	1.36		
Interact with Fans Twitter				0.107	0.899
	<i>positive violation</i>	4.48	1.47		
	<i>negative violation</i>	4.23	1.706		
	<i>no violation</i>	4.44	1.546		
		Survey 3			
Interact with Fans Facebook				2.039	0.133
	<i>positive violation</i>	4.04	1.499		
	<i>negative violation</i>	3.37	1.067		
	<i>no violation</i>	4.19	1.369		
Interact with Fans Twitter				1.460	0.235
	<i>positive violation</i>	4.72	1.814		
	<i>negative violation</i>	3.84	1.185		
	<i>no violation</i>	4.56	1.498		

Online Opinion Sharing

Results of the one-way ANOVA did not reveal any statistically significant differences among the groups for sharing opinions about the team online. Consistent with all the previous findings, respondents reported spending the same amount of time as previous seasons sharing their opinion about the team online, despite whether their expectation for the team success was violated in a positive or negative way. Table 6 summarizes these findings.

Table 6. One-way ANOVA Results: Share Opinion

		Survey 2			
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Share Opinion Facebook				0.19	0.827
	<i>positive violation</i>	3.87	1.146		
	<i>negative violation</i>	4.15	0.55		
	<i>no violation</i>	4.05	1.522		
Share Opinion Twitter				0.06	0.941
	<i>positive violation</i>	4.08	1.612		
	<i>negative violation</i>	4.23	1.476		
	<i>no violation</i>	4.20	1.501		

Table 6 continued. One-way ANOVA Results: Share Opinion

			Survey 3	
Share Opinion Facebook			0.738	0.48
<i>positive violation</i>	4.32	1.612		
<i>negative violation</i>	3.89	0.793		
<i>no violation</i>	3.94	1.343		
Share Opinion Twitter			2.146	0.12
<i>positive violation</i>	4.93	1.431		
<i>negative violation</i>	3.82	1.377		
<i>no violation</i>	4.45	1.504		

Therefore, based on the cumulative findings of these analyses, it can be concluded that the hypotheses were not supported. Positive or negative violations of expectations did not result in an increase or decrease in online activity among sport fans. However, results of this study did reveal that sport fans are consistent with their online activity whether the team is meeting their expectations or not. This is evidenced by the lack of statistically significant differences among the groups, and the mean response for various online engagement activities was reported to be “about the same as previous seasons”. Furthermore, responses related to online engagement on surveys two and three are consistent with what respondents reported on survey one, when asked how much time they anticipate spending engaging online with the team: reading about the team ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.265$), interacting with other fans of the team ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.255$), sharing opinions about the team ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.242$), and sharing information about the team ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.414$).

5. Discussion

The growing relevance of fandom and participatory culture requires scholars to look at the problems and opportunities of social media using a variety of theoretical perspectives. This study adds to this research by coupling interpersonal theory, EVT, and public relations theory, situational theory of publics, to better understand how an active publics' online activity is influenced by their expectations for the organization. This paper approaches this problem using a sport context, and findings from this paper offer insight into how fans interact with their favorite team throughout the course of the season, and how expectations for the team influence online behavior.

The situational theory of publics provides a framework for how to segment audiences based on the level of involvement the audience has with an organization or message. It is important for public relations practitioners to segment audiences to better meet the needs of that audience. By focusing on an active public (e.g., sports fans), this study extends the situational theory of publics by tracking the online activity of a group over a period of time. Results of this study indicate finding information as one of the primary online activities of sports fans throughout the season. Moreover, compared to finding information, sports fans spent less time utilizing more interactive online activities (e.g., posting information, sharing opinions, and interacting with other fans).

In terms of the more interactive communicative actions fans take over the course of a season, there was an increase in online activity with each survey. As evidenced by the increased composite mean scores, fans dramatically increased their online activity between the beginning and midpoint of the season (surveys one and two) and more subtly increased their online activity between the midpoint and the end of the season (surveys two and three). There were small differences in terms of fans posting information and sharing their opinions of the team. This could be attributed to the fans' need for interaction with others who are interested in the team as opposed to just transmitting information and opinions, as suggested and supported by the situational theory of problem solving, otherwise known as STOPS (Kim & Grunig, 2011).

A key finding of this study is that online activity remains consistent throughout the season among college sports fans, even when fan expectations are being met. Drawing on expectancy violations theory, this study proposed that positive fan expectancy violations would increase the online engagement of sport fans. Overall, findings from this analysis did not support the hypotheses; however, the lack of significant differences among the violation groups indicates that respondents tended to spend the same amount of time engaging about the team online whether expectations for the team's performance were positively or negatively violated or not violated at all. Therefore, team performance did not increase nor decrease the amount of time that respondents spent engaging in online activities related to the team. Moreover, the finding that online activity remained consistent means that fans were likely satisfied with the information available to them, which meant they did not see a need to add information or share their opinion.

As previously mentioned, EVT does not account for communication changes when expectations are met. This study begins to fill that void and demonstrates that when expectations are met, there is a consistency with communication, rather than an increase or decrease in communication activities. Another theoretical implication highlights the need to examine the formation of expectations to better predict online communication patterns. It is logical to infer that people seek out information to form their expectations about the season and the team's performance. Hence, fans are particularly opinionated about team performance at the beginning of each season. The results of this study begin a conversation about the importance of understanding how and what channels the public uses to form their expectations, and to better understand how and where they will use information throughout the season. Finally, this study illustrates that expectations change over time, a fact that EVT overlooks. In the second survey, fans reported that their expectations were being positively violated based on team performance. By the third and final survey, their expectations had changed to being met and not violated at all, demonstrating that the formation and management of expectations is a fluid, rather than fixed state of mind.

Related to the communication channel, as the season progressed, fans had a tendency to turn to Twitter more than Facebook or the team website for information. Twitter has received considerable attention from sport communication researchers and those in the sports industry (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2012). Twitter was designed for easy information sharing and interaction among users, which has made the platform especially attractive to sports fans. Twitter combines mass media with interpersonal communication, which allows sports fans to connect with their favorite team and interact with other fans of the team at the same time (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Frederick et al., 2012; Watson, 2016). The platform-specific capabilities of Twitter provide an efficient outlet for fans to seek out and share information. The results of this study combined with previous research on sports and Twitter suggest that social media managers should continue to emphasize the use of Twitter in their social media strategy.

Implications and Recommendations for Public Relations Practice

Social media has empowered publics to take a more active role in the organizational-public relationship. As a result, studying the online activity of active publics has important implications for the practice of public relations. These findings can guide practitioners to develop targeted strategic communication plans that meet the information needs of an active public. For example, based on these findings, a public relations practitioner should increase the online information available to fans as the season progresses and Twitter should be the primary information source. Meeting the information needs of an active public can have long-term benefits for the organization. If the team organization can satisfy the initial need for information through social media, then the fan may be more likely to engage in additional online information seeking and communication. This is consistent with the conservation of visitors principle in Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) dialogic principles, which posits that it is important to keep audiences engaged in your organization's online spaces. In this

case, sports fans need and seek out information related to the team to provide context for the expectations for the team's success.

To maintain online engagement with fans, findings from this study point to three areas sports public relations practitioners should consider. First, sports organizations should more closely examine how fans are getting their information to form their expectations. It is likely that a variety of sources are being used to form expectations including interpersonal contacts, official team information, and information from sports outlets like ESPN, Fox Sports, and other publications through television, online channels, and in print. A deeper understanding of how people receive their information about the team could help sports organizations target their communication efforts for maximized engagement and involvement. Similarly, sport organizations should examine when people start to look for information about the team and adjust their communication strategies accordingly.

Second, sport organizations should understand that when expectations are being met, communication needs to remain consistent. There is not a need to increase or decrease communication between organizations and fans. However, sports organizations should also understand that when expectations are being met, it is unlikely that involvement or engagement will spike up, so efforts to increase engagement might be limited and should be planned with this potential outcome in mind.

Finally, sport organizations should regularly engage in social listening and monitoring of the fans' online activity to determine whether expectations are being violated throughout the season. The ability to monitor conversations about an organization via social media allows practitioners to remain aware of public opinion and sentiment. This is especially important in a sports setting where, as the results of this study indicate, expectations change over time, based upon performance. Therefore, sports organizations need to constantly assess how the fans are feeling about the team through social media monitoring and listening to create effective and engaging communications.

Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this study was the lack of focus or measurement on met expectations. The hypotheses were not created to assess how communication and online engagement is affected when expectations are met. EVT also does not provide reasoning for how people respond to met expectations. This study also focused on fans of one team over the course of one season. While studying one cohort of fans has merit, this does limit the generalizability of findings to other sports. This study is situated in a sports context, but it can be replicated in other contexts where organizational performance has influence over the publics' identification and involvement with the organization.

The goal of this study was to assess the influence of fan expectations and team performance on fans' online activity with the team over the course of a season. To that end, we were unable to account for other factors that could potentially influence a sport fan's online activity. As such, future studies should consider other factors such as breaking news, average time spent online, and so on when measuring online fan activity. Related to this, the online activities were operationalized on the survey as general activities and did not consider the nuances of individual social media platforms. Respondents had to make broad assessments of their online activities. Future studies can overcome this limitation by concentrating on a single social media platform or adjusting the online activities to reflect more specific activities.

6. Conclusions

By looking at EVT in conjunction with the situational theory of publics, this work provides a foundation for future studies to examine how active publics' expectations of an organization can influence online behaviors. Although the findings relating to EVT were not supported, this study does have important implications for better understanding expectations and expectancy violations. While EVT presumes that some violations will produce reciprocal communication responses and other violations will produce compensating communication responses, within the context of college sports fans and online engagement, this assumption is not supported. Additionally, these results demonstrate that regardless of expectancy violations, sport fans continue to communicate online. This advances our understanding of responses to expectancy violations because it shows that responses are contextual. Finally, the results of this study indicate that expectations change over time and are not stagnant, as originally argued by EVT.

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