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## H-Town Takeover: Social Media Agenda Setting and Branding Efforts at the University of Houston

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*Journal of Issues in*  
**Intercollegiate Athletics**

**H-Town Takeover: Social Media Agenda Setting and Branding Efforts at the  
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*Social media marketing efforts have quickly emerged as a powerful method of engaging the sport consumer and developing long-term relationships through a variety of platforms. In a state with some of the most well-known college football programs, the University of Houston engaged in a marketing campaign to differentiate themselves from their competition. The school created the H-Town Takeover promotion in order to draw more attention from fans, alumni, and the media. The purpose of this study was to examine how the #HTownTakeover hashtag was used on Twitter during the first year following the hiring of head football coach Tom Herman. Two thousand eight hundred tweets ( $N = 2800$ ) from the official team account were analyzed. Results demonstrate that the hashtag was often used to showcase the team's success, but not frequently used in order to encourage fans to buy tickets or merchandise. Surprisingly, less than one percent of the tweets referenced the State of Texas or opponents within the State. Implications regarding agenda setting and stakeholder theory are addressed.*

On Saturday, August 6, 2016, Radio host Chris Childers hosted the 5th Annual College Sports Nation Camp Tour for *SiriusXM College Sports Nation*. The University of Houston (UH) was sixth amongst the 29 schools to be featured. This feature was broadcast worldwide via Sirius XM radio and featured numerous key "faces" of the university and its football program including the school's president, athletic director, head football coach, and its star quarterback.

Childers, along with former National Football League (NFL) player and UH football star Stanford Routt, discussed the excitement that is taking place on campus, throughout the City of Houston and beyond for institutional stakeholders. There is a renewed confidence and sense of optimism for the school, particularly as it pertains to its football program. The team is coming off one of its most successful seasons in school history and is in the midst of a school-generated campaign: the *H-Town Takeover*. Houston is the fourth largest city in the country. The citizens of the city and others that identified with the Texas hub affectionately identify it as "H-Town". The H-Town Takeover movement is a marketing and recruiting strategy that seeks to capitalize on the fifth largest Metropolitan Statistical Area in the country (Greater Houston Partnership, 2016).

Recently, social media marketing efforts have seen increased usage as a part of a company's overall marketing efforts. As Safko (2012) noted, social media marketing accomplishes what past marketing activities such as print advertising or direct mail marketing were able to accomplish, but is "exponentially more effective" (p. 5). This enhanced efficacy of social media to better reach the consumer relies on the two-way communication between the organization and the consumer that is built in a trustful frame. As opposed to being told why they should be a consumer of a product or service, social media allows the consumer to be directly involved with that product or service on a more personal level. The relationships that are developed through social media platforms allow the organization to activate the consumer in a different manner than traditional marketing efforts (Safko, 2012).

Ultimately, the goal of these marketing measures is to get a consumer excited about a product through whatever means necessary. This is consistent with the idea of agenda setting in which the public becomes interested in a subject based on how frequently it is covered by the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Therefore, sports marketers can use agenda setting in an effort to make fans aware of new developments or initiatives within the athletic program. Researchers in the realm of sport marketing have become increasingly interested in the power of social media to move the sport consumer to act. These studies have examined areas such as the use of certain social media platforms for customer engagement (e.g., Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012; Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012), creating meaning and emotion through social media marketing (Lee & Kahle, 2016), and the establishment and strengthening of a brand (Pieper, 2013). As Newman and colleagues (2013) presented, it is imperative that professionals in the sport industry develop and employ effective social media marketing practices in order to develop productive two-way relationships with their consumer base.

In order to accomplish this goal, sport marketers must also develop effective marketing messages and strategies to deliver through these social media channels. These messages should help communicate the desired image (Newman et al., 2013) and values (Lee & Kahle, 2016) that an organization wants to cultivate in the consumer's mind. An initiative that found great success with a cohesive message and two-way interaction strategy can be found when examining the H-

Town Takeover campaign that the University of Houston Athletic Department constructed in 2015. The purpose of the present study is to analyze the effectiveness of the H-Town Takeover marketing initiative via social media marketing campaigns executed by the University of Houston Athletic Department.

## Research Context

### *About the University of Houston*

Enrollment figures confirm that 43,744 undergraduate and graduate students were enrolled at UH in the fall of 2016 (University of Houston, 2016). With such numbers, UH ranks as the third largest university in the state Texas, trailing only the state's flagship institutions, the University of Texas (UT) and Texas A&M University (Texas A&M) (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2015). Furthermore, the student body composition at UH is among the most diverse student populations in the country (Ballouli, & Bennett, 2012; University of Houston, 2016).

UH's intercollegiate athletics program sponsors 15 teams, which compete in the American Athletic Conference (AAC). Formed in 2013, the AAC is a Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) conference governed by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The AAC has seen significant success since its inception, including a total of four NCAA National Championships in men's and women's basketball, two teams finishing in the top 10 rankings for FBS teams, and five NCAA individual championships ("American Athletic Conference," n.d.). Despite these multiple successes in a relatively short span of time, the AAC does not possess the brand recognition of the "Power-Five" conferences (i.e., Atlantic Coast, Big 12, Big 10, Pacific 12, and Southeastern). The continued success of the member institutions may help build that identity and resulting conference pride (Havard & Reams, 2016), of which the UH athletics program can play a major role. Thus, the institutions and conferences can be part of mutually beneficial brand growth and development efforts.

Since joining the AAC in 2013, the Cougar athletics program has won a total of seven conference championships across all sports ("American Athletic Conference All-Time Conference Champions," n.d.). While UH is a notable member of the AAC, and routinely produces winning seasons in football that culminate in bowl game appearances, the school finds itself on the outside looking in as a member institution that is not part of the current "Power Five" conference structure present in FBS college football. Beyond football success, Cougar athletics had various distinctions that have brought the school visibility. This includes having a successful men's basketball and baseball team, both of which enjoyed numerous appearances in postseason tournaments, as well as numerous other team and Olympic sport successes. Included in these successes are the men's golf team, which to date has amassed numerous national championships, as well as various successful women's programs, including soccer, swimming and diving, track and field, and volleyball (Ballouli, & Bennett, 2012).

UH athletics also lays claim to many noteworthy sport alumni. That list includes Olympic gold medalists in both track (i.e., Leroy Burrell and Carl Lewis) and diving (i.e., Yuliya Pakhalina). Additionally, well-regarded professional basketball players (i.e., Chandi Jones and Don Chaney), professional football players (i.e., Andre Ware and Wilson Whitley), and a professional golfer (i.e., Steve Elkington) and all suited up at the UH before going pro. A few former Cougars also reached the pinnacle of their sport through induction into the Hall of Fame

in basketball (i.e., Clyde Drexler, Guy Lewis, Elvin Hayes, and Hakeem Olajuwon), golf (i.e., Fred Couples), and football (i.e., Tom Landry) (Hall of Honor Inductees, n.d.).

With such accolades and various elements that have built UH's storied athletic history, the school has yet to attain a level of notoriety and a reputation as a premier institution (Ballouli & Bennett, 2012). This is particularly evident when compared to in-state rivals such as UT, Texas A&M, and other schools with membership in the "Power-5" such as the Big 12 schools such as Baylor University, Texas Christian University, and Texas Tech University. Even though UH athletic revenue has almost doubled during the period from 2005-2015, the athletic program is still on the outside looking in when compared with institutions from Power-5 conferences ("NCAA Finances, 2014-2015," 2016).

On the other hand, there have been notable successes with the brand's presentation to consumers. In their case study on the UH Athletic Department, Ballouli and Bennett (2012) noted that the organization had been recognized by the American Marketing Association (AMA) Houston Chapter as "Marketer of the Year" and they also described the challenges that the organization had creating a new identity and direction for the brand. This led to major rebranding efforts to try to reposition the brand among consumers. These marketing efforts, undoubtedly fueled by improved performance from the football team from 2003 - 2010, led to increases in attendance (University of Houston Media Guide, 2016). However, marketing efforts must remain innovative and adjust to the needs of the marketplace to continue to move a branding effort forward. Thus, the athletic department must look to new ways to set the Cougar brand apart from its many competitors.

### *Houston Cougars Football*

UH Football began in 1946, and since then the school has won 11 conference championships in football (one American Athletic Conference championship, four Southwest Conference championships, two Conference USA championships, and four Missouri Valley Conference championships). UH has also appeared in 25 college bowl games (University of Houston Media Guide, 2016). The longest-tenured head coach was Bill Yeoman, who led the Cougars from 1962-1986. Yeoman revolutionized the use of the Veer offense in football and is also a member of the College Football Hall of Fame. During his time as head coach of the Cougars, the program won four Southwest Conference titles and made 11 bowl game appearances. Yeoman tallied an overall record of 160-108-8 and had the 1976 Lombardi Award Winner (Wilson Whitley) on one of his teams (University of Houston Football Media Guide, 2009).

Jack Pardee, a fellow revolutionary who employed the "Run-and-Shoot" offensive scheme, took control of the program following Yeoman's retirement but had to deal with a number of NCAA sanctions that were tied to his predecessor. In 1988, the NCAA put UH on probation for three years, barred them from bowl games for two years, and removed them from television for one year ("NCAA Comes Down Hard," 1988). Pardee stayed with the team as head coach until his departure to coach the NFL's Houston Oilers following the 1989 season. That season was also particularly monumental as the Cougars posted a 9-2 record and the quarterback of that team, Andre Ware, won the only Heisman Trophy in the university's history (University of Houston Media Guide, 2009).

While serving as the school's sole Heisman Trophy winner, Ware was but one of the numerous individuals to put up eye-popping numbers as a member of the Cougars. In 1976,

Wilson Whitley had the distinction of winning the Rotary Lombardi Award, which is given to college football's best lineman. Whitley's performance that season not only helped him receive the Lombardi Award, it also propelled the Cougars to the 1976 Southwest Conference Championship, a #4 final ranking in the AP and Coaches Polls (which currently remains as the highest final ranking for the program), and a 1977 Cotton Bowl victory over unbeaten Maryland (University of Houston Media Guide, 2016).

More recently, UH has also touted well-known coaches who made their mark at UH and then went on to greater success from there. Examples include Art Briles, former head coach at Baylor University, and Kevin Sumlin, current head coach at Texas A&M. Tom Herman also experienced great success at the University of Houston, posting a 22-4 record in his two seasons as head coach of the Cougars before departing for the University of Texas (UT) head coaching position in November 2016 (Duarte, 2016a). Major Applewhite, the Offensive Coordinator under Herman, was hired in December 2016 as his replacement (Duarte, 2016b).

UH Football has also hosted its home games in several different venues over the years. Rice Stadium, home to the rival Rice University Owls, actually served as the home stadium for UH from 1951-1964. When the Astrodome opened in 1965, the UH Cougars moved to that stadium to play their home games and remained there full-time until 1993. The 1966 season in the Astrodome still stands as the largest home attendance total for a UH football season, with 287,530 spectators attending seven home games that year. Following the 1995 season, football returned to campus permanently to play their games at Robertson Stadium, which had been updated (University of Houston Media Guide, 2016). The need for a new facility was evident, however, as the building's initial construction in 1941 made it outdated for current needs.

The new stadium was to be built in the same general area as Robertson Stadium and would cost \$120 million to build. TDECU Stadium was formally opened on August 29, 2014, as the Cougars hosted the University of Texas-San Antonio Roadrunners. The 40,000 seat stadium represents a state-of-the-art college sports venue and is designed to add 20,000 more seats in the future should the Cougar brand continue to gain in popularity (Barron, 2014). The construction of this innovative facility on the UH campus adds another premium element to the brand and it happens to be in the heart of the city of Houston.

### *Houston, We Have a Problem – The Crowded Sports Marketplace*

UH is located in the bustling metropolis of Houston, Texas. The school's geographic positioning affords the school many opportunities, while also posing various challenges. In regards to sport competition, the school's athletic programs are met with a wide assortment of indirect and direct competition for stakeholder interest. It is home to a wealth of corporate, cultural, educational and government entities. The city is also supported by a wide variety of sports and entertainment opportunities for citizens and tourists to enjoy.

The various sports and entertainment choices, however, pose direct and indirect challenges for the UH athletic brand. In terms of competition posted by various Houston professional sports, the Houston Astros (MLB), Houston Dynamo (MLS), Houston Rockets (NBA), and Houston Texans (NFL) are all highly visible sport franchises playing on the highest level in the US. More recently, other professional teams including the Houston Dash (NWSL) and the Scrap Yard Dawgs (NFP), have emerged as well. In terms of intercollegiate athletic competition, numerous other intercollegiate programs call the greater Houston area home. This includes direct NCAA Division I athletic program competitors such as Houston Baptist

University, Rice University, Sam Houston State University, Texas Southern University, and Prairie View A&M University.

Beyond the schools in the greater Houston area, UH faces competition from other schools in the state of Texas and bordering states. Competition is fierce when it comes to recruiting students, student-athletes, faculty and staff, financial resources, etc. Notable are public institutions across the state such as the University of Texas, Texas A&M University, Texas Tech University, the University of Texas-San Antonio, and Texas State University, who all serve as great competition to UH. There is also a wide assortment of private institutions that present themselves as close competition. Notably, schools such as Baylor University, Southern Methodist University, and Texas Christian University are other competitors.

Clearly, the UH Athletic Department faces great challenges to present themselves in a positive and attractive manner to key publics. Some of these challenges were mentioned in a previous case study on the UH Athletic Department, when Rob Stewart, an Assistant Athletic Director of Marketing, Sales, and Promotions for UH, described the brand as not being fully recognized for its position as *the* major college athletic program in the fourth largest city in the country. Additionally, Stewart characterized the consumer base as being more identified with past successes as opposed to present successes (Ballouli & Bennett, 2012). Accordingly, University of Houston administrators, both academically and athletically, realized that it was imperative to invest in powerful marketing initiatives aimed at cutting through the clutter. Pursuing new strategies would allow the school's offerings to stand out in a crowded marketplace, while also generating greater brand awareness and bolstering UH's brand image.

As a result, the UH brand needed to make a strong effort to differentiate itself from competition both within the city of Houston and the state of Texas. In their study on engaging fans through the Facebook platform, Pronschinske, Groza, and Walker (2012) described the importance of authenticity and engagement as applied to the sport consumer. Specifically, the origination of marketing messages from an official social media account that generated two-way interaction between the organization and the consumer was found to be most impactful on the creation of enhanced engagement with the brand. The #HTownTakeover campaign was effective at generating this two-way interaction between the UH Athletic Department and consumers through social media, which subsequently assisted with building a strong affinity for the brand. A great deal of this impact could be attributed to the message originating from the brand and consumers being able to trust that message. As a result, the #HTownTakeover strategy possesses great equity among consumers exposed to the effort.

Researchers (e.g., Achen, 2014; Bee & Kahle, 2006) noted these and other relationship marketing efforts must move beyond traditional demographics or basic compliance, and should move consumers to a more internalized need for the brand that is focused on shared values. The use of the superordinate identity of taking over Houston with the UH Cougar brand (and using the two-way social media interaction to cauterize it) could help drive consumers to a higher level of involvement. The fact that the effort reached consumers in a unique fashion also speaks to the differentiation from other options. This is a clear goal and purpose of the #HTownTakeover strategy and will help consumers maintain a long-term commitment to the brand.

### *UH Athletics' Marketing Strategies*

In recent years, the UH Athletic Department has embarked on various marketing initiatives trying to promote the school brand. As mentioned earlier, the UH Athletic Department

has been recognized in the past for employing engaging, innovative communication strategies, all while collecting awards for their marketing efforts from organizations such as the Houston Chapter of the American Marketing Association (AMA). In recent years, the athletic department at UH has enacted various strategies trying to connect to key stakeholders by generating greater awareness and affinity for the school and its athletic programs. They have enacted a strategy that has focused more on moving away from living in the past and more towards embracing a dynamic brand that is modern, confident, and competitive (Ballouli & Bennett, 2012). Such an approach will help the UH Athletic Department with the development of multi-platform long-term relationships with its fan base, further enhancing the level of engagement with its consumers (Achen, 2014; Bee & Kahle, 2006).

By maximizing social media practices and content, the school has been able to work towards their institutional marketing goals. In recent times, the school has decided to position themselves through social media by using the H-Town Takeover campaign. The H-Town Takeover campaign is a comprehensive marketing strategy aimed at competitively positioning the athletic department in a flooded metropolitan marketplace. It is employed through various means including utilizing the hashtag #HTownTakeover on social media communications. The school has even used this as the name appearing on their Twitter account. By utilizing focused social media marketing campaigns, Cougar athletics have assumed a prominent role in the Houston and national marketplaces, evidenced by the increased media coverage during, and specific referencing of, the H-Town Takeover campaign (Davis, 2017; Schroder, 2015; Smith, 2016). In fact, some even labeled the H-Town Takeover initiative as a “movement” that has transcended traditional marketing efforts (Davis, 2017). Additionally, the H-Town Takeover campaign has worked its way into other revenue channels, with merchandise and licensing opportunities becoming more commonplace.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Stakeholder Theory*

The term stakeholder refers to “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Essentially, stakeholders are individuals or groups that are affected by or influence an organization’s objectives. Long associated with the world of business, stakeholders have a transferred interest in organizational undertakings (Ackoff, 1981; Allen, 1988; Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2009). When applied to the world of higher education, university stakeholders are able to construct assorted points of connection pertaining to various institutions of higher learning (Gregg, Pierce, Lee, Himstedt, & Felver, 2013). These stakeholders have the potential to obtain various tangible and/or intangible benefits related to the actions of a given institution (Freeman, 1984). Accordingly, stakeholders (such as those associated with the University of Houston) feel a specified interest in association with helping to protect the organizational reputation.

For those associated with an educational institution, social media has become a method in which stakeholders can express their opinions. Following the firing of Joe Paterno at Penn State, fans of the program (the stakeholders) used social media to express their support for the fired coach and not the university. In some cases, the athletes are the stakeholders attempting to draw attention to an important issue involving their team. In 2013, the members of the swimming and diving teams at UNC-Wilmington used Twitter to rally support behind their team after the



program faced elimination from the athletic department's offerings. The team members sent over 1,750 tweets in just two weeks, which helped them gain 14,000 online signatures on a petition calling for the team to be saved (Hull, 2014). Similarly, in 2014 and 2015, members of the University of Alabama-Birmingham (UAB) football team used the hashtag #FreeUAB on Twitter in order to try to gain support to bring back their football team after elimination from UAB's athletic department (Hull & Lee, 2016). That effort was successful, with UAB's football team returning to play in 2017 ("UAB to reinstate football," 2015). However, all of these instances were fan-driven, so this study is one of the first to address a movement that originated from the athletic department itself.

For the purposes of this research, it is Gregg et al. (2013) that noted that athletic programs are able to serve as prime elements in the construction of an institutional framework for establishing brand identification, while also launching distinctive public perceptions – including those of stakeholders. The positioning of athletic programs for initiating stakeholder relationships allows universities a means for generating greater awareness of university brands, as well as positively shaping institutional brand perception (Curtis, Abratt, & Minor, 2009; Toma, 2003). For UH, using the excitement around the football program to initiate the H-Town Takeover branding effort was a natural fit. Furthermore, while there are a variety of stakeholders that the UH athletics department wished to reach, it was the fans and media that were likely the most important. Fans were needed to buy tickets and merchandise, while the hope was that the media would recognize that this was a new era of Houston football in which the team should be nationally ranked and could make it to a top bowl game.

### *Agenda Setting Theory*

The concept of agenda setting was developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972) who examined the influence the media has on the importance of a topic to the public. They used media coverage of the 1968 American presidential election to demonstrate that the frequency the news media reported on a topic had a direct impact on what issue voters believed to be the most important. For decades, agenda setting theory was one of the most-cited works in media-related research (Bryant & Miron, 2004), including in the world of sports (i.e., Kozman, 2013; Seltzer & Dittmore, 2009). In the world of marketing, the concept of agenda setting is often discussed to explain how advertisements make some products more salient than others (Sutherland & Galloway, 1981). It has become a popular theory when discussing political advertising, as campaigns to use promotional materials to make the public more aware of the candidate and that candidate's stance on issues (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, McCombs, & Lennon, 1998; Roberts & McCombs, 1994; Sweetser, Kaye, Golan, & Wanta, 2008).

While most of this research focused on traditional media, it was one of the theory's originators, McCombs (2014), who stated "With the vast expansion of communication channels in recent decades, particularly the continuing proliferation of Internet sites and personalized social media, we have entered a new era of agenda-setting research that is seeking answers" (pp. 17-18). Based on the emergence of social media, researchers began debating the importance of the traditional media in agenda setting (Sayre, Bode, Shah, Wilcox, & Shah, 2010). One of the most important aspects of social media is the active audience that allows users to send information to people, and then have the audience resend that information to others. Instead of simply being a passive viewer or reader, the audience can demonstrate how important an issue is by "retweeting" a message. No matter how large the audience of an original tweet, a retweeted

message can reach an average of 1,000 users (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010). This means that a retweeted message could be a powerful way for users to advance the ideas they wish to send to the public.

In the world of sports, that rise in alternative news delivery options has coincided with the rise of team-run media. Fans used to only be able to get the latest news and information from traditional media outlets, but now teams are running their own media. Mark Cuban, the owner of the NBA's Dallas Mavericks, stated in 2010:

I'm not sure I have a need for beat writers. I think we have finally reached a point where not only can we communicate any and all factual information from our players and team directly to our fans and customers as effectively as any big sports website, but I think we have also reached a point where our interests are no longer aligned. I think those websites have become the equivalent of paparazzi rather than reporters (Cuban, 2011).

Cuban's point is simple: Why does he need the traditional media to report on his team when he can do it himself? Teams now have the opportunity to be their own media outlets, which also gives them a chance to shape public opinion. As Groshek & Groshek (2013) noted, "it is clear that agenda-setting processes can now regularly intersect and cross amateur and professional boundaries" (p. 17). So for team media, they have the opportunity to ignore negative stories (players in trouble with the law, for example) and focus on positive ones (such as team winning streaks or charitable efforts in the community). Agenda setting theory implies that fans who get their news from team media will likely deem the positive stories as more important because that is what is being reported on more. In that light, the social media accounts of a team can be used for more than just news. For a school such as the University of Houston, the Twitter account is an opportune location to create excitement about the H-Town Takeover movement and give fans the impression that this initiative is something that is worthy of attention.

### *Research Questions*

Using agenda setting theory and stakeholder theory as guides, this study aims to determine how the official University of Houston football Twitter account used the hashtag #HTownTakeover to get fans excited about the team. As stated within agenda setting, gatekeepers determine what information is released to the public in order to draw attention to certain issues. In the case of the team's Twitter account, the gatekeepers are the social media managers who run the account. Therefore, it is worth examining what topics were mentioned when the #HTownTakeover hashtag was used.

RQ<sub>1</sub>: In what type of tweets did the official University of Houston football Twitter account use the hashtag #HTownTakeover?

One clear goal of the H-Town Takeover campaign was the concept of differentiation in order to make the Cougars stand out from the other schools in the State of Texas. While many of their fellow Texans have rich football histories, the University of Houston was still attempting to carve out their own niche in the state when Tom Herman was hired. The second research question addressed how frequently the team's account referenced Houston's success in relation to, or in comparison to, the other football playing schools in Texas.

RQ<sub>2</sub>: How frequently did the official University of Houston football Twitter account mention other schools in Texas or the State of Texas in tweets that had the hashtag #HTownTakeover?

Ultimately, the goal of the H-Town Takeover campaign was to get fans excited about the team. In the world of major college sports, schools hope that excitement will eventually result in a financial windfall. Whether it is through donations or buying tickets, the school hopes that creating excitement will also create a financial benefit. The third research question addresses this topic.

RQ<sub>3</sub>: How did the official University of Houston football Twitter account encourage fans to spend money on the team in tweets that had the hashtag #HTownTakeover?

## Method

### *Data Collection*

In order to determine how the University of Houston football team used Twitter to help build its brand, the official Twitter account of the football team (@UHCougarFB) was analyzed. In late 2014, the school hired the 13th head coach in school history, Tom Herman, and in his first season as coach, the Cougars went to a “New Year’s Six” bowl game and defeated Florida State in the Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl. Based on that successful season, and the H-Town Takeover branding initiative that started during the season, tweets were collected from the day Herman was hired (12/16/14) until the day after the Peach Bowl victory (1/2/16). This resulted in a population of 6,744 total posts. The focus of this research is the implementation of the H-Town Takeover marketing and branding campaign, so it was determined that only posts containing the hashtag #HTownTakeover would be included in the data analysis. Just over 41% of the tweets (2,806 posts) contained the chosen hashtag. In between the data collection period and the data analysis period six of the posts became blocked (“Not authorized to see status”) by the original poster, meaning these retweets were from a once public account that was now private. This left 2,800 posts for analysis in this study.

### *Data Analysis*

To analyze the tweets, a content analytic method was used. This analysis is consistent with previous research involving the use of hashtags in the world of sports and Twitter (Hull, 2014; Hull & Lee, 2016). A previous study regarding how football players at the University of Alabama-Birmingham used Twitter when their program was in danger of being eliminated was used as a guide to developing coding categories (Hull & Lee, 2016). This study involved a team account instead of players, so additional team-specific and branding-specific categories were needed. The constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) was used to finalize the coding guide. Data were classified into emergent categories. Creation of new categories and refinement of existing ones continued until observations did not add to the final categories. The two coders reviewed 200 posts (7.1% of the sample) initially and then met again after each had coded 500 posts (35.7% of the sample) discuss emergent themes and categories before reaching a consensus regarding the content of the tweets.

Ultimately, four main categories were created with subcategories within each. These

included basic Twitter information (date of post, original tweet or retweet, if the tweet occurred during a game, appearance of other hashtags, or if an embedded tweet was included); if a geographic reference was included (referencing the state of Texas, other schools in Texas, or the city of Houston); references to specific Houston football items (Coach Herman, fans, recruiting, on-field success, or where/how to buy tickets or merchandise); and if media appeared in the post (if so, what type).

Each tweet was placed into one category within each variable. For example, during the Cougars' Peach Bowl win, the official account tweeted "HALFTIME of @CFAPeachBowl: #HTownTakeover 21, FSU 3 #GoCoogs" with an accompanying graphic of Houston players. This post was coded as an original tweet, a live tweet, a reference to on-field success, has another hashtag present, and contains a graphic posted by the account. The post was also coded as not a reference to Texas, a rival school, the city of Houston, Coach Herman, fans, recruiting, or where to buy tickets.

Two independent coders examined 10% of the tweets ( $n = 280$ ) in order to determine intercoder reliability. Intercoder reliability using Krippendorff's  $\alpha$  determined a high level of reliability for basic Twitter information ( $\alpha = .968$ ), geographic reference ( $\alpha = .936$ ), specific Houston football reference ( $\alpha = .939$ ), and if media was used in the tweet ( $\alpha = .881$ ). Based on the acceptable level of initial agreement for intercoder reliability, the remaining tweets were divided up evenly among the two coders.

To help demonstrate the context of the tweets sent during the H-Town Takeover campaign, examples have been included in the discussion that follows. Some messages contained links to other website addresses. For clarity, all link addresses have been removed from the tweets and replaced with [link]. Otherwise, all tweets have been transcribed verbatim from the data set, including all misspellings and punctuation errors.

## Results

### *Sample Overview*

The #HTownTakeover hashtag first appeared in the official account on April 11 in a retweet from @UHFVIDEO. It is not clear if this account is officially linked to the football team or is simply a fan account. The tweet read "Circle drill winner gets this! Don't act like u don't want to be a part of the #HTownTakeover @UHCougarFB #HTownReppin" with a photo of a wrestling championship title belt embedded in the tweet. There were four more retweets using the #HTownTakeover hashtag before the official account used the hashtag for the first time on May 22 with the message "HOUSTON Appreciation Weekend in full effect!! #HTownTakeover #HAW like a sprained ankle we ain't... [link]".

The hashtag was used frequently once the football season began as at least one tweet using #HTownTakeover was sent every day (even on Christmas). Starting with the first game of the season (9/5/15) until the end of the data set, the #HTownTakeover hashtag appeared in 57.3% of the tweets from the account (2,406 of 4,201 tweets). The username of the account was even changed to #HTownTakeover.

Over 90% of the tweets were original posts from the official account (2,536), while the remaining 264 posts were retweets from other accounts. Of those original posts, 520 of them contained an embedded tweet. The majority of the embedded tweets were from the media (219 for 7.8% of the entire sample) or fans (208 for 7.4% of the entire sample). No other subject provided more than 2% of the embedded tweets.

The majority of the posts contained some type of media within the post. Just over 2,000 posts (2,002) had a media element within the post. The majority were photos (850 for 30.4% of the sample), animated GIFs (461 for 16.5% of the sample), or graphics (315 for 11.3% of the sample). No other media type appeared in more than nine percent of the sample. Tables 1 and 2 have a breakdown of the types of tweets that appeared in the sample.

Table 1

*Information about Tweets*

Type of Tweet	# of Tweets	Percentage
<b>Basic Twitter Information</b>		
Original tweet	2,536	90.6
Live tweeting	772	27.6
Hashtag used	1,775	63.4
Embedded tweet	520	18.6
<b>Geographic Reference</b>		
The State of Texas	9	0.3
Rival schools	4	0.1
The City of Houston	58	2.1
<b>Reference to Houston Football</b>		
Head coach Tom Herman	371	13.3
Purchase tickets/merchandise	192	6.9
Fans	490	17.5
Recruiting	35	1.3
On-field success	757	27
<b>Media in Post</b>		
Photo	850	30.4
YouTube video	124	4.4
Vine	3	0.1
Embedded video	236	8.4
Animated GIF	461	16.5
Graphic	315	11.3
Audio clip	13	0.5
No media in post	798	28.5

*Success and the Fans*

RQ1 asked in what type of tweets did the official University of Houston football Twitter account use the hashtag #HTownTakeover. Perhaps not surprisingly, the hashtag was used most frequently in reference to the on-field success of the team. Just over 27% of the all the tweets using the hashtag were a reference to the success of the team. For example, during a game against Louisville, Adrian McDonald's interception led to tweet that read "Take it away!

INTERCEPTION @aday\_mac11! #HTownTakeover”. In mid-October, the team’s success was celebrated with this tweet: “The AP poll is out & YOUR #HTownTakeover is ranked #24. 1st ranking since 2011: [link] #GoCoogs”.

The fans themselves were also a popular topic when the #HTownTakeover hashtag was used. More than 17% of all tweets in the sample contained a reference to the fans (490 tweets). In a message that was retweeted by the official account, head coach Tom Herman wrote “The #HTownTakeover is nationwide. I can’t wait to see all the Coog fans rocking TDECU stadium tonight. #GoCoogs”. This was one of many tweets that encouraged the fans to be a part of the action by showing up to games, live radio shows, rallies, or viewing parties in other cities. In November, the official account tweeted “Don’t forget – 4 pm at Legends Plaza. Be a part of the #HTownTakeover rally with @KHOU @SportsTalk790 & @937thebeat” with an embedded video also promoting the event. Following a victory, fans welcomed the team back to Houston and the official account tweeted “Thank you to our #HTownTakeover fans for the welcome home. The best around... #GoCoogs”. Even simple reminders to fans about the bag policy at the Georgia Dome for the Peach Bowl included the hashtag (“FANS – Don’t forget your clear bags today #HTownTakeover [link]).

During his first year at the helm of the program, head coach Tom Herman was a popular subject of tweets. Of the 2,800 tweets, 371 of the posts either mentioned him or had a photo of him with the tweet (13.3% of the sample). Tweets included reminders to watch Herman on ESPN’s *SportsCenter*, listen to his weekly radio, and award recognition: “Congrats to @CoachTomHerman, named @American\_FB’s Co-Head Coach of the Year. #HTownTakeover #GoCoogs”.

While recruiting news has become of the fastest growing areas in terms of the sports media, with fans eagerly awaiting to hear about the latest high school star to sign with their school, very few of the posts in this sample were related to recruiting. Only 35 of the 2,800 posts (1.3%) were about recruiting and the majority of those posts did not explicitly discuss the process. College coaches and programs are unable to discuss high school players until the player officially signs his letter of intent, so when a player would verbally commit to the program, the account would tweet “Another call has been answered... #HTownTakeover” or a tweet that showed a graphic of red dominoes being knocked over, signifying that once the first player commits that makes it easier for the next ones to go too.

The official account was especially busy during the team’s football games. When the team was in action, the account would provide frequent updates during the game in order to keep fans aware of the score, big plays, or any other event that was usually a big play for the Cougars. This category, labeled “live tweeting,” made up 27.6% of the sample (772 tweets). For every game, the team would send pre-game tweets of the players warming up beforehand, then tweets throughout the game, and then a few tweets immediately after the game finished.

### *Differentiation from Other Texas Schools*

In order to determine if the official football account was using the #HTownTakeover in order to compare or contrast the team to other schools in the State of Texas, RQ2 asked how frequently other Texas schools were mentioned in tweets. Of the 2,800 tweets, only nine (0.3%) referenced the State of Texas. In one of those tweets, the account proclaims “Houston – the ONLY UNDEFEATED team in the state of Texas. #HTownTakeover #GoCoogs” with a photo of Texas painted red and the University of Houston flag visible. Beyond the #HTownTakeover

hashtag, the city of Houston was mentioned in 58 of the tweets (2.1%), with 10 of those references (17.2% of the 58) referencing that Houston is a major city and not a college town.

Individual schools in Texas were not mentioned frequently. Only one in-state school, Southern Methodist University, was on the 2015 schedule and only four references to other schools appeared outside of SMU (0.1%). Additionally, the SMU matchup was on a Thursday night, so there was little time for in-state “trash talk” following a Saturday night victory. It should also be noted that as another member of the AAC, SMU is an in-conference rival.

The differentiation can also be seen through the fact that the #HTownTakeover hashtag was only used by the football team, making this effort different from other sports. While other sports were also competing with schools throughout Texas, the football team was the only one that made a concerted effort to separate itself from in-state rivals.

### *Promotional Tweets*

RQ3 addressed how the #HTownTakeover hashtag was used in tweets in a promotional sense. Of the 2,800 tweets, 162 were encouraging ticket sales (5.8% of the sample). For example, one read “Be a part of the #HTownTakeover & secure your season tickets for as low as \$99 at [link] #GoCoogs” with an accompanying graphic with the words “YOUR CITY IS CALLING H-TOWN” written over a photo of downtown Houston. An additional 29 tweets were promoting merchandise sales (1% of the sample). Many of these tweets occurred during the lead up to and immediately following the Cougars’ Peach Bowl victory over Florida State. One tweet promoted both ticket and merchandise sales within the same message.

## **Discussion**

### *Theoretical Implications*

In the frame of agenda setting theory, the University of Houston used the Twitter account to demonstrate the importance of the H-Town Takeover campaign. Simply by using the hashtag as frequently as they did (more than 41% of the tweets), the team was able to keep reminding fans that this was something of importance to the university. By including the hashtag within tweets that signified something positive (such as the success of the team), fans were able to associate the initiative with a winning culture.

This adds to the literature on agenda setting theory by demonstrating that online media does have the same agenda setting capabilities as the traditional media. Through Twitter, UH was able to let fans know about the H-Town Takeover campaign by sending at least one tweet every day during the football season that contained the hashtag. Further, while traditional media has often referred to major news organizations such as major television news networks and newspapers, team media has begun to carve a niche in the vast world of sports media. With teams having their own online presence, fans can follow team media for the latest information about their favorite players.

When considering stakeholder theory, it is logical that more than 17% of the tweets that used the #HTownTakeover hashtag were devoted to the fans. By getting fans invested in the hashtag, the university was attempting to give fans ownership of the new direction the program was headed. By posting pictures of fans, encouraging them to come to games, and thanking them for support, H-Town Takeover became more than just a team motto, but something the entire

community could embrace. This strategy can help the stakeholders (i.e., fans, students, recruits, alumni, boosters) help make sure the branding campaign could be a success. This research adds to the literature that demonstrates that athletic teams have the potential to be a primary method in which schools can create a new image to excite stakeholders (Curtis, Abratt, & Minor, 2009; Gregg et al., 2013; Toma, 2003).

### *Differentiation*

The purpose of the H-Town Takeover campaign was to make the football program stand out in a crowded marketplace that involves a variety of other schools in Texas. The team might have embarked on routes in order to differentiate itself from other schools: they simply did not mention them. With so few of the tweets (less than 1%) devoted to discussing the in-state competition, it appears as if the team instead simply chose to focus on itself. While most marketing is designed to explain why a product is better than the competition's, Houston chose to not discuss the competition at all.

This may run counter to how some companies would aim to differentiate themselves from their competition. For consumer products, a business will often take their entry in the market and have the consumers decide for themselves which is better. Perhaps the most famous of these is the "Pepsi Challenge" in which Pepsi asked consumers to take a blind taste test between their product and their top competitor, Coca-Cola. Most consumers chose Pepsi, and the campaign was considered a tremendous success (Green & Wei, 2013). However, UH elected not to get into a 'taste-test' with the University of Texas, Texas A&M, and their other Texan rivals schools. Instead, the school elected to simply focus on themselves. Based on the decades of history and the recent success of rival schools, this was likely a good strategy. When it comes to championships and football history, UH cannot match the University of Texas. Instead, the H-Town Takeover was designed to focus on Houston itself.

An additional point of interest is that while the team was attempting to differentiate from other schools, they were also trying not to differentiate too far from their own past. Over 63% of the tweets with #HTownTakeover present also contained the hashtag #GoCoogs, a reference to the team's Cougar nickname. The social media team was attempting to maintain a connection with other elements of the university's visual identity.

### *Promotional Efforts*

Less than 10% of all the tweets were overtly encouraging fans to buy tickets or merchandise. However, one of the main purposes of the campaign was likely to get fans excited enough to want to spend more money on the University. This appears to be a missed opportunity for the Cougar athletic department. However, this leads directly into the idea of overt and covert promotions. While the account overtly promoted infrequently, one could argue that every tweet in the sample is somewhat of a promotion for the program in that each message is trying to get the fans excited about the team. A simple tweet that says "#HTownTakeover wins" could be enough to get fans excited about the prospects of a winning team. That excitement may then translate into ticket or t-shirt sales.

Previous research has demonstrated that fans may not be interested in overtly promotional posts. An examination of Instagram posts from every Major League Baseball team in 2015 found that posts encouraging ticket or merchandise sales had less fan engagement (comments and likes) than posts that strictly focused on sporting accomplishments (Kim & Hull,



2017). UH was able to address multiple objectives within their tweets (sporting and promotional objectives) but focused primarily on team and player posts. The implications regarding Houston's lack of promotional posts are that teams and schools are recognizing that while promotional posts are important, those posts should not be the primary focus of a team's account.

While social media managers may wish to overly promote various money-making opportunities for the school, they should also follow the guide of the University of Houston and not focus solely on those efforts. The team picked strategic times to focus on specific for-purchase items. For example, ticket sales were promoted before the season began and a few days before each game. Merchandise sales were almost exclusively promoted during the time before the Peach Bowl in which fans could buy hats and shirts with their team's logo on it signifying the appearance in the New Year's Day game. By not constantly bombarding fans with these messages, the few appearances took on increased significance and did not get lost in the constant tweets coming from the account.

### *Limitation and Future Research*

While this study is successful with the goal of analyzing the hashtags usage of a major college football program, it is not without a limitation. Primarily, the study looks at just posts on Twitter. One can assume that the H-Town Takeover campaign fell across many different platforms, including print, television, online, and other social media outlets. To get a full synopsis of branding campaigns, future researchers may wish to examine all platforms in which the campaign was run on.

A future examination of the effectiveness of the #HTownTakeover campaign would be another interesting avenue of research. A longitudinal study would provide an opportunity to see how the campaign has evolved in the subsequent years, including seasons in which the football team was not as successful following Tom Herman's debut. A comparative study could also be completed in which the social media efforts during the first season of Tom Herman are compared to the first season of a different coach at a different university. To keep the research elements similar, comparisons could also be made between this current study and Tom Herman's first season at Texas and/or the first season of Major Applewhite (Herman's head coaching replacement) at Houston.

Finally, while this research did examine the tweets pertaining to the #HTownTakeover campaign, the researchers are making their own conclusions about the goals. To address this limitation, a future study could consist of interviews with those tasked with running the social media accounts of the University of Houston football Twitter account. Getting first-hand information about the tweets would provide an additional avenue of data that could help further add to the literature on branding and agenda setting.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that the University of Houston recognized the importance of enacting differentiation strategies and in order to meet the demand of standing out in the crowded marketplace. Not being a member of a "Power 5" conference was one of the aspects of their program that made them unique. However, the team's success ultimately put them back in the national spotlight and in 2016, when the Big 12 considered conference expansion, UH was

being debated as one of the new institutions to be added as a member. This opportunity made the school reconsider what made them different.

UH embraced the possibility of joining a major football conference and embarked on a campaign to move to the Big 12 by investing considerable time and resources to market its case. However, UH would end up being disappointed in October 2016 as the Big 12's Board of Directors tabled consideration of any new member institutions for the foreseeable future (Barron & Duarte, 2016). Although UH would not be joining the Big 12 and would instead have to show their strength over other in-state programs through online campaigns, the school still needs to find other ways to convince fans, recruits, and the media to follow their program. In that regard, the #HTownTakeover campaign will live on against state rivals the University of Texas, Texas A&M, Baylor University, Texas Christian University, and Texas Tech.

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