

# Demographics and Usage Profiles of Users of College Sport Message Boards

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Internet-based sport communication mediums represent a crucial area of scholarly inquiry for the field. The continuing growth in popularity of blogs, message boards, and other Internet-specific types of sport communication presents sport communication scholars with a plethora of avenues for research. This commentary examines one such avenue, through a survey administered to users on 14 college sport message boards. Survey results indicated that message-board users were primarily male (87.8%) and White (90.8%) and possessed at least an undergraduate degree (76.0%). In addition, 42.2% of users reported a household income of \$100,000 or more per year. The analysis of the resulting demographic and usage data highlights some of the key aspects of this sample of users, including information relating to race, gender, income, education level, and salience of message-board use by both subscribers and nonsubscribers. These and other factors are presented as potential areas of future scholarly inquiry for sport communication researchers.

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The growth of the Internet in the past 2 decades has yielded many new and promising avenues for academic inquiry in the field of sport communication. Message boards, team and organizational Web sites, media convergence, blogs, and other Internet-specific areas have become popular sites for academic inquiry, and these areas are bound to grow in importance as the body of sport communication knowledge grows.

Sport communication scholars who investigate these new-media phenomena are presented with a particular challenge, however: to effectively analyze the various populations of users who consume and create new-media sport communication. Although there has been a great deal of demographic and usage analysis of users of traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, television, and radio, our understanding of the true nature of New Media audiences is still in its nascent stages. Even outside the field of sport communication, researchers are still trying

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to get a grasp on exactly who is using Web sites, who is participating on message boards, and who is writing and reading blogs.

The purpose of this commentary is to use an examination of a sample from a sport-based new-media population to demonstrate the potential benefits of New Media population analysis. Although a sport communication researcher could choose any such population as the target of such analysis, I chose to highlight college sport message boards, for a variety of reasons. College sport message boards have become increasingly popular, with certain message-board networks seeing over 70 million users online in a single day (Skretta, 2007) and with major media conglomerates such as News Corp. and Yahoo spending tens of millions of dollars to gain control over these networks (Oates, 2007). These message boards represent a unique type of sport communication, in which fans from disparate geographical locations converge to talk about their favorite teams, as well as other items not related to sport. Furthermore, the nature of message boards in general is unique, because of the technical setup allowing users to be both creators and consumers of content. Finally, college sport message boards are a highly visible and recordable medium. Unlike other New Media communication modes, such as live chats and streaming media, the content of message boards can be easily observed and analyzed by researchers.

The particular features of sport message boards make them prime subjects for academic inquiry using a variety of communication research methods. The ability to observe, record, and analyze messages on message boards allows for the use of content analysis, an unobtrusive and nonreactive research method, which is commonly used in academia in inquiries relating to journalism and sport communication. In addition, the ability to directly contact and monitor individual users who create and consume content lends itself to using qualitative methods of examination.

In terms of theoretical application, researchers have several ways of approaching sport message boards. For instance, agenda-setting theory, which involves the advancement and framing of certain messages so as to make them more attractive to the general public (Lang & Lang, 1983; McCombs & Shaw, 1972), could be used to study the way in which certain types of messages are portrayed by both operators and users of message boards.

Another theoretical avenue available to researchers is uses-and-gratifications theory, which attempts to explain the way individuals use communications in a goal-directed manner by using direct inquiries of those users (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). This method seems especially apt for sport message boards, because they are at their core a user-driven enterprise. Without the participation of and interaction between users, message boards would resemble other forms of Internet-based sport communication, such as blogs, in which there are few content generators. As Ruggiero (2000) noted, uses-and-gratifications theory assumes that users are active in their use of the media, which further bolsters the argument for employing the theory when examining sport message boards. Other scholars (e.g., Morris & Ogan, 1996; Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996) have also suggested that uses and gratifications is a proper lens through which to examine Internet-based communication, and several scholars have used the theory to study Internet users over the past decade.

## Method

To lay the groundwork for future studies of the uses and gratifications of sport message-board users, it is important that we first examine the nature of the users themselves (Klopfenstein, 2002). To that end, I used survey methodology to examine a convenience sample of users of college sport message boards over a 2-week period in late October of 2007. The survey instrument was derived from a series of operational steps undertaken to ensure both reliability and validity of the instrument, including a review of existing message-board-related literature, multiple panels of experts, interviews with message-board-industry personnel, users of college sport message boards, and a pilot study.

After these steps had been taken, the survey instrument was placed on the four most popular discussion forums on each of 14 message boards who chose to participate in the study, and all users on these boards were invited to participate. The demographic portion of the survey asked users to identify their age, gender, racial or ethnic background, approximate household income, education level, relationship status, number of children, country of residence, and current level of employment. Users were also asked whether they were alumni of the schools that the message boards focused on.

The usage portion of the survey asked users to identify the number of computers in their primary residence, the weekly amount of time they spend on the Internet and on college sport message boards, the average weekly number of posts they make on college sport message boards, the weekly amount of time they spend at work visiting college sport message boards, the average amount of money they spend per year on tickets to athletic events, the average number of college athletic events they attend per year, the average amount of money per year that they donate to college athletic programs, the amount of time they spend consuming traditional print media, the amount of time they spend watching television, and the amount of money they spend annually on subscriptions to traditional sport media. Respondents were also asked to indicate whether they subscribed to a college sport message board.

Finally, users were asked to respond via a 5-point Likert-type scale to a series of 40 statements relating to message-board use, with 1 indicating *strongly disagree* and 5 indicating *strongly agree*. These statements included such items as "I use college sport message boards to talk about my team's recruiting efforts," "To find out news faster than I would using other types of sport media," "To discuss X's and O's and general strategy," and "Because I enjoy interacting with other users."

Through identifying and analyzing the data derived from the survey responses, my goal is to both analyze and comment on the nature of college sport message-board users, as well as the scholarly and industrial implications of these findings. This commentary, and the survey data that it examines, are intended to be the first in a series of steps for sport communication researchers interested in studying sport-related message boards.

### Respondents' Demographic Data

The placement of the survey instrument on the participating message boards yielded a total of 2,339 responses, which is thus the sample size of this study

( $N = 2,339$ ). The response numbers per board ranged from a high of 487 responses to a low of 21. The mean number of responses for all 14 participating message boards was 167.

Users who identified themselves as nonsubscribers to college sport message boards ( $n = 1,519$ ) outnumbered those who identified themselves as subscribers ( $n = 794$ ). This was an expected result, because subscriber-only forums have been found to be far less numerous than “free” forums in previous research (Clavio, unpublished data, 2007). The rate of response from premium subscribers is higher than one might have anticipated, however, given the relatively low number of subscribers (Oates, 2007) and the high number of overall visitors (Skretta, 2007) to the message boards.

The data indicated that the vast majority of message-board users were male (87.8% of total, 92.2% of subscribers), White (90.8% of total, 92.4% of subscribers), and married (62.1% of total, 63.0% of subscribers); had least an undergraduate degree (76.0% of total, 79.3% of subscribers); and were current residents of the United States (97.4% of total, 98.1% of subscribers). Most respondents indicated that they were alumni of their message board’s school of focus (59.0% of total, 60.6% of subscribers). A total of 77.4% of survey participants indicated they were at least 30 years old, with subscribers tending to skew slightly older than nonsubscribers. Also of note was the finding that 25.5% of all users were age 50 or older.

In addition, the demographic data indicated that most message-board users (81.1% of all users, 83.6% of subscribers) were either employed full-time or self-employed. In terms of household income, the largest percentage of users reported that they earned between \$100,000 and \$199,999 per year. Subscribers indicated a higher approximate household income than nonsubscribers, with 49.3% of subscribers reporting a household income of over \$100,000 per year versus 39.3% of nonsubscribers. Approximate household income is portrayed in Table 1.

## Respondents’ Usage Data

In terms of media usage, the demographics indicated that most users spent at least 11 hours per week on the Internet. Time spent on message boards was less than that amount, with 79.7% of users spending 10 hours or less on college sport

**Table 1 Respondents’ Household Income**

Household income	Nonsubscribers (%)	Subscribers (%)	Total (%)
\$19,999 or less	57 (3.8)	19 (2.4)	76 (3.2)
\$20,000—39,999	113 (7.4)	48 (6.0)	161 (6.9)
\$40,000—59,999	212 (14.0)	86 (10.8)	298 (12.7)
\$60,000—79,999	257 (16.9)	121 (15.2)	378 (16.2)
\$80,000—99,999	255 (16.8)	115 (14.5)	370 (15.8)
\$100,000—199,999	444 (29.2)	285 (35.9)	729 (31.2)
\$200,000 or more	157 (10.1)	104 (13.4)	258 (11.0)
No response	27 (1.8)	16 (2.0)	69 (2.9)
Total	1,519	794	2,339

message boards. Premium subscribers, however, did tend to spend more time on message boards than nonsubscribers.

Respondents were also asked to relate the average number of hours per week that they spent using college sport message boards at their place of employment. Most users reported spending at least some time on college sport message boards while at work. The resulting data from this question are portrayed in Table 2.

User responses to the 40 statements relating to message-board usage ranged from a low mean response of 1.63 ( $SD = 1.03$ ) for "I enjoy putting other users in their place" to a high mean response of 4.62 ( $SD = 0.81$ ) for "To get information about my favorite teams that I can't get elsewhere." The statements with the highest mean responses dealt with elements such as quickness of information access and depth of information compared with traditional media sources, ability to read analysis from fellow fans, ability to talk about recruiting efforts, and finding out the latest gossip about the user's teams. The statements with the lowest mean responses dealt with items such as the ability to argue or "smack-talk" with other users, buying or selling tickets and memorabilia, and engagement in nonsports discussions.

In regard to usage of other media types, most users (63.4%) indicated that they spent at least some money on subscriptions to non-message-board sport media such as special print, cable, or Internet-based sports items like *NFL Sunday Ticket* or *Sports Illustrated*. Among nonsubscribers, 46.6% indicated that they did not spend any money on subscriptions to sport media, compared with only 18.5% of message board subscribers.

Although a major component of any message board is the ability to write messages to other users, a surprising number of survey participants reported that they did not engage in this activity. These users, known as lurkers in Internet message-board parlance, composed 28.2% of the total sample and 34.2% of the total nonsubscriber sample. The data for average number of posts per week are given in Table 3.

When asked about the number of college sporting events that they attend during an average year, 57% of respondents indicated that the number was five or fewer games, with 11.3% indicating that they did not attend any such events. A

**Table 2 Average Use of College Sport Message Boards at Place of Employment per Day**

Use of message boards at place of employment	Nonsubscribers (%)	Subscribers (%)	Total (%)
None	515 (33.9)	240 (30.2)	755 (32.3)
1–30 min	592 (39.0)	243 (30.6)	835 (35.7)
31–60 min	227 (14.9)	149 (18.8)	376 (16.1)
61–120 min	66 (4.3)	52 (6.5)	118 (5.0)
More than 120 min	13 (0.9)	15 (1.9)	28 (1.2)
Constantly throughout the day	85 (5.6)	77 (9.7)	162 (6.9)
No response	21 (1.4)	18 (2.3)	65 (2.8)
Total	1,519	794	2,339

**Table 3 Average Number of College Sport Message-Board Posts per Week**

<b>Posts per week on college sport message boards</b>	<b>Nonsubscribers (%)</b>	<b>Subscribers (%)</b>	<b>Total (%)</b>
0 (lurker only)	519 (34.2)	140 (17.7)	659 (28.2)
1–20	825 (54.3)	516 (65.0)	1,341 (57.3)
21–40	105 (6.9)	78 (9.8)	183 (7.8)
41–60	38 (2.5)	33 (4.2)	71 (3.0)
More than 60	30 (2.0)	26 (3.3)	56 (2.4)
No response	2 (0.1)	1 (0.1)	29 (1.2)
Total	1,519	794	2,339

total of 21.2% of all users, and 24.2% of subscribers, indicated that they attend 11 or more college athletic events per year.

While 51.9% of all users reported donating no money per year to college athletics, subscribers did tend to donate more money to college athletic programs than did nonsubscribers. Among subscribers, 16.8% reported donating \$1,000 or more per year to college athletic programs, and 57.7% of subscribers reported donating at least some money per year.

Finally, respondents were asked to identify the college sport they followed most closely. Most users (75.6% of all users, 83.2% of subscribers) indicated that they followed college football more closely than other sports. Men's college basketball was the next most closely followed sport (20.4% of all users, 14.5% of subscribers). No other sport was identified as being the most closely followed by more than 1.2% of any segment of the sample population.

### **Analysis of Message-Board Sample**

The data gleaned from the survey yielded an interesting mix of results, which offer several avenues for future scholarly inquiry, as well as a potential reevaluation of current industrial strategies. The responses from nonsubscribers revealed this segment of the sample to be relatively casual fans, both in terms of message-board usage and college-sport consumption in general. Nonsubscribers did not attend college sporting events in large numbers, and they were not predisposed to donate money to athletic programs. Based on media-consumption patterns, these users likely followed their favorite teams through the media as opposed to in person. According to their responses, nonsubscribers used college sport message boards primarily to gather information on their favorite teams and to interact with other fans.

Subscribers, on the other hand, were more heavily invested in their favorite teams. This group attended games in larger numbers, was more predisposed to donating money to athletic programs, spent more time on message boards, and made more posts on message boards than nonsubscribers. According to their responses, subscribers used college sport message boards primarily to gather information.

The demographics of this sample were similar to those in the nonsport survey by James, Wotring, and Forrest (1995) examining the online subscription-only communities of CompuServe and Prodigy. They found that 74% of respondents were male, 87% held jobs in a professional or managerial capacity, and 89% possessed a college degree. What is particularly noteworthy about the similarities in demographics between the two studies is the dissimilarity of the mediums examined. This study examined college sport message boards, which do not require a subscription for access and use; indeed, most respondents to this survey identified themselves as nonsubscribers. In contrast, CompuServe and Prodigy are subscription-only services only accessible by using a modem to dial directly into the respective services' computers, and the college sport message boards examined in this study are all accessible through a standard Internet connection.

**Education, Income, and Usage.** The prevalence of highly educated users in this study's sample is not unexpected, given the likelihood that an alumnus of a particular school would be interested in keeping up with his or her alma mater's athletic program. The curious part of this finding is that only 59% of respondents indicated that the message board on which they spent the most time was focused on their alma mater, and there was not a statistically significant difference between nonsubscribers and subscribers for this variable. This indicates that alumni affiliation is not the only variable that affects the desire of an individual to spend time on, or subscribe to, a college sport message board. The 41% of respondents who were not alumni of the schools in question could very well have developed an affinity for a team that is based more on geographical or cultural concerns than on alumni affiliation.

One of the most surprising results from the demographic examination of both groups was the average household income reported by respondents, particularly by subscribers. As noted in the data analysis, 49.3% of subscribers indicated a household income level of \$100,000 or greater. This stands in sharp contrast to the average national median income reported by the U.S. Census Bureau (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2007), which found in 2006 that the median income for households in the United States was \$48,201. Even if one were to take the median household income for married couples as a comparative figure (\$69,716), the difference is sizeable. A possible explanation for this difference in median income is the high level of education of subscribers, but even with that, one would expect the median income to be somewhat near the national average. Another explanation is that the nature of college sport message boards attracts more affluent consumers, perhaps because of the intellectual pursuit of information. Regardless of the explanation, this finding represents a potentially lucrative untapped market for college athletic programs, because 41.7% of subscribers reported donating no money to athletic departments.

The variables relating to message-board use, particularly those relating to hours spent on college sport message boards, posts made per week on college sport message boards, and amount of time spent on college sport message boards at work, reveal some interesting implications for the assessment of message board users as a market segment. The data indicated that most nonsubscribers are spending 5 or fewer hours per week on college sport message boards, whereas most subscribers are spending 6 or more hours on the message boards. Despite this,

over 80% of both groups are only posting zero to 20 times per week. This calls into question whether a message-board user's level of activity should be measured more by posting activity or by content consumption, particularly when 28.2% of all users report not posting any messages at all. Based on the other results from this study, it would seem appropriate to examine message board users from the standpoint of two separate variables: the amount of material consumed (or read) on the site and the amount of material created (or posted) on the site. Both of these elements would seem to play a large role in the activity level of college sport message-board users, and some users appear to prefer consuming material to the exclusion of creating material.

**Race and Gender.** As mentioned in the results, the vast majority of users were male. A possible reason for this is the focus of college sport message-board forums, which attend overwhelmingly to male sports (Clavio, unpublished data, 2007). Nonetheless, this does not explain the relative lack of female participation, because previous research has shown that females are interested in men's sports as spectators and fans (Armstrong, 2002; Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, & Jacquemotte, 2000; James & Ridinger, 2002).

One possible explanation can be found in existing literature on sport fan behavior and attitudes of males and females. Dietz-Uhler et al. (2000), in an investigation of gender-based sport fan behavior, uncovered several findings pertinent to this examination of college sport message-board users. They found that, although large numbers of both men and women considered themselves sport fans, men were significantly more likely to strongly identify with being a sport fan than women were. Furthermore, men were found to spend significantly more time discussing sports and watching sports on television than women and were also found to possess more knowledge of sport than women. These findings occurred in spite of men's and women's reporting equal levels of attendance at sporting events. The researchers also discovered that females were more likely than males to engage in sport fandom for social reasons, whereas males engaged in sport fandom both because they like sports in general and because they "seem to enjoy acquiring information about sports through such means as reading the sports page" (Dietz-Uhler et al., p. 226).

The findings of Dietz-Uhler et al. (2000) help at least partially explain the predominance of males in the sample of college sport message-board users, particularly in light of the demonstrated salience of information-related motives among both nonsubscribers and subscribers. If college sport message boards are seen by consumers as primarily focused on the dissemination and sharing of information related to sport teams, then it is understandable that males would be more attracted to these message boards than females. What the findings do not help explain is why females are not more attracted to the socialization elements of college sport message boards. A possible reason for this is that college sport message boards might not market themselves as places of socialization; therefore, many females are not aware of the social facets of message boards. If true, this finding could represent an untapped source of consumers for message-board publishers. By emphasizing the social and interactive elements of message boards, publishers could potentially increase their female demographic.

Also pertinent to the discussion of gender in relation to college sport message boards are the findings of Mitra, Willyard, Platt, and Parsons (2005), who noted that females were more likely to use the Internet in a way that adapts to their everyday practices, whereas males tended to use the Internet for the sake of using the technology itself. College sport message boards might not be considered useful by females unless they somehow fit into their everyday practices.

In terms of race, the vast majority of respondents identified themselves as White, with the proportion of these users exceeding the current population demographic distributions of the United States. The reason for this discrepancy is unknown, particularly in light of existing literature. For example, a self-report questionnaire distributed to Black sport consumers by Armstrong (2002) indicated that these consumers were active in their consumption of sport, with 68% reporting that they talked about sport with their friends on a regular basis and 75% indicating that they watched sports frequently on television. Although the primary reasons for college sport message-board usage among this study's sample was information based, there was a social/entertainment element to that usage, as well, particularly among nonsubscribers. Armstrong also noted that the most salient reason for sport consumption among Black consumers was entertainment. It is possible that message-board operators have not effectively promoted the entertainment aspects of message boards to Black consumers, who might see the medium as primarily information based.

## Concluding Commentary

This article has provided data and analysis of a sample of college sport message-board users to demonstrate the potential for future research in this area by sport communication scholars. Although sport message boards and other Internet-based sport communication media have the potential to be studied using a variety of research methods, this article proposed the theory of uses and gratifications as an appropriate scholarly approach for this particular medium.

Through a survey instrument, users on 14 different college sport message boards were asked questions relating to demographics and media and Internet use and were also asked to respond to motivation statements involving college sport message boards. This convenience sample yielded a total of 2,339 users who participated in the survey.

In examining the demographic and usage data generated by the survey, several potential areas of future inquiry were discovered. The predominance of White males in the survey seemed to be inconsistent with what might have been expected, based on other scholarly research (Armstrong, 2002; Dietz-Uhler et al., 2000; James & Ridinger, 2002). There was also a notable disparity between the high observed household income of survey participants and the national median household income (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2007). In addition, motivations for using college sport message boards differed between subscribers and nonsubscribers.

The popularity and reach of message boards in general, and college sport message boards in particular, are almost certain to continue to increase in the coming years. These Internet communication mediums have already achieved a

modicum of popularity among college sport fans (Oates, 2007; Skretta, 2007), and as more and more fans become comfortable with the medium of Internet-based sport communication, the number of users is almost certain to grow, as it has over the past decade. The unique nature of sport message boards, coupled with the accessibility of both content and users to researchers, should make the medium a primary target of scholarly inquiry.

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