Instagram As a College Athletics Recruiting Tool

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Abstract

The contribution of this thesis is to support the Syracuse University women's rowing team by helping them improve their social media presence as a recruiting tool. The aim of this research is to evaluate what digital strategy the team should implement in order to effectively recruit high school athletes. Conducting this research included an analysis of peer program's social media and assessing the best practices of online sport marketing. In turn, this required learning about the history of women's rowing in both the NCAA and at Syracuse University.

Analysis showed that Instagram would be the most effective platform for recruiting because it is the most-used social media for the targeted demographic of high school girls. This research concluded that using Instagram and a variety of content, including athlete highlights, a facility tour, and IGTV videos dedicated to the academic side of being a student athlete, would be the most effective way of improving the SU women's rowing team's social media as a recruiting tool.

Executive Summary

For this project, I developed a strategy for the Syracuse University (SU) women's rowing team's Instagram account, building on and extending their current efforts. I focused on this as the SU women's rowing team staff has found over the past several years that Instagram is one of their most important recruiting tools. More broadly, one of the most common ways for high school students to do research on potential universities is through the use of social media. Most schools are active on all forms of social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Some schools, like Syracuse University, have even jumped on the TikTok bandwagon, a new platform that has skyrocketed in popularity since 2019. All of these social media platforms provide a way for high school students to research universities provides college athletics with the unique opportunity to recruit students in ways that were not possible even a decade ago. By showcasing their athletes, facilities, and overall team, coaches are able to present their teams in a much more personal way that resonates with student athletes.

SU women's rowing staff know Instagram plays an outsized role in recruiting student athletes, especially international students who may not have the opportunity to travel to Syracuse to experience the campus and facilities firsthand. To accomplish the social media strategy, I built from what is currently known about social media and athletics, recruiting practices, and best practices in social media. The strategy is also driven by the need for the coaching staff to have a structured schedule and guidance on content to ensure regular posting. This schedule includes athlete spotlights weekly, competitions highlights, creating a facility tour video, and having athletes discuss their home college or major to create the connection between athletics and academics.

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Introduction

This thesis focuses on the Syracuse University women's rowing team's uses of social media. The goal is to provide suggestions for improving their current digital strategy in order to set them apart from peer programs. This guidance is based on researching their competitor's uses of social media and is driven by overall best practices in sport marketing. First, it is important to acknowledge the growing influence social media has today, particularly in teenagers and how colleges must maintain a relevant presence on a variety of platforms. Then, based on statistics, sport marketing research, and comparisons to rival programs, the most effective digital strategy for the Syracuse University women's rowing team, also referred to as SU WROW, will be explained and demonstrated.

This thesis concentrates on managing social media platforms and understanding what content should be produced as posts. Hootsuite, an online social media managing application, defines a social media platform as "a social network or component of a social network" (Worthy & Newberry, 2020). Examples of platforms would be Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Snapchat. Hootsuite also defines posts as "any social media status update, photo, or video, or an item shared on a blog or forum" (Worthy & Newberry, 2020).

Social media is a huge part of our everyday lives, as more than half of the world's population today use it in some form. Based on data collected by BroadbandSearch (2020), as of early 2020, an estimated 3.8 billion people use social media with 11 people using it for the first time every second. Each day, these 3.8 billion users are on a variety of social media platforms for an average of 144 minutes: two hours and 24 minutes. While North Americans are on social media for an average of only 2 hours and 6 minutes, it is still a significant amount of time to commit per day to social platforms (BroadbandSearch, 2020).

This thesis continues in seven sections, with the next section containing a summary on the rise of social media use and its roles in college admissions and recruiting. The second section outlines the history of women's rowing in the NCAA and at Syracuse University. The third section deals with choosing a platform to implement a strategy and why that platform is the ideal choice. The fourth section focuses on the best practices in both social media and sport marketing and why they are important. Section five pertains to the comparisons to competitive peer programs and what could be emulated for SU's strategy. Section six is dedicated to the actual strategy created for the Syracuse University women's rowing team, including examples and the reasoning behind those decisions. The final section is dedicated to the lessons learned from this research and predictions on where social media in sports will be in the coming years. The references complete this work.

Section I: The Rise of Social Media and Its Role in College Admissions

While social media has expanded significantly in recent years, the concept of social media itself dates back as early as 1844. It was then that Samuel Morse sent a telegraph from Washington D.C. to Baltimore that said, "What hath God wrought" (Madrigal, 2013). While that is not the traditional social media we've become accustomed to over recent years, it was still a way for people to connect and share, despite geographic barriers. Then in 1969 the United States' Advanced Research Projects Agency Network tried to connect universities on a proto-internet for them to send messages to each other. The network was somewhat successful, sending the letters "LO" to the intended recipient rather than the full "LOGIN" that had been planned (Ahmad, 2018).

The first social website that resembles our present-day platforms was a website called SixDegrees.com in 1997. The concept of the site was to create a profile page, have a list of connections, and send messages to your connections within the network (Samur, 2018). Most contemporary social media platforms are based around a similar format, one that relates back to Samuel Morse connecting with someone using technology.

SixDegrees.com, the first social media website created in 1997, led to Friendster and Friendster dominated the industry until Myspace came along in 2005. Myspace provided everything Friendster did not. It had public profiles that users could customized with things like their favorite music and videos (Samur, 2018). This became the closest thing to our modern-day social media as it was the first social platform to reach a million monthly users, which was accomplished in 2004 (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019).

Myspace dominated the social media space, and was a leading platform until 2006, when Facebook took off. Facebook, originally named Facemash, was Mark Zuckerberg's social network that was available to Harvard University starting in 2003. 2006 was the year that Facebook opened its site to the world, branding itself as a global network for the first time since its creation in 2004. Twitter, formerly known as Twttr, also launched in 2006, making that the year in which two of the most influential social media platforms today got their start (Samur, 2018).

Since 2006, there have been a steadily growing and evolving number of platforms that have been taken up and through extensive use become incorporated into people's daily lives. Examples of these platforms are Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, and now the recent addition, TikTok. As seen in Table 1, these platforms now boast 1 billion users, 210 million users, 2.45 billion users, 330 million users, and 800 million users respectively (Moshin, 2020) (Moshin, 2020) (Moshin, 2020) (Moshin, 2020) (Ying Lin, 2019). In recent years, kids have been getting tablet devices and smartphones at younger ages, exposing them to social media earlier than older generations did. Nielsen (2017) highlighted that nearly 45% of children in the United States between the ages of 10-12 have their own smartphone with a data plan and another report done by Common Sense Media showed that 42% of children in the United States that are 8 years old are younger have their own tablet device (Howard, 2017).

Social Media Platform	Number of Users
Instagram	1 billion
Snapchat	210 million
Facebook	2.45 billion

Twitter	330 million
TikTok	800 million

Table 1: Social media platforms and their number of active users

Common Sense Media (2016) further reported the average age of children signing up for a social media account is now 12.6 years old (Howard, 2018). This means that by the time these students are in high school and beginning the college process, they have already had a presence on social media for several years and are likely to be using social media when searching for colleges.

Given this, colleges have increased their presence on social media in recent years. College admissions officers and senior leadership are keenly aware that their activity across a variety of platforms is helping draw in prospective student and their families.

Using social media effectively also goes beyond just engaging prospective students as it also allows for schools to connect with their current students and their alumni (Ridley, n.d.). However, focusing on prospective students is especially important because social media is such a huge part of high school students' lives, with 71% of U.S. teenagers on social media platforms, These teens are now spending an average of nine hours each day consuming social media on various platforms (Weindling, 2017).

Marketing strategies typically follow the "four P's": product, price, place, and promotion. Because of the brand universities are creating, the "four P's" are not enough. Universities often follow the "seven P's": programs, price, promotion, placement, personnel, processes, and prominence (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014). By hitting all seven P's, universities position themselves in a way that caters to prospective and incoming students as well as creates connections and satisfies the expectations of current students, parents, alumni, potential donors,

fans, and members of the community. Creating these connections is important, especially with current students. Studies have shown that students who are more connected to their university often have higher grade point averages and are more likely to graduate at that institution (Peruta & Shields, 2016).

By maintaining up-to-date and engaging accounts via social media, universities can present themselves in ways that traditional brochures and booklets cannot. Social media gives universities the chance to authentically share what the student experience is life at that school. Creating a strong brand identity when marketing a university is essential because the product they are selling is not tangible. By branding themselves rather than a product, higher education institutions are dependent on the perceptions of the public, which is why they must produce content that will appeal to their targeted demographics (Watkins & Gonzenbach). Jason Boucher, the Social Media Coordinator at the University of New Hampshire, advocates that schools create a hashtag for current students to use to share their own personal experiences at their university. University of New Hampshire uses #UNHTales and Boucher explains that "Our audience for UNHTales is not only students, but prospective students and their parents read the voice of the student and what their experience is like at UNH coming from actual students not the administration, so it's genuine and authentic" (Ridley, n.d.). Current students being the center of branding is important because they are both consumers and products of their universities (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014).

Syracuse University does something similar where they do Instagram takeovers on the @syracuseu account. A student is selected for a particular day to show what a typical day in the life for them is like between classes, dorm life, and extra-curriculars. This gives prospective students a feel for what it would be like if they were a student on campus without needing to

physically be in Syracuse. Having current students featured on colleges' social media accounts makes that university more relatable because prospective students are seeing what the school is like through the lens of someone closer in age or in a more similar stage of life to them than the traditional admissions counselor (Weindling, 2017).

With many students traveling out of state to attend college or choosing to live on campus regardless of being close, prospective families are looking into a university beyond just academics. These prospective students are looking for a plethora of other things, such as study abroad programs, what dorm buildings are like, Greek life, clubs and organizations on campus, places to volunteer, and many others. An active presence on social media allows universities to have more direct contact with families and can see what students are looking for in order to make improvements to their digital strategy. By knowing what prospective students and their families are looking for, schools can focus on that to best capture what their campus culture feels like. Kayla Germain, the E-Media Coordinator at the College of Saint Rose, explained that, " One of the basic ways we use social media is to share what's going on on campus right now – sharing different photos, and event information can help showcase to incoming students what's going on at The College of Saint Rose and what makes our campus different from others" (Ridley, n.d.).

As The College of Saint Rose's Germain mentioned, social media allows schools to show what is going on at the campus right now (Ridley, n.d.). Timeliness is something that universities could not quite provide prior to social media and instead had to settle for promotions before an event and recaps following it. With social media, schools can now post content as events and activities are happening in real time. Nikki Sunstrum, Director of Social Media at the University of Michigan, expanded on Michigan's digital strategy to include being timely in their posts. The University of Michigan was one of the first universities in the country to launch a Snapchat

account and create almost 30 different geotags for campus along with creating new ones for specific events. This strategy has allowed the school to increase their engagement with prospective students in a much newer and timelier fashion (Weindling, 2017).

Difference for College Athletic Recruits

Social media has become an integral part of the collegiate athletic recruiting process, for both high school athletes and athletic programs. Athletes can use various platforms to brand themselves to potential coaches, using their accounts to promote their own highlight videos and showcase their talent. They can share their accomplishments and any official offers they may have received. Coaches can use social media as a tool to see not only the talent these potential recruits have, but also their personality, putting pressure on these athletes to keep up a good image online. Social media also gives athletes the chance to reach out to coaches directly, often receiving a response quicker than recruits who send an email to a coach (How to Use Social Media for Recruiting, n.d.). Just as social media provides a platform for athletes to showcase and brand themselves, it also gives athletic programs the same opportunity. This breaks down geographic barriers and allows both parties to experience what the other is like, regardless of the physical distance between them.

College athletic recruits have more to look for in a future school than the typical prospective high school student. While athletes still look for things in a school like academic programs, campus life, organizations to join, and various others, they also must look into the athletic program they are looking to pursue. Prospective student athletes must consider things like the strength of the school's academics as well as the strength of the school's athletic programs and the quality of their particular sport's team and decide what to prioritize. Beyond a

school's campus culture, athletes are looking to see what the team culture is like in the sport they are hoping to continue in college. While everybody is looking for different things, this could include things like the team's successes, highlights, outings, and facilities. These recruits need to know that the teams they are looking to join have the resources that they need to help them in a successful athletic career.

Athletes have many of the same day-to-day experiences of their non-athlete peers in college. They have classes, assignments, exams, and extra-curricular activities, hang out with friends, and interact with friends and family outside of campus. Student athletes are also balancing practices and athletic treatments, sorting out the academic demands placed on student athletes for games/competitions, and traveling for those competitions; participating in additional seminars and experiences provided for student athletes, and representing their sport and school.

As a result of this, student athletes typically have a more structured daily schedule that they must follow. This suggests that an Instagram takeover feature from an athlete would look different than one from other students. Just like a university, a college athletic program should also be running an effective digital strategy. Athletic programs have the same goal as university's when it comes to recruiting prospective students: to stand out. For this reason, college athletic programs need to use social media effectively when recruiting high school students. And, specifically, in this thesis I focus on the Syracuse University women's rowing team with the goal of helping them improve their current digital strategy in order to distinguish themselves from their peer program. To do this, I draw on the best practices of sport marketing and use evidence from my research on SU WROW's competitors.

Section II: Women's Rowing in the NCAA

College sports are overseen by a governing body. Most people know of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, also known as the NCAA[1]. But, there are others, including the Intercollegiate Rowing Association (IRA[2]) for men's rowing. The NCAA and other collegiate sports organizations put in place rules to ensure fairness across programs and for equitable treatment of the student athletes.

Despite being under the same governing body, there is a huge disparity when it comes to the revenue generated by NCAA sports, specifically at Division I schools. In 2017, football brought in an average of $31,924,154. The sport with the second highest revenue, men's basketball, brings roughly $8 million each year, an almost $24 million difference. Additionally, while football is bringing in close to $32 million, the next 35 sports on average are only generating $31.7 million combined every year, with rowing only contributing $932,464 on average (Gaines and Nudelman, 2017).

The NCAA also has a strict set of rules that Division I coaches must follow when recruiting students. For women's rowing in particular, athletes can start receiving any non-recruiting and nonathletic publications from coaches at any time. Starting June 15th following sophomore year, coaches are allowed to extend verbal scholarship offers, send recruiting materials, and privately communicate with athletes via text messages, instant messages, direct messages, and emails. Beginning August 1st before junior year begins, athletes are allowed to begin official visits to campuses as well as unofficial visits to a school's athletic department to

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[1] http://www.ncaa.org/

[2] http://irarowing.com/

meet coaches. In addition, coaches are also allowed to visit athletes at their schools or residences (NCAA Recruiting Rules: When Can College Coaches Contact High School Athletes, n.d.),

Using social media allows programs to show fans, and more importantly, potential recruits, what the culture of the team is by posting highlights, practice clips, fun teams photos, and anything else that shows off the personality of the team. This gives student athletes a unique chance to see both the team and what it is like for the team behind the scenes. It helps these programs create a consistent brand and provides an opportunity to engage with high school students as well as stay on their minds just by posting frequently. Recruits also see programs' social media accounts' effectiveness as a reflection of what their own personal brand will look like in the future.

Especially with the NCAA asking all three divisions to create rules on athletes being able to benefit from their likeness by January 2021, high school athletes are now looking at how they can build their own brand because there is now a good chance they will be profiting, or at least trying to, from it sooner rather than later (Barajas, 2019). Beyond just program success and culture, recruits are looking to see resources an athletic program has for social media as well as what advice they can offer to continue building the athlete's brand. One of the top quarterback recruits for 2018 even said, "It's important for me personally to someday have a million followers. That's a big goal I know I can get at a place like (university redacted)." These athletes are looking for school that will make them well-prepared for life after college, both athletically and socially, and the athletic programs that prove they are equipped to do that will stand out among the rest (Giffin, 2017).

Social media makes these teams and programs accessible to high school students which is important when recruiting to athletes beyond a university's region (Wright IMC, n.d.). Iowa

State's football program is a prime example of utilizing social media as a recruiting tool for their team. They created the hashtag, #AStormIsBrewing, as a nod to their team name, the Cyclones, to use on Twitter whenever the team was posting anything related to recruiting. They also incorporated another hashtag, #SoundTheSirens, for when a new recruit signs to keep consistent branding and excitement at the new additions to their teams. On top of this, it was highly encouraged to use the tornado emoji to help rebrand the image of Iowa State football and create more buzz and excitement surrounding their team. By creating a fun and interactive account online, potential students saw that and were intrigued by the culture of the team and would want to be a part of it or at least learn more about it. Iowa State's Director of Scouting, John Kuceyeski, explained the importance of a strong social media presence by saying, "If you're not doing it, you're going to get beat by somebody that's doing it. You have to be out there. You have to be different. You have to be completely visible and be accessible, and the best way to do that in today's recruiting world is through social media" (Crabtree, 2016). Additionally, NCAA data shows that female athletes begin their recruiting process earlier than male athletes, with about 50% of female athletes taking unofficial visits prior to their junior year of high school. Female athletes in team sports, like rowing, have proven to take even more initiative, with about 71% taking their first unofficial visits before their junior year (Cooper, 2017). These unofficial visits are in person and more likely than not, these athletes are researching potential athletic programs on social media well before taking any visits in person. This provides the need for good, consistent branding for teams like Syracuse University's women's rowing team as the content they are creating is potentially recruiting beyond just the incoming class for the 2020-2021 academic year.

Women's rowing was established as an NCAA sport in 1997, which helped create a rowing program at many schools. Many schools did not have women's team rowing listed as a varsity sport or even a program dedicated to the sport prior to 1997. As of 2014, there were more than 5,600 female students participating in rowing at the Division I level, which is more athletes than both softball and women's basketball combined. There has been a 63% increase of participants in Division I women's rowing since it became an official NCAA sport, which has also increased the popularity of the sport at the high school level (Rodriguez, 2014).

One of the big incentives for female high schoolers to continue rowing in college is the opportunity for scholarship. The NCAA allows up to 20 scholarships to be offered per women's rowing team, giving rowing more scholarships than any other team with the exception of football (Rodriguez, 2014). Although a lot of scholarships are available for women's rowing, it is still one of the hardest teams to make in the NCAA. Most sports, like football and basketball, rely on walk-ons which help to make up their teams. Women's rowing, on the other hand, only has room for 25 girls on the roster, making it much more competitive. Schools have anywhere from 100-400 girls on average who show interest in making their 25-person roster (Sequin, 2018).

Although the NCAA introduced women's rowing at the Division I level in 1997, it wasn't until 2002 when women's rowing was incorporated at the Division II and Division III levels. Within the NCAA, there are eleven conferences, the American Athletic Conference, the Atlantic Coast Conference, Atlantic 10 Conference, Big Ten Conference, Big 12 Conference, Colonial Athletic Association, Ivy League, Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference, Patriot League, West Coast Conference, and Eastern Colleges Athletic Conference/Metro League.

The NCAA is not the only conference for women's rowing. Other conferences include the Eastern Association of Women's Rowing Colleges, Mid-Atlantic Rowing Conference,

Northwest Collegiate Rowing Conference[3], and the Western Intercollegiate Rowing Association (Row2k, n.d.) (see Table 2).

Women's Rowing Collegiate Conferences
National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)
Eastern Association of Women's Rowing Colleges (EAWRC)
Mid-Atlantic Rowing Conference
Northwest Collegiate Rowing Conference (NCRC)
Western Intercollegiate Rowing Association (WIRA)

Table 2: List of women's rowing collegiate conferences

The Syracuse University women's rowing team is a member of the NCAA. However, the programs history begins more than 20 years before the women's rowing was established as an NCAA sport. In the early 1970s, women's rowing was introduced as a club sport. The club had humble beginnings, starting with borrowed equipment and a volunteer coach. The club was given varsity status just a few years later in 1997. The team became part of the NCAA in 1997 and under novice coach, Kris Sanford, advanced to the inaugural NCAA championship, establishing Syracuse University women's rowing as an elite team. From 2001 to 2013, Syracuse rowed in the Big East conference and won three conference titles conference titles consecutively, from 2001-2003. In 2014, Syracuse University joined the ACC, one of the premier rowing conferences for women in the country (The History of Women's Rowing, n.d.).

Much like other college sports, a few conferences dominate. In women's rowing, those dominant conferences are the PAC12, Big 10, Ivy League, and the ACC. There are strong

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[3] https://www.nwcsports.com/sports/wrowing/index

programs in many of these conferences: 11 send their conference champions to the NCAA championship. When speaking with the SU WROW coaching staff, they explained that the 11 at-large invites for the NCAA championship often come from the depth of the PAC12, Big 10, Ivy League, and ACC. Following early success, SUWROW had slid to a mid-tier program. In 2009, athletic department leadership began to revitalize the program. In recent years, Syracuse has been ranked in the top 20 schools consistently, re- establishing their spot as an elite team (History of Women's Rowing, n.d.).

Section III: Choosing a Social Media Platform

When creating a digital strategy to boost the Syracuse University women's rowing team's social media presence, one of the most important parts is choosing the platform to focus on and highlight in the strategy. Instagram was selected as the most important platform for the sake of recruiting. Going into the 2020-2021 school year, the team is primarily looking to find talent between the ages of 17-19 for the incoming freshman class. In recent years, Instagram has surpassed Facebook in popularity among younger generations. After Facebook helped to initiate the surge in social media usage, other platforms also rose in popularity and we saw things like Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Vine, and Tik Tok create their own giant followings. In a survey done by Streetbees, a British market research startup, commissioned by Business Insiders, it was found that Gen Z chose Instagram as their preferred social media platform (Hamilton, 2019).

The Pew Research Center reported that Gen Z was roughly between the ages of 7-22 in 2019, meaning that the incoming freshman class for the 2020-2021 academic year would be classified as Gen Z (Dimock, 2019). Additionally, a national survey done by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research showed that teen girls between the ages of 13-17 spend more time on photo-centric social media platforms like Snapchat and Instagram (The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, n.d.). This data provides the argument that Snapchat could also be a contender for the platform of choice when rebranding the SU women's rowing team's digital strategy.

In a "Experts' Roundtable" focused on social media in college athletics by Athletic Director U, a college athletics news source, leaders in the industry provided insight on why Snapchat isn't the most effective (Athletic Director U, n.d.). With this research, it is assumed that this incoming class would follow the trend of preferring Instagram above other platforms.

Brandon Harrison, Social Media Manager at the University of Wisconsin, argued that between

Instagram and Snapchat, Instagram's growth in popularity and story feature that is similar to

Snapchat's story feature makes Instagram that platform that has more value in investing time and

effort in. Morgyn Seigfried, Assistant Athletic Director for Digital Media at Temple University,

explained that Temple's athletic program had tried incorporating Snapchat into their digital

strategy as it was clearly a platform that their targeted demographics are using. However, when

comparing numbers between their Instagram and Snapchat, Temple saw that the numbers on

their Instagram stories well surpassed the numbers on their Snapchat stories. That encouraged

them to turn their focus on Instagram to really push unique and compelling content on one

platform in order to avoid "spreading [themselves] too thin". Seigfried also made the argument

that Snapchat is used more for one-on-one interactions rather than athletic programs interacting

with fans and potential recruits (Athletic Director U, n.d.).

Beyond being the preferred platform of the target audience, Instagram also provides the

unique angle of being a very visual platform that also allows for lengthy text. Being visual and

descriptive is crucial when using a social media platform as a recruiting tool because it gives a

potential athlete a much better idea of what the school and team is like, all from the comfort of

their smartphone. Instagram gives organizations, like college athletic programs, a more effective

approach to creating brand associations by using the brand identity in a visual manner (Watkins

& Lee, 2016). Instagram has similar features to Snapchat where teams can post stories that

remain on their profile for up to 24 hours, just like a Snapchat story. Instagram also allows for

long texts in posts' captions, similar to Facebook and surpassing the 280-character limit on

Twitter. Although captions can give more insight and depth, it's important to note that users

typically have a heightened brand perception when seeing information displayed visually, like on

Instagram, rather than when content is written out like Twitter (Watkins & Lee, 2016).

Instagram also has several features that allow teams to really be creative with their

branding. This includes being able to post videos as both regular posts and as a story. Videos or

photos posted as a story also gives the team the opportunity to add to a highlight, something that

is pinned to the top of a profile and can be viewed indefinitely, even after the post expires 24

hours after being added as a story. Another unique feature is Instagram TV, also known as

IGTV. Instagram has a 60-second limit on videos used in regular posts. IGTV allows a page to

post longer videos than usually allowed on a post and collects all of these videos in one section

of an account's profile, known as the account's "channel", while also allowing the account to

share 60 seconds of the video as a regular post that links to the IGTV channel. IGTV allows

videos between 15 seconds to 10 minutes, which gives teams ample opportunities to be creative

with the videos they want to publish. All these features are things that can be tailored to improve

recruiting on a platform that is already most likely used by recruits (see Table 3).

Twitter	Facebook	Instagram	Snapchat
280-character limit	No character limit	No character limit	Photos
Photos	Photos	Photos	Videos
Videos	Videos	Videos	24-hour long stories
	24-hour stories	24-hour stories	
	Livestream	Story highlights	
		Livestream	
		IGTV	

Table 3: Relevant features of social media platforms

Section IV: Best Practices in Sport and College Marketing

One of the key parts of building a successful strategy is to leverage and build from best practices already established within the industry. For the Syracuse University women's rowing team, it is important to implement best practices from both sports and college recruiting to guide recruiting for potential student athletes looking for both sports and academics.

From a college perspective, it is recommended that schools first identify the most-used platform for their targeted demographic (Tips on how to Use Social Media as a Student Recruitment Tool, 2019). From there, a school must make sure that their digital strategy aligns with the university's recruitment strategy. This means consistent branding and goals throughout both. Building from these decisions, the next step is to examine what content, including things such as pictures, videos, and stories, is in place already across social media platforms. This gives the chance to see what is and is not working to figure out what needs to be improved or changed.

Lastly, it is recommended that colleges look at competitor universities so see what they are doing successfully as well as innovative schools who are doing things outside of the box. An example of this is Texas A&M University having an additional account separate from @tamu, the university's official account, that is dedicated entirely to prospective students called @aggiebound, found on both Twitter and Instagram. They use @aggiebound to pass along information about applications, financial aid, housing, and what student life is like on campus (Tips on how to Use Social Media as a Student Recruitment Tool, 2019).

On Instagram, specifically, it is recommended that schools use hashtags that will enhance Instagram algorithms to help push their content on to user explore pages, even if they don't follow the schools account. Between using hashtags and posting engaging content, a school is

more likely to stand out (Tips on how to Use Social Media as a Student Recruitment Tool, 2019). Schools are looking to recruit students who stand out so their social media must reflect that their program is also different from the rest.

Recruiting athletes through Instagram requires athletic programs to come up with innovative ways to showcase their athletics and school culture. One of the ways to do this is to take advantage of Instagram stories as a visual storytelling tool. Jessica McNamara, Assistant Director of Digital Media/Social Media at Duke University, explained that she uses Instagram stories extensively, as doing so provides a way for Duke athletics to keep fans updated with things like gameday previews and recaps along with scores that can also link back to team's website (Twiford, n.d.).

For the school culture aspect, Tim Lutz, Sports Information Director at Auburn University of Montgomery, stressed the importance of using student-athletes (Twiford, n.d.). While his approach was directed towards gaining a bigger following and using student athletes to like and share their team's content with their family and friends, using student athletes in a strategy for recruiting is equally as important. Having content focused on these athletes give recruits a better feel for who they would be surrounding themselves if they commit to a certain university and the overall team culture. A strategy that implements these best practices will help create social media content that engages recruits and helps them better understand the teams they are hoping to join in the near future.

Section V: Comparisons to Competitive Peer Programs

Another important aspect of creating a strategy is creating content that both aligns with and yet distinguishes Syracuse University from its primary competitors for rowing. The SU women's team usually falls just under being considered a "powerhouse school" in terms of athletics and below an Ivy League school in regard to academics. The powerhouse rowing schools being compared to Syracuse University were University of Southern California, University of Louisville, Duke University, and Rutgers University. The schools selected to compare academically were Harvard University, University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Notre Dame. The schools were selected as they were all stronger than Syracuse University either athletically or academically (see Table 4).

All schools used for these comparisons were also featured on the US Rowing and Pocock Collegiate Rowing Coaches Association (CRCA[4]) preseason poll for the 2020 Women's NCAA Division I rankings in either the top 20 teams, with Syracuse University at #19, or as a university that also received votes but didn't make the top 20[5]. There were not any major differences between these selected schools, as most stuck with a consistent theme of posting videos and photos from practices and competitions along with posts highlighting athletes who had officially signed to compete with the team as incoming freshman (see Table 4).

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[4] https://collegerowcoach.org/

[5] https://www.row2k.com/polls/index.cfm?cat=college&type=Pocock%20CRCA%20Poll%20presented%20by%20USRowing

Athletic Peer Programs	Academic Peer Programs
University of Southern California @uscwomensrowing 2.5k Followers	University of Southern California @uscwomensrowing 2.5k Followers
University of Louisville @uoflrowing 2.1k Followers	Harvard University @radhwtcrew 3.8k Followers
Duke University @dukerow 4.8k Followers	University of Pennsylvania @pennwomensrowing 3.7k Followers
Rutgers University @rutgerswrowing 2.2k Followers	University of Notre Dame @ndrowing 1.6k Followers
Syracuse University @cusewrowing 3k Followers	

Table 4: Peer programs used for comparison

While most schools have similar content on their Instagram posts, a few of these comparison universities used tools on Instagram differently, or highlighted unique parts of the program which made them stand out from the rest. Duke, for example, used the highlights feature on Instagram very well. They often posted videos at practices, using catchy songs and gifs related to Duke. They also post videos of workouts on their highlights which gives potential students a good look at what the facilities are like, something very helpful especially if they are not able to visit North Carolina in person. These highlights also show their consistent branding of "Here Comes Duke" between the gifs they add to their practice videos to the phrase being painted on the walls of their training facility. This consistent branding and look into such a strong school's facility are things the Syracuse team could emulate in their new strategy.
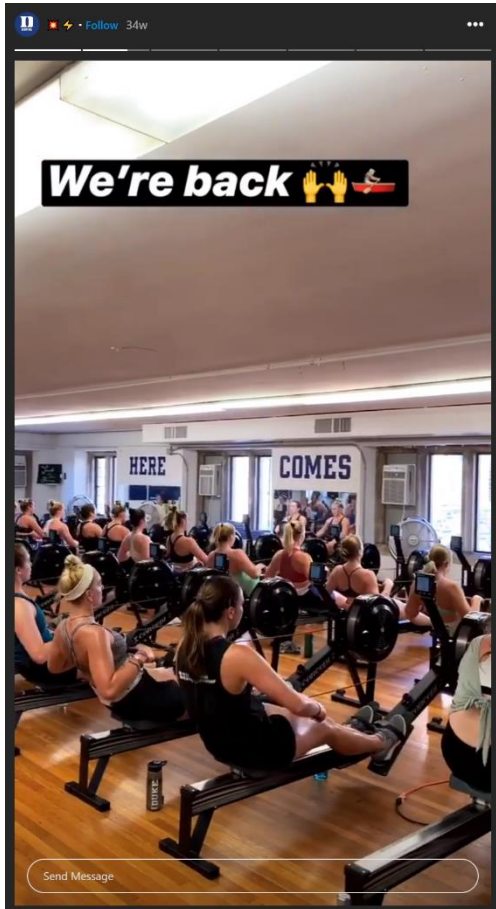
Figure 1: Duke University Women's Rowing Instagram

Although it was expected that the stronger academic schools would have more of a focus on academics, it was University of Louisville that highlighted their academics in the most unique way. It was a way to highlight the entire team's successes and to show the importance of the athlete's schoolwork. This is also something that could be implemented into Syracuse's digital strategy to emphasize strong academics.

Figure 2: University of Louisville Women's Rowing Instagram

Rutgers University, one of the powerhouse rowing schools used for the comparisons, was the only school that highlighted their place on the preseason rankings. Because of the COVID-19 outbreak, the 2020 NCAA rowing season was cancelled. So, preseason rankings were the only ones for the season. However, Rutgers took the opportunity to create content for their account by showing off their 12th place rank. The team used a simple template that kept consistent branding from pasts posts about branding and included a fun caption to get fans excited about the upcoming season. It was visually aesthetic and simple and it something that would be good to emulate for SU's strategy.

Figure 3: Rutgers University Women's Rowing Instagram

The University of Southern California's post highlighting their international student athletes is something that stood out among the rest of the women's rowing page. Syracuse University has seven students that come from outside of the United States. These women on the rowing team come from New Zealand, Australia, Germany, England, and Sweden. Showing this on their Instagram page would also be helpful when recruiting more international athletes; because they can see other women from their home country or at least see that not everyone is from the United States. It is a simple way to represent these athletes and their home countries, much like the University of the Southern California did in the caption.

Figure 4: University of Southern California Women's Rowing Instagram

Something that stood out about the Harvard's women's rowing team's Instagram was the behind-the-scenes feel of the page. Harvard had significantly more posts than any other school about team-bonding within the program. There were lots of pictures of trivia nights, celebrating the arrival of new uniforms, running marathons and/or supporting their teammates running marathons, the team supporting other Harvard teams, like the women's basketball team, and even screenshots from a team meeting over Zoom because of the ongoing pandemic. Although these posts aren't strictly focused on rowing (which they do have the usual highlights and practice pictures/videos), the Harvard women's rowing team's Instagram really demonstrates the culture of the team and what it's like to be a student athlete at a prestigious Ivy-league school like Harvard.

Figure 5: Harvard University Women's Rowing Instagram

The University of Pennsylvania women's rowing team's Instagram was almost the opposite of Harvard's page. While there were a few light-hearted posts, most of the content on the page was strictly about rowing, with a very professional feel to it. Almost every post includes the Penn logo which gave the account a very cohesive and consistent branding. They also used set templates to announce newly signed athletes that stuck with the same theme as the rest of the page. By scrolling further, you could see the difference over time and how the account had gradually progressed to the professional look they have achieved. This served as a good example of a successful branding of an athletic program's social media and provided inspiration on achieving a similar design.

Figure 6: University of Pennsylvania Women's Rowing Instagram

Lastly, Notre Dame, one of the stronger academic universities used for this comparison, was much different than every other team. Notre Dame women's rowing team really focused on team culture. Almost all posts, whether they are more personal to the team or focused on competitions and highlights, feature the hashtag, #shamrocksisters, which helps create consistent brand identity for the program all throughout their account. There were many pictures of what women on the team have done outside of rowing like studying abroad or volunteering in third world countries, especially in the summer. There is even a recent post highlighting a 2007 alum of the Notre Dame Women's Rowing team who is currently working on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic as physician's assistant, and is, of course, wearing a Notre Dame monogram on her scrubs. Another thing that stood out was a post that showed a candle that had been lit in memory of Grace Rhett, a member of the Holy Cross women's rowing team, who passed away earlier this year. These types of post demonstrate their unity as a team as well as members of the rowing community.

One of the biggest parts of Notre Dame's women's rowing team showing their team culture is their featured rower, Becky Boatmover, in the majority of their posts over the past two

years. Becky Boatmover, also known as the Elf on the Shelf, first made an appearance on

December 3, 2018 and was introduced as the newest member of the #shamrocksisters. Since

then, Becky Boatmover has been featured in 44 posts, becoming one of the biggest themes on the

team's account. The team posts pictures of her doing a variety of things, from going to practice

to visiting cafes on campus. On December 11, 2019, she even received her very own Notre

Dame shirt that she now sports in most of the posts about her.

Figure 7: University of Notre Dame Women's Rowing Instagram

While Notre Dame's women's rowing account may not explicitly focus on rowing, it

shows the lighthearted side of college athletics and the fun the team has. While Becky

Boatmover may not be something that Syracuse women's team can incorporate specifically, it

was still worth seeing how teams incorporate their culture into their branding.

Section VI: A Digital Strategy for Syracuse University Women's Rowing Team

The idea behind rebranding the women's rowing team's social media is to use a messaging campaign on the @cusewrowing Instagram to build a bridge between athletics and academics for potential recruits. The strategy has seven parts, as described below and summarized in Table 5.

One of the keys to maintaining a solid brand identity is to come up with a consistent hashtag to be used on all posts. Branded hashtags are seen throughout professional sports, especially on Twitter, where a team's logo is automatically added any time the hashtag is used (see also Figure 8[6]). Teams also use those branded hashtags in both pictures and captions. These branded hashtags in sports go beyond just the professional level. Many teams use them at the collegiate level. For example, Duke University women's rowing team uses #HereComesDuke in every Instagram caption. Even the Syracuse University men's rowing team's Instagram account, @cusemrowing, uses #CuseRowing in their bio and in every caption. The women's team should also be taking advantage of this and create their own hashtag that is unique to them. An idea for this would be #GoOARange as a fun play on words for the university and the sport. Beyond just the team hashtag, posts can also include other fun hashtags as they relate to content. For example, when an international athlete is being featured, there can be hashtag about her home country to help build exposure. Another element to be featured in all posts is the block "S" logo, the symbol of Syracuse University athletics. By incorporating the logo and using the branded hashtag in the Instagram's bio, captions, and story templates, there will be consistent branding throughout the account.

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[6] https://wtop.com/nfl/2016/09/ranking-the-new-nfl-hashtags-from-first-to-worst/

Figure 8: Branded hashtags on Twitter for all 32 NFL football teams

The next part of the strategy to be implemented is a biweekly athlete spotlight year-round. This required creating a template (see Figure 9) to use weekly that would focus on one athlete, why she chose Syracuse University to pursue her rowing career, and things like her year, major, hometown, and any other fun facts along with the branded hashtag. Doing this biweekly also helps build a consistent posting schedule, something that is lacking now from the current social media strategy. One of the reasons for doing this biweekly year-round is because it ensures that there will be content published, even in the offseason. Priority of posting will be given to upperclassmen, particularly the seniors which could double as a senior spotlight for those athletes. Seniors can also add things like the biggest lesson they have learned in their college career or what they will miss the most about Syracuse. By rotating through upperclassmen first, it ensures that every girl on the team will have a chance to have their spotlight once during their time at Syracuse University, if not more.

Figure 9: Athlete spotlight post template

Similar to the biweekly spotlight feature are "a day in the life" highlights, where the athlete chosen for that week would choose a day to do a "takeover" on the team's Instagram to show what her typical routine on any given day is. This gives potential students a look into what their daily routine would consist of it they were to commit to Syracuse. It would start with a set template photo that includes the athlete's name, year, and major. Following that would be videos from the athlete selected that show things like rowing practice, her class schedule, eating in the dining hall, and anything else in between. Each story would then be added to a highlight that is then pinned on to the @cusewrowing account. Figure 10 shows s an example of what the "day in the life" story cover will look.
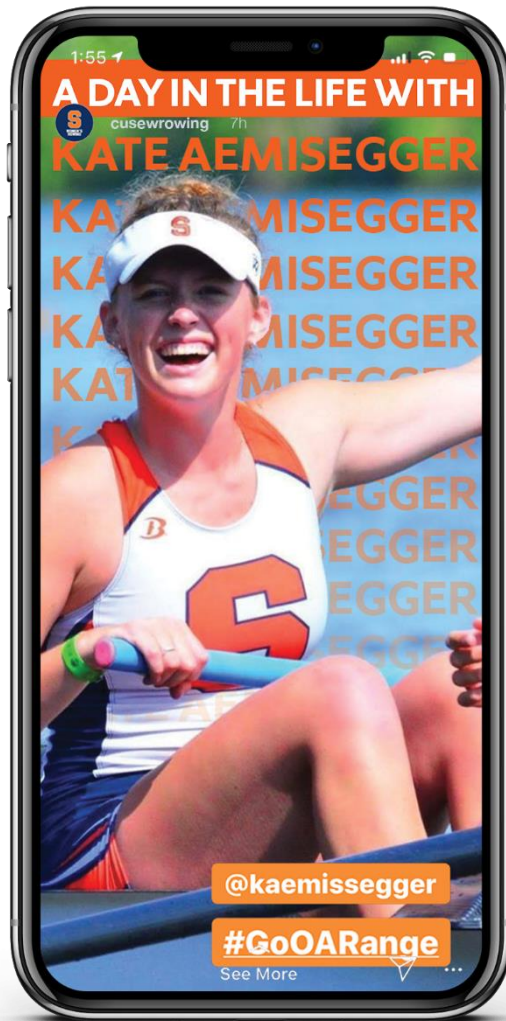
Figure 10: "Day in the Life" story template, shown on an iPhone

The third part of this new strategy is to also have Instagram story templates dedicated to birthdays, holidays. Instagram stories are an easy way to share timely information, like the events previously listed. The birthday template (see also Figure 11) would include either the coach or athlete's name along with their picture and posted that day. Having templates dedicated to holidays, whether it is a national holiday like Halloween or a fun, niche holiday like National Take a Rower to Dinner Day, is a fun way to engage with the account's followers. This template would be similar to the simplicity of the birthday template (see also Figure 12). Lastly, a

competition template would be an easy way for fans to see competition details as they scroll through Instagram, rather than needing to search online. Posting this on an Instagram story, a feature that disappears after 24 hours also helps keep the account timely. This template would consist of the date and time of the competition as well as the name of the competitor the team will face (see Figure 13 below). After the race is over, another story will be posted with the results listed instead of the time.

Figure 11: Birthday story template

Figure 12: Holiday story template

Figure 13: Competition story template

Welcome Wednesdays is a feature already included on the @cusewrowing account. The purpose of this is to welcome the new students who have officially committed. Currently, there is no set template for Welcome Wednesdays, so improving this would involve creating a template to be used consistently. This template would include the rower's name, hometown, and class year (see Figure 14). The captions used for Welcome Wednesdays contain information about signed athletes like their high school, intended major, rowing accomplishments, why they chose Syracuse University, and #GoOARange. This is an exciting way to get to know these new

students before they arrive on campus and would continue to be implemented in this improved

strategy.

Figure 14: Welcome Wednesdays post template

A fifth and new element that is going to be included are IGTV channels. When

examining other universities' rowing pages, IGTV was not seen very often. Only about half of

the schools that were selected for comparison were utilizing IGTV and most of the content on

there was footage from practice or competitions. As mentioned before, IGTV is a unique way to

compile videos longer than 60 seconds into a channel on an Instagram account. A way to use this

feature while also showing off the academic side of the rowing team was to create school

spotlights of the 13 colleges within Syracuse University.

In recent years, Syracuse University has been branded as a "party school" and there has been a bigger push to show how strong the academic programs here are. Additionally, when choosing a school for athletics, the academic side of recruiting may not be shown upfront so these school spotlights would act as a way to help dissipate the "party school" stereotype, as well as showcase the great programs within the schools and colleges on campus. A school spotlight post would consist of pictures of the physical building designated for that college, which also shows off the campus, and an interview with some of the athletes in that college. With athletes in most of the 13 colleges on campus, this would be a good representation of the variety of paths athletes can go on in their academic careers at Syracuse University. These school spotlight interviews with athletes would be about why she chose her major and home college as well as what kinds of classes she takes, what she hopes to do with her degree following her graduation, internships she's had, and how she is able to balance her schoolwork with her rowing schedule. These school spotlights would be posted once a month, which also gives the team more content to post in the offseason when things are slower.

The final part of the strategy to be implemented are facility tours. This would begin with the recently modernized William Sanford and Family Rowing Center at the Barnes Center at the Arch. With the unveiling of the new rowing center being just a few months ago, this new facility is a stark difference from what the team had previously and is a huge pull for high school athletes looking for great facilities to pursue their rowing in. This facility tour would also be added to the team's IGTV channel, but because there is nothing similar for the team, it is also something that could be added to the website for even more reach. This is important to add as it shows potential recruits exactly where they would be working in the years to come. The goal for this element is to be as posted as soon as it is completed so it can also be posted on the team's website.

When speaking to the SU WROW coaching staff, they did not have any specific key performance indicators (KPIs) in mind when building this strategy. While there may not be any specific KPIs yet, one general KPI to analyze is the number of followers and follower engagement. With slightly above 3,000 followers, @cusewrowing can track to see if the number of followers and likes per post increase. Those numbers increasing means more people are watching, which could include recruits, and engaging with the new content being posted. If those numbers improve, the strategy will be successful is raising brand awareness.

New Features	Occurrences
Athlete Spotlights	Biweekly
Welcome Wednesdays	When Necessary
Day in the Life Highlights	Biweekly
Celebration/Competition Stories	When Necessary
School Spotlights	Monthly
Facility Tour	Once
Branded Hashtags	Every Post
Block "S" Logo	Every Post

Table 5: New features for the Instagram and how often they will occur

Section VII: Conclusion

The Syracuse University women's rowing team currently has about 3,000 followers, putting them roughly in the middle of the competitive peer programs (see Table 4). By making these improvements and producing more engaging content, SU WROW is more likely to increase their following and be closer to the top, like Duke University and Harvard University. More importantly, it will create a more compelling image of the team for recruits to see that could help them make their college decision.

Although creating a digital strategy centered on Instagram is the most effective approach for SU WROW currently, it is important to note that social media will change in the future. As social media changes, this strategy will have to adapt along with it. Although Instagram is popular now and likely will be for a long time, there is always the chance of a new platform popping up and quickly rising in popularity. This has been seen in the past with apps like Vine and is happening now with TikTok. TikTok has experienced a surge of users since 2019 and although it was not necessary to include in the strategy presented, it could eventually be needed. It is important that college athletic programs stay up to date on social media trends to ensure that they are appealing to their recruits.

The COVID-19 pandemic has proved the importance of good social media presence. With social distancing laws and travel bans, it is impossible for recruits to visit campuses and meet with coaches in person. International students are typically in this situation due to distance, but COVID-19 has put these restraints on everyone. Social media has become one of the only means of communications between organizations and the public. Maintaining a strong presence has become critical for all organizations during this global pandemic and the same effort should

be given even once the world returns to normal. For college athletic programs like SU WROW, staying engaged will help build better connections among fans and recruits.

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