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“We Smoked a Gator!”: An Exploration of College Football Fans’ Instagramming of Food

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The ritual of tailgating is a staple of college football Saturdays, particularly for fans of teams in the Southeastern Conference (SEC). Fan traditions help infuse pregame gatherings around the stadiums with team spirit, as fans frequently theme their food and drink to represent their chosen team. New social media platforms—particularly photo-sharing platforms such as Instagram—have taken tailgates to the virtual space. Through interviews with participants who partake in the phenomenon, this study sought to ascertain what fans of SEC teams gain from the process of social media participation. Utilizing the critical framework of symbolic interactionism, this exploratory study examines meaning attached to the ritual and symbolism of team-specific food and drink. By sharing pictures of food and drink with supporters of their favorite team, SEC fans create a virtual community, united by fan allegiance and food and drink fellowship, realizing personal benefits such as sharing nostalgia and developing a sense of community.

Keywords: Instagram, social media, sport and food, symbolic interactionism, tailgating

National news and lifestyle magazine *GQ* offered a definitive guide to football tailgating in the Southeastern Conference (SEC) in a 2015 article titled, “The 10 types of people you will meet at an SEC tailgate.” Ranging from fraternity brothers to spirited grandmothers, the taxonomy of tailgaters was united by the credo: “God, sweet tea and the gosh darn SEC” (Skipper, 2015, para. 1). The archetypes exist for

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a reason. The tradition of college campuses filling with fans hours before kickoff, playing music, enjoying food and drink, and sharing fellowship is particularly pronounced in the SEC. A recent ranking of college football tailgates included seven SEC schools in the top 10 (Kenyon, 2016), exhibiting the conference's passion for tailgating. However, the act of tailgating is not a new phenomenon. College football fans have engaged in such pregame fellowship since the early 1900s to socialize, escape their daily routine, and celebrate their school pride (Delaney, 2008; James, Breezeel, & Ross, 2001; Kerstetter et al., 2012). What is new, though, is the presence of these tailgaters—and specifically their photos—on social media.

The sharing of food and drink photos via social media has grown in popularity as various platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram become more ubiquitous, allowing individuals to engage in a new form of self-expression through photo-sharing. This act, which has grown more common throughout society, has also spread to college football tailgates. Once a tradition limited to on-campus participation, tailgating has transformed into an experience that includes the virtual space. A search of Instagram “spirit” hashtags such as #HailState and #WarEagle reveals pictures of food ranging from frosted cupcakes to fried alligators. Such food items were previously shown to serve as a form of escape and identity celebration among tailgaters (Drenten, Peters, Leigh, & Hollenbeck, 2009; Kerstetter et al., 2012). With this trend accelerating through the growth of social media image-sharing platforms such as Instagram, which now has more than 800 million users (Balakrishnan & Boorstin, 2017), it is worth examining the marriage of football, fandom, food, and social media sharing. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore fans' desire to share photos of their tailgating food and drink via social media, and how these photos might symbolize an emotional connection to their favorite school.

The tradition-laden SEC has been acknowledged as the country's best (Uthman, 2016) and most popular (Luckerson, 2013) athletic conference in the past two decades. With annual team revenues that in many cases exceed \$100 million (Gaines, 2016), and attendance figures that lead all of college football (Solomon, 2016), the conference has inspired a fiercely loyal following for its 14 teams. Fans express their team support in many ways, including on social media sites. Using hashtags, an innovation originally created for Twitter that has spread to other social media platforms (Castillo, 2013), SEC fans display team allegiance and provide up-to-the-minute commentary in the high-stakes college football conference (Pearson, 2016).

With football fandom and tailgating pursued more enthusiastically in the SEC than anywhere else on the college football landscape (Kenyon, 2016), this exploratory study sought to unpack motives for SEC fans to not only tailgate, but also share pictures of their experience on the social media image-sharing site Instagram. The study, a marriage of social media and football tailgating culture, utilizes a theoretical framework rarely utilized in sport literature—symbolic interactionism. The theory, which seeks to ascribe meaning to messages, both for the sender and recipient (Blumer, 1969; Hier, 2005) was used, along with participant surveys, to learn more about what inspires football fans to not only smoke entire hogs on football Saturdays, but also to share the image from their tailgate with the social media world.

Review of Literature

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a social-psychological theory of human interaction and experience focused on the study of human social interaction and the meanings given to objects and actions that guide human behavior (Denzin, 2016; Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975). Social interaction is mediated by symbols, meanings, and interpretations of others' actions (Hier, 2005). Human beings interpret the actions of others through the use of symbols and assign meaning to these actions. These symbols are constructed by social groups and then serve as a guide for behavior (Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1980).

Blumer (1969) offered three integral components of symbolic interactionism. First, human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them, such as the affinity of University of Alabama fans for houndstooth hats, because that was the chosen headwear for beloved former coach Paul "Bear" Bryant. Second, the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's peers, such as the back-and-forth cries of team chants such as "War Eagle" by Auburn University fans. Third, these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. An example of this is how University of Tennessee football fans incorporate the checkerboard pattern into many different forms of spirit wear, emblematic of the end zone in Tennessee's Neyland Stadium. Thus, meaning is a communicative, interpretive process guided by situational contexts (Rochberg-Halton, 1982).

In order to create meaning, individuals need a system of interpretation or symbolic communication that can be consistently interpreted by all individuals (Mead, 1934). Symbols that maintain such meaning are "anything – word, painting, icon, sound – whose function is to point to and to serve in place of something else" (Hewitt, 1989, p. 67). Therefore, symbols are anything in which individuals assign meaning, which is acquired through its use by social groups (Hewitt, 1989; Mead, 1934). The importance of symbols is demonstrated through their ability to motivate and organize behavior and enable individuals to predict what will happen in social situations (Stryker, 1980). Popular symbols among groups include books, pictures, flags, and food, which allow individuals to establish and maintain one's connection within a community (Lichtman, 1970; Morasso & Zittoun, 2014). Implicit in the theory of symbolic interactionism is the integral role of social groups in motivating human behavior.

Social Identity

Symbols, through their use by social groups, have a strong influence on individuals' identities. Identity was previously categorized into three types: social (or collective or group), self, and personal. With social interaction at the core of symbolic interactionism, social identity is the focus of this theory (Silver, 1996). Social identification is defined as "that part of the individual's self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance of that membership" (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255).

In the sport context, team identification was previously used to describe the importance of sport teams to individuals' identity (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Family, friends, and geography have been shown to influence one's identification with sport teams (Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996). The relationship between communities and sport teams was also highlighted by Heere and James (2007), who suggested that fans' relationship with sport teams is influenced by their association with other sources of identity. These authors pointed to professional sport team names such as the National Football League's (NFL) Pittsburgh Steelers and Green Bay Packers serving as a symbolic representation of the community. While some sport fans are strongly identified with their favorite teams, others maintain a strong relationship with external identities such as city, state, or region. Thus, sport teams desire to develop relationships with fans through association with other sources of identity, which create a sense of meaning for fans.

The identity fans maintain with teams and schools often is impacted by their relationships with other fans. Based off the concept of brand communities, Yoshida, Gordon, Heere, and James (2015) introduced the term fan community identification, defined as "the intrinsic connection that fan community members feel toward one another and the collective sense of difference from others not in the fan community" (Yoshida, Gordon, Heere, & James, 2015, p. 107). Upon discovering fan community identification having a positive impact on team brand equity, Yoshida et al., (2015) suggested that fight songs, rituals, and other symbolic acts be emphasized in order to increase fans' identification with teams, which serve as ways for fans to express their identity. Therefore, teams may turn to fans' symbolic rituals in order to attempt to strengthen fans' relationship with the team.

Such ritual behavior is common in the sport context. In addition to team songs, fans wear specific clothing, eat certain types of food, and engage in other acts to reinforce their identity (Eastman & Riggs, 1994; Smith & Stewart, 2007). On the professional sport level, Heere and James (2007) noted Packers fans' wearing of cheese heads, a ritual exhibiting the relationship between the team and its state's identity. In addition, fans not only desire to be a part of a group with a common sense of identity, but they also seek distinctiveness from other groups (Brewer, 1991). Thus, ritualized, symbolic behavior must have meaning for not only the in-group, but also the out-group (Kloberdanz, 1988), presenting a sense of competition with opposing fans.

Tailgating and Food

One of the more popular settings for rituals in the sport context is tailgating. Previous research discovered social interaction, drinking, and food were the primary reasons for one school's fans' continual practice of tailgating (James et al., 2001). Other research showcased fans' enjoyment of the social interaction among both fellow and rival fans, and also fans valuing the personal and social identity expression offered through tailgating (Drenten et al., 2009). An integral component of tailgating that fulfills fans' desire to express their identity is food (Bradford & Sherry, 2017; Drenten et al., 2009).

Food was previously described as a "multilayered and multidimensional subject—with social, psychological, physiological, [and] symbolic dimensions"

(Holtzman, 2006, p. 362). What we eat, how it is eaten, when and with whom it is eaten all contribute to social creation (Visser, 1986). Lalonde (1992) noted that we eat certain foods with certain people. For example, pork skins were viewed as a comfort food due to a fan's memories of eating them while watching college football with their father (Locher, Yoels, Maurer, & van Ells, 2005). Such experiences are also shown to serve as sources of nostalgia (Duruz, 1999; Mannur, 2007).

Like other forms of ritual behavior, food not only serves to solidify group membership, but it also allows for the creation of group distinction. Cuisines—whether real or imagined—can add concreteness to an ethnic identity (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). In the tailgating context, tailgating fans were shown to prepare distinctive and novelty dishes reflecting their hometown (Bradford & Sherry, 2017; Kerstetter et al., 2012). Other research showcased tailgaters cooking a form of the rival's mascot (i.e., roasting a pig when the mascot is a razorback; Bradford & Sherry, 2017; Drenten et al., 2009). These foods thus serve as shared symbols that convey meaning among fans.

Instagram and Social Sharing

The growth and spread of social media platforms has been one of the most important cultural innovations of the 21st century, providing a platform for social interaction that spans the globe (Shirky, 2011). One of the most popular social media sites is Instagram. Launched in 2010, Instagram quickly became the world's fastest-growing social media platform, accumulating more than 800 million monthly active users by September 2017 (Balakrishnan & Boorstin, 2017). The mobile-based photo- and video-sharing platform allows users to post personal photos and share them simultaneously on other social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Instagram Help Center, 2016). In a 2014 study of the content of individuals' Instagram posts, food was captured in more than 10% of all photos, behind the leading categories of selfies, friends, and activities (Hu, Manikonda, & Kambhampati, 2014). A cluster analysis in this study also revealed that individuals who Instagrammed their food most often also took many photos of themselves, friends, and the activities they were engaged in, exhibiting the connection between food, family, and friends.

In addition to identity expression, Instagram also provides individuals a sense of personal validation and provides a platform for individuals to manage their public selves and relationships with family and friends (Dumas, Maxwell-Smith, Davis, & Giulietti, 2017). Previous literature showcased people turning to the site to provide a sense of belonging (Dumas et al., 2017). Other literature exhibited positive feedback received on social media providing individuals' self-esteem and well-being (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). Thus, posting a photo and receiving likes and positive comments aids individuals' psyche. Blight, Ruppel, and Schoenbauer (2017) meanwhile examined sense of community on Twitter and Instagram as a function of users' motives for use, finding those linkages a stronger motive of Instagram interaction than interactivity on Twitter.

In the sport context, Instagram is used by both fans and sport organizations. The San Francisco Giants, for example, began utilizing the platform after seeing their fans use it "to share their experience at the ballpark or wherever they were in

Giants gear” (Ives, 2014, para. 14). Academic research of the social media platform includes studies of self-presentation by athletes (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015), how fans use the platform to engage with teams (Kim & Hull, 2017), and how the hashtag #SheBelieves was used to frame coverage of the U.S. Women’s Soccer Team during the 2015 FIFA World Cup (Pegoraro, Comeau, & Frederick, 2017). Instagram use by organizations and companies has also been examined, including the degree to which Major League Baseball (MLB) teams demonstrate corporate social responsibility through the platform (Hull & Kim, 2016). Other research of organizations’ use of Instagram was conducted by Geurin and Burch (2017), who examined the Instagram accounts of six running brands, analyzing to what extent brands utilized user-generated content on their Instagram accounts and if that resulted in different levels of audience engagement. These studies exhibit the role of Instagram for both individuals and organizations.

With the increased popularity of Instagram in recent years, the current study sought to explore its use by SEC football tailgaters. The reviewed literature exhibits the importance of the use of symbols to demonstrate one’s in-group and out-group identity. College football fans have long engaged in the ritual of tailgating, incorporating food and drink as symbols of their identity. The new trend of taking photos of such food and drink and posting them on Instagram presents an extension of this identity expression. With recent literature investigating Instagram’s potential benefits to both individuals and organizations, the current exploratory study sought to assess the motives for SEC tailgaters’ use of Instagram and the connection it creates to their favorite schools. Based upon this, the current study was constructed utilizing the following research questions:

RQ1: What do fans of SEC football teams gain from the process of social media sharing of football tailgate images?

RQ2: What symbolic meaning do SEC tailgaters attach to the images they send, or receive, on Instagram?

Method

Sport-themed social media research typically has utilized different forms of content analysis, from social identity studies (Pegoraro, 2010; Smith & Smith, 2012) to social network analysis (Hambrick, 2012). With sport and social media scholarship facing criticism for its over-reliance on content analytic techniques, scholars have challenged the sport research community to move beyond content analysis, utilizing more complex critical frameworks, especially from outside of sport (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015; Hutchins, 2014).

One area that sport and social media research has been deficient in is the almost total absence of studies relying on survey data gathered from participants themselves. Only a few such studies have been published (Clavio & Walsh, 2014; Gibbs, O’Reilly, & Brunette, 2014; O’Hallarn & Shapiro, 2014). This is attributed in part to the difficulty of capturing a suitable sample for analysis from social media sites (Abeza, O’Reilly, Séguin, & Nzindukiyimana, 2015).

The qualitative nature of data collection is a frequent criticism of social media survey research in other disciplines. The population of users of a particular

platform, or who engage on a particular topic, skews so strongly toward select demographic groups that it is difficult to generalize findings (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). Rather than seek a random sample of online participants, this exploratory study sought to gain insight from a strongly delimited purposive sample of Instagram users, who met two conditions for invitation to take the seven-question qualitative survey: (1) Instagram users who took and shared pictures of food and drink, and (2) who also deployed a “spirit” hashtag of one of the 14 SEC teams, such as #RollTide for the University of Alabama, or #GoGators for the University of Florida (see Appendix A for the full list of spirit hashtags).

Data Collection and Procedure

The researchers recruited subjects for this study through utilizing the search tool on Instagram, searching spirit hashtags for the 14 SEC institutions. The bulk of survey solicitations were sent to Instagram users around the time of weekend home football games, when fans were more likely to post pictures of food and drink using a hashtag that supported their school. The SEC school spirit hashtags were divided among researchers who worked on the project. As a division of labor, each of the three co-authors were responsible for monitoring specific spirit hashtags for their assigned schools via Instagram over the course of the 2016 football season. Based on a regional split, one researcher monitored the University of Arkansas, University of Kentucky, University of Missouri–Columbia, University of Tennessee, and Vanderbilt University. Another monitored Louisiana State University (LSU), University of Mississippi (Ole Miss), Mississippi State University, and Texas A&M University. The third researcher monitored the University of Alabama, Auburn University, University of Florida, University of Georgia, and University of South Carolina.

Respondents were contacted through comments made by the researchers on potential study subjects' posts on Instagram. Because the request to complete the study questionnaire was delivered to Instagram users with whom there had been no previous interaction, careful attention was paid by researchers to identify their survey pitch as part of a university-based academic study. An online survey link—which took respondents to a Qualtrics (Provo, UT; Seattle, WA) survey—was sent to Instagram users only if they responded expressing their interest in completing the survey. The survey, which was reviewed by qualitative experts, was designed to test the tenets of symbolic interactionism present in the sentiment that underpinned the desire to post Instagram pictures of food and drink along with the spirit hashtag. Seven open-response questions (see Appendix B) were asked of participants, who are not identified in this study. Participants were offered the opportunity to win a \$50 gift card for participation. To enter the contest, participants provided a valid email address, which was used to gain clarification on survey responses if necessary.

Data Analysis

Following collection of the online questionnaires, a total of 42 participants provided data for analysis. Sport and social media research has frequently relied on different content analysis methodologies under the umbrella of constant

comparative methodology (Miles & Huberman, 1994), utilizing the emergence of themes (Pegoraro, 2010; Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012) or frames (Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012).

To begin, concentrating on their assigned schools' hashtags throughout the 2016 college football season, each researcher analyzed the content of the Instagram posts themselves in search of instances that portrayed both pictures of food/drink and a school-related hashtag to provide an initial de-limiting of the sample of all Instagram posts under particular hashtags. This provided researchers with a pool of qualifying Instagram users from which to solicit open-ended survey responses. After the conclusion of the season, survey responses for the 42 study participants were analyzed independently by each researcher. Utilizing constant comparative methodology, which treats each observation as a unit for analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the independent coding resulted in the generation of a list of emergent themes by each researcher. The researchers then discussed emergent themes until consensus was reached, consistent with constant comparative methodology (Hays & Singh, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Finally, these themes were compared against the principles of symbolic interactionism, providing a survey-based analysis of this phenomenon present through the Instagram posts of SEC football fans.

Results

Since the current study was designed to gauge the impact of sharing food and drink photos by football fans themselves, the bulk of the analysis comprised information gleaned from the transcripts of interviews. Fans' desire to share photos of their tailgating food and drink via social media was canvassed, along with how these photos might symbolize an emotional connection to their favorite school. Utilizing the symbolic interactionism framework to address this purpose, six themes emerged from the data following consensus coding by the study authors.

Outcomes of Sharing Football Tailgating Images on Social Media for SEC Fans

With RQ1, the researchers sought to better understand what, if anything, fans accomplished through sharing their tailgating images on social media. Three themes emerged relating to these outcomes, including a sharing of the experience, a sense of community, and validation of their efforts and fandom.

Sharing the experience. Many fans tailgating at the game site expressed a desire to share their experiences with fans at other locations. As expressed by Bo, "I gain enjoyment of sharing my experiences with family and friends that are not in the area." Similarly, Scott said "I share my local experiences here with all my friends from other areas." Going beyond friends and family, however, Shannon recognized that she had garnered somewhat of a following among fellow fans, stating "as I have done my themed meals for almost 10 years, people seem interested in what I come up with each week." Thus, the ability to share the experience with family, friends, and fellow fans who could not be part of the on-campus gameday experience was shown to be an important reason for many fans to post their photos.

At the same time, fans shared photos of their food and drink to integrate those in other locations into the gameday experience as part of the ritual of football tailgating. Roslyn stated that “it allows the people who aren’t there to feel a part of the experience.” Similarly, Joel expressed that it provides them the opportunity to “share my local experiences here with all my friends from other areas.”

In fact, displaced fans used the tailgate to traverse geographic distance, particularly with fans who were tailgating at another location. For example, Eric said, “I was excited for our game and grilled out in the backyard in preparation for it, and wanted to share it with friends.” Likewise, Marcus said, “I know that we all might not be together, but they are keeping up with what I am doing in that moment.” Therefore, Marcus recognized the value of social media and Instagram as a means by which to connect with others during that ritual of tailgating. Luke similarly stated, “I live >4,000 miles from home. Sharing and receiving feedback and comments is just a small nugget of communication and connection.” These comments exhibit displaced fans’ desire to share in the gameday experience with family, friends, and other fans experiencing the game from afar.

Sense of community. Fans engaging in the experience on-site as well as those from distant locations expressed the importance of the sense of community and interaction among fans experiencing the game from various locations. As Don explained, “It shows that there are people all over the country who are supporting the team and tailgating/getting ready for the game, instead of just the fans AT the game or the ones that I personally know.” This sense of community was also expressed by Alexis, who said, “It makes me aware that I’m a part of a large network of people that share the same experiences.” Reports of this sense of belonging by being part of the fan group helped build a sense of community among fans, even among those that they might not know.

The communication with other fans was also shown to encourage fans’ posting of food and drink photos. Cheryl showcased her excitement toward being able to use Instagram to interact with other fans, stating that she “loves when [she] sees a [three Razorback emoticons] comment, and especially when it’s from a friend who lives far away.” Other feedback included the joy that fans felt being connected with like-minded people. As mentioned by Thomas, posting food and drink on Instagram “connects anyone who is familiar with the team, campus, and town.” This statement further exhibits food and drink serving as symbols of these schools. Schools and the group identities they represent have unique traditions and rituals, and fans are able to engage with each other through the use of these symbols, a core function of symbolic interactionism.

Sharing tailgating photos was not just limited to fans exhibiting a high level of identification with their school, however, as Lauren suggested that it “brings people who may not be interested 100% in the game into the conversation.” Nick stated that sharing photos “helps to meet other people that express the same interests” and that “it is just a way for my buddies and I to share what we’re cooking/drinking.” Some fans also mentioned sharing culinary ideas and recipes via Instagram. For example, Autumn noted, “I get new recipes & inspiration from other food lovers all of the time. I love the sharing of ideas.” Therefore, while the connection they share with their school serves as their initial point of

communication, the shared interest in food allows them to cultivate a stronger relationship with each other, and potentially their school.

Validation. In addition to using Instagram to maintain a sense of community, fans also sought personal identity validation through posting photos. As Mike suggested, "It is a way to show off what planning and effort go into the process." Mike also mentioned the work involved in tailgating, indicating "it took 18 hours to cook that pig. That's an all-night affair of supporting my team." Glen noted that it "shows that you are passionate about your team even with what you eat and cook," while Daryl said that "it shows the extra step that I go in supporting my team, beyond watching or wearing team gear." These statements further exhibit the meaning fans place on tailgating, and use it as a way to draw personal meaning based on its interpretation by others.

Symbolic Meaning of Shared Images for SEC Tailgaters

The second research question sought to better understand the symbolic meaning that SEC tailgaters attach to the images they send and receive via Instagram. The thematic findings suggest that tailgaters found symbolic meaning in how they expressed their identity, the competitive nature of sport that manifested in their posts, and the nostalgic symbolism of various images and events from their past.

Identity expression. With food strongly connected to individuals' social identity, the desire to express this identity was shown to be a motive to share food and drink photos. Roger, an LSU fan, spoke to the state's identity, suggesting, "I thought LSU's new Cajun coach would approve of a Cajun dish for the game." Other fans pointed to pride as being the reason for displaying specific food, drink, and school-branded plates and cups. Jess expressed that sharing these photos "shows your passion for your team to a broader audience."

The expression of one's identity was also evident among a number of displaced fans who chose to post photos to share the type of food and drink they were consuming. LSU fans in particular took pride in the local products, with Josh stating, "The official LSU beer from Tin Roof with the gumbo was something I had to show off;" and Sara mentioning, "I hadn't made white beans and rice in a while, and it felt fitting to show my team spirit for the LSU game." However, the concept continues into other areas as well, with Nate describing the fact that he found it fitting to be "drinking a drink made in Mississippi out of a cup with a Mississippi State logo." Similarly, Brendan stated the beer he consumes "is always associated with Tennessee tailgating and for the most part we drink Tennessee-brewed beer: Yee-haw, Black Abbey, Wiseacre, Yazoo, Black Horse, Jackalope, Fanatic, Balter Beer, SawWorks." This symbolism of identity expression was shown to be important for displaced fans that still desire to connect to their team from afar, as explained by Carrie: "A renowned chef in Oxford recently published a cookbook with recipes from one of my favorite restaurants in Oxford. I tried his biscuits and gravy recipe on gameday as my way of 'tailgating' at my house when I could not travel to the game."

In addition to the value attained from consuming food and drink with social meaning, fans also sought to display their identity to people unfamiliar with their

culture. For example, Randall stated that posting photos “is a way to share the tailgating atmosphere and food with people who are not familiar with the south and its traditions.” Similarly, Becca noted, “It’s awesome to see how others spend their game day and it’s a way to share our traditions with others.”

Competition. While many fans took pride in showcasing their identity to other fans of their school, many others took to Instagram to post photos meant to engage rival fans in competition, with a culinary twist. One such way was by posting photos of cooking the mascot of the opposing team, with alligator meat used frequently as an example of this practice. According to Robbie, “(What I cook) depends on who we are playing that game . . . for the Florida game, definitely some blackened or fried gator,” while Kent stated, “People eat gator meat before the Florida game, because it symbolizes beating the gators.” Acknowledging the irony in the tailgate food choices of his peers, Dale also saw the competitive symbolism in food choice: “Well, being a Razorback fan, I find it odd we’re probably the only team that eats its mascot on gameday lol. So, for the Arkansas vs. Florida game this year, we decided to smoke an alligator.”

Other fans used tailgating photos as proxy for school pride, suggesting their tailgate scene was proof of their football fandom superiority. As Jayson boasted, “(Sharing these photos) shows that I represent my school’s tailgate scene, which is the best in the country (looking at you, Wisconsin), and I get to be a part of representing that.” Yet, as indicated by Lee, much of the competition was directed to other schools within the league: “I wanted to show all my loser friends at other schools throughout the SEC what they are missing. And yes, they search posts with my school’s hashtag.” These statements exhibit the importance SEC fans place on tailgating, as they derive a sense of meaning from being superior to other schools’ tailgaters. These comments also display the competition that takes place among fans on social media.

Displaced fans also engaged in this type of in-group/out-group competition through sharing their photos with others via social media. Willie stated, “I had some blackened gator bits & wanted to share with all my Tennessee fan friends.” Kirk, another displaced fan, noted a creative way of incorporating the opposing team’s mascot into their gameday experience and sharing it with others using the school’s hashtag, stating, “My wife came up with a cool idea using a little gator toy and placing it on top of a ‘fire’ as in ‘we’re roasting a gator.’ I wanted to show it to our friends and any other fellow Vols fans, so I used the hashtag.”

In addition to engaging in competition with rival fans, tailgaters also were shown to compete with their fellow fans, another theme consistent with Drenten et al. (2009). Sergio suggested that, “Sometimes interacting with other fans on Instagram acts as an incentive to ‘up’ your tailgating game,” while Steph stated, “I get to show my own school’s fans what they should target for with their food and drink.” Therefore, food and drink serve as symbols of one’s identity at multiple levels.

Nostalgia. Nostalgia emerged strongly in the responses of the football fans on Instagram, suggesting how the Instagram posts were helping foster a stronger connection between fan and school, frequently bridging geographic distance. As Clay mentioned, “I think you can bring your old college friends that follow your account those same nostalgic feelings. Reminisce on the good ole days,” while Liz

noted, "Making and sharing certain foods is sentimental and brings back memories of tailgating or being a student."

Restaurants also are prone to evoke nostalgia, as displayed by one fan who mentioned visiting an establishment they used to patronize while in college. Nostalgia thus served as a motive for their behavior. The connection between nostalgia and social identity was also exhibited, with fans consuming food and drink due to their association with certain food and their favorite school. For example, one Mississippi State fan mentioned eating "barbecue, chicken, side items like potato salad, mac & cheese, potato chips, and dip . . . because those are the foods I grew up with associating with SEC and Mississippi State football most commonly, either tailgating at the games or watching from home." Meanwhile, Krista, an Ole Miss fan, stated that they drink a Hot Toddy on gamedays because of its inclusion in the Ole Miss cheer.

Discussion

Representation of SEC Football and Tailgating Culture via Instagram

Collecting valid survey data from 42 SEC football fans who deployed a spirit hashtag along with an Instagram post featuring food and drink required researchers to examine many posts on the social media site, searching for potential study participants. In finding applicable posts and writing survey pleas to users, some observations about the tailgating posts became apparent. The collected social media posts reflected an avid level of fandom; fans frequently used several versions of spirit hashtags, and the posts themselves included many variations of food and drink themed to their team allegiance. Consistent with tailgating's celebration of a bacchanalian culture (Kerstetter et al., 2012), the photos provided evidence of a large party under way or being prepared for. There were rarely people in the photos being analyzed; the star attraction was the food and drink itself.

In addressing both of the research questions, six themes emerged from the results. In addition, the results also exhibited meaningful information concerning the tradition of tailgating. The following sections discuss the themes related to the outcomes experienced, symbolism shared, and general tailgating culture.

Outcomes of Sharing Football Tailgating Images on Social Media for SEC Fans

The current study's findings suggest that these SEC fans shared images of their tailgate in order to share in the experience with others, develop a stronger sense of community, and to validate their tailgating efforts and fandom. The current section explores these outcomes in detail, beginning with tailgaters' desire to share the experience with others.

Sharing the experience. Much previous research of tailgating has exhibited the importance of socializing with family and friends, consuming food and drink, and celebrating one's identity (Drenten et al., 2009; Kerstetter et al., 2012). The current study extends literature by displaying the importance of sharing this on-campus

experience with individuals off site. Tailgaters were shown to attempt to share the experience with family and friends engaging in the gameday celebration from afar while others posted photos to engage other fellow fans who were active on social media. In an increasingly mobile society, this exhibits both the desire and ability for fans to connect with one another.

Displaced fans also utilized Instagram to take part in the experience by posting food and drink photos from home. These findings further indicate that food is also part of the football gameday experience for fans away from campus (Aden et al., 2009; Kraszewski, 2008). For example, Aden et al. (2009) showcased the ritual performances of University of Nebraska football fans at watch parties across the country. Such rituals included fans wearing red, the playing of the school's fight song, and also importing Nebraska food to simulate the on-site experience. Similarly, displaced fans examined in the current study simulated the on-site gameday experience from their distant location, yet attempted to connect with those on-campus tailgaters via their social media postings. This phenomenon is an important aspect for marketers and team representatives to not only track, but actively participate in. By engaging with these displaced fans through sharing, liking, commenting, or other engagement functions, it may help displaced fans feel a greater sense of connection to the institution. Schools could take this knowledge to encourage the sharing of scenes from at-home tailgating through social media promotions specifically directed toward these displaced fans.

Sense of community. Fans both on campus as well as those enjoying the gameday celebration from a distance exhibited the importance of experiencing a sense of community as a result of posting food and drink photos. The feeling of being part of a large community was something that brought fans great satisfaction. Previous research showcased the development of sense of community among tailgaters (Delaney, 2008) as well as fans consuming sporting events from a distant location (Fairley & Tyler, 2012). However, the potential sense of community established through interaction among fans at different locations has yet to receive much attention. With the enhanced use of social media in the sport viewing experience (Phua, 2010; Clavio & Walsh, 2014) and the large number of displaced sport fans (Collins, Heere, Shapiro, Ridinger, & Wear, 2016), schools and professional teams should look to develop social media strategies designed to foster communication among fans from various locations on gameday.

While such communication can include phone calls and text messages, this study showed the meaning that photos of meaningful symbols have in creating connection among fans, which has both practical and theoretical implications. The symbols utilized in the current study were food and drink, which further illustrates the role these items play in fan interaction. In a broader sense, the results demonstrate new forms of communication going beyond words, including photos, meant to communicate a message. Emoticons and other symbols have become very popular in recent years (Collister, 2015), and the current study exhibits the importance symbols maintain in interpersonal communication. Research should continue to explore symbols that maintain such meaning among groups of individuals. The opportunity for such connection also serves as a practical outcome

in which schools could look to utilize shared symbols via social media, which is shown to provide individuals with a sense of community (Oh, Ozkaya, & LaRose, 2014).

Validation. The ability to receive validation was also shown to be an important reason for fans to take their tailgate into the virtual space. Such personal validation can be accomplished through receiving likes and positive feedback of posted photos (Dumas et al., 2017). Interestingly, some fans sought validation specifically of their tailgating skills while others desired to prove their level of commitment to their team through tailgating. This exhibits two compelling outcomes. First, the impact of fans' cooking skills on their team identification further showcases food and drinks' status as symbols among these fans. Food and drink are shown to be important components of fans' identity, and similar to schools' and teams' attachment to external identities through the use of team nicknames and rituals (Heere & James, 2007), fans' cooking skills are shown to impact their school identity. This finding exhibits the relationship of school and external identities, which in this case is tied to tailgating. Schools and teams should thus explore the external identities of their fans in order to determine how to strengthen their relationship with fans through utilizing these sources of identity.

Fans' validation-seeking through posting food and drink photos on social media also illustrates the importance of food and cooking among these fans. Cooking has long held great meaning in society, providing individuals with positive social and psychological outcomes (Kauffmann, 2010). In recent years, individuals have turned to posting photos of both ordered and self-prepared food and drink on social media platforms (Hu et al., 2014). The current study exhibits this trend's occurrence in the sport context. With the popularity of tailgating and individuals' desire to attain validation for their cooking, schools could encourage such posting of food and drink photos to provide individuals the validation they receive and also attempt to strengthen their connection to the schools.

Symbolic Meaning of Shared Images for SEC Tailgaters

Results from this study also suggested that tailgaters found symbolic meaning in how they expressed their identity, the competition inherent in sport, and the nostalgia they felt by sharing images and experiences from their past. The current section explores each of these three themes.

Identity expression. Fans utilized the ability to share food and drink photos via Instagram to express their identity. These findings are consistent with previous research of both tailgating (James et al., 2001; Kerstetter et al., 2012) and also Instagram (Hu et al., 2014), which showcase the importance of food and drink. The current study brings these two contexts together, exhibiting fans' desire to express their identity with photos of food and drink on social media. These findings display the importance social media plays among certain fans, serving as a platform to showcase the pride fans have for their school, and experience the value and emotional significance that accrues from group membership (Tajfel, 1981).

The use of food and drink specifically also exhibit their use as symbols, as they maintain a consistent meaning among fellow fans, a core component of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). Furthermore, also characteristic of symbolic

interactionism (Stryker, 1980), these symbols were shown to not only impact fans from a social/psychological standpoint, but also behaviorally through their posting of photos. Fans expressed their connection with locally-identifiable food and drink as well as consuming food and drink with an established connection to their favorite school. For example, one participant noted consuming Tin Roof Beer, which maintains a partnership with LSU to brew the officially-licensed beer of the school. Based upon these findings, schools have the opportunity to take advantage of fans' established connections with food and drink. Heere and James (2007) suggested that fans' relationships with teams are affected by their relationships with other sources of identity. Thus, schools should employ strategies to highlight local food and drink to strengthen fans' connection with the schools.

While food and drink are the focus of the current study, they are just one type of symbol. Schools should look to identify symbols of all kinds that maintain meaning among their fans and can be used as a form of communication and bring a sense of pride and distinctiveness to their fans. As mentioned previously, the University of Alabama is known for its houndstooth clothing pattern as a result of Paul Bryant's popular hat. Many fans can now be seen wearing clothing items with this design, as it has become a unique symbol for the school (and one that the university has started to not only market, but monetize). With symbols including words and phrases, objects, and sounds, schools can turn to a wide variety of items to serve as symbols.

Fans also noted sharing food and drink photos to engage fans who were unfamiliar with their culture. This further illustrates the emotional connection SEC fans maintain with food and drink. Fans place such an emphasis on food and drink that they use these items to showcase their identity with other groups of people. The finding also exhibits their use as symbols, used to interact with not only members of the in-group, but also the out-group (Kloberdanz, 1988).

Competition. Fans also used food and drink to engage in a form of competition. One way in which fans engaged in competition was through the symbolic act of cooking the opposing school's mascot, which was done by both fans on campus as well as displaced fans, and served as a way for fans to participate in the competition between the two schools. This performance further illustrates the meaning SEC fans attach to food, which can be used in an attempt to antagonize opposing schools' fans. This theme of competition within tailgating was also shown by Drenten et al. (2009), who noted fans' cooking of the opposing school's mascot as a form of competition. With derogation of one's outgroup a component of social identity (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the act of cooking the opposing school's mascot is not surprising. Therefore, fans do not stop at merely cooking such food, but now take advantage of the opportunity to share it with fans of both their school as well as rival schools.

Fans also noted the role of social media in providing the ability to engage in such competition. With the popularity of spirit hashtags, fans are easily able to search for photos of both their own schools as well as opposing schools. Such competition is no longer constrained by time nor location. This finding further demonstrates the novelty and unique contribution of the current study, with fans now able to post food and drink photos for the specific purpose of exhibiting their perceived superiority over opposing schools.

In addition to engaging in a form of competition with fans of opposing schools, tailgaters also sought to outperform fellow fans while tailgating. The competition among tailgaters at the same school is currently utilized by LSU through its “Best of LSU” campaign. Each home gameday, select tailgaters are chosen for best food, décor, dress, and spirit. Fans must use the “#BestofLSU” hashtag, and winners are shown on the stadium’s jumbotron during the game (LSUSports.net, 2017). While schools may be wary of promoting out-group competition among fans, this in-group competition marketing strategy employed by LSU provides an avenue for other schools to explore.

Nostalgia. The results also exhibited the impact of nostalgia motivating fans’ sharing of food and drink photos on Instagram. Nostalgia was exhibited by fans both on campus and also those displaced as a result of their food and drink photos. Such findings are not surprising, with previous literature exhibiting food and social events serving as sources of nostalgia (Havlena & Holak, 1996; Holak & Havlena, 1992). In addition, the period of adolescence and young adulthood is when many individuals experience events that later evoke nostalgia (Holak & Havlena, 1992). Thus, many fans likely are nostalgic for gameday experiences from their childhood and college years. As a result, they are turning to social media to relive these experiences with other fans. This finding provides both practical and theoretical implications concerning nostalgia. Theoretically, it extends the confines of nostalgic experiences. Previous literature exhibits the nostalgic impact of pictures of family and friends (Belk, 1990); however, such photos are now able to be shared instantaneously via social media. With nostalgia-inducing positive benefits including feelings of pleasure (Sedikides et al., 2015), social connectedness, and greater meaning (Routledge et al., 2011), individuals are now able to turn to social media to experience nostalgia and its outcomes. Social media continues to grow due to its ability to meet individuals’ social and psychological needs, and the results of this study give credence to its use.

Facebook recently began taking advantage of nostalgia by showcasing users’ photos from years past (Sedikides et al., 2015), and “Throwback Thursday” (#TBT) and “Flashback Friday” (#FBF) have become popular on social media in recent years (Moreau, 2017). With the popularity of such platforms, schools could therefore place greater importance on utilizing social media by posting photos of historical moments that are likely to hold special meaning for fans and alumni. This would allow for fellow fans to reconnect while also impacting their connection to the school.

Importance of Tailgating for SEC Fans

Finally, the results further display the importance of tailgating to college football fans. Many of the fans surveyed in the current study expressed the meaning tailgating held in the gameday experience, in some cases stating that tailgating was equivalent to the games themselves. While spectator sporting events inherently are social activities, tailgating presents a unique environment enabling families and friends to connect in ways that are often not possible inside stadiums. With fans desiring such social interaction, tailgating may in fact be favored over the core competition among some fans.

The current study also extended tailgating knowledge by displaying tailgating among displaced fans and their desire to become part of the shared tailgating experience among all fans. Displaced fans tailgating from their distant locations cooked foods that connected them to their favorite school, and through posting photos of this food, became part of the shared experience. Fans tailgating on campus also sought to connect with fans tailgating at other locations by posting photos of their tailgates on Instagram. Therefore, not only does tailgating occur on campus, but also at distant locations, with these fans able to share the experience via Instagram.

Limitations

As with any research, the current study featured limitations. Due to the reliance on hashtags as the initial means to screen Instagram posts, relevant posts that did not include the hashtags in the search or that were posted from private accounts may have been missed. Furthermore, due to the sheer volume of Instagram posts made surrounding many of the teams and games throughout the 2016 football season, it is possible that the researchers were not able to solicit survey feedback from every poster who met the qualifications for solicitation. The study was also limited by the number of Instagram users who responded to survey requests, which may have led to a self-selection bias due to the sample of volunteers in this study. In addition, the respondents were not asked to identify their favorite school. Thus, while some responses included information that clearly identified their favorite school, the results did not exhibit the number of respondents associated with each school. While each of the 14 schools were targeted equally, some schools may have been more heavily represented than others. Finally, selecting the SEC as the focus of this study is also a limitation, as fans of other leagues (especially the Group of Five [American Athletic Conference, Conference-USA, Mid-American Conference, Mountain West Conference, Sun Belt Conference]) may have expressed different feelings regarding their tailgating experience and their accompanying Instagram posts given the unique culture within their fan base.

Future Research

Given that this was an exploratory study focused on one particular conference, similar research could be conducted to assess the symbolic interactionism of social media sharing in other settings. Also, as noted, while food and drink were the focus of this study, future research could explore other symbols that maintain meaning among fan groups, and how schools and teams can use such symbols to foster relationships with fans. Future research could also explore the role of tailgating in the complete college football gameday experience to learn how schools and teams can effectively create a comprehensive experience that meets fans' needs. Investigations could also focus on how perceived rivalry intensity may affect the tenor and meaning behind competition-related posts. Given the limited research on the sharing of nostalgic experiences with others, efforts are needed to examine emotional and behavioral responses of these actions. Future research could continue to explore the interaction of fans at various locations, which could have both marketing and societal implications.

An interesting side observation—possibly worthy of future study—was that many local establishments piggybacked on the spirit hashtag to advertise their own tailgate-style events in conjunction with both home and away football games. It is notable that this hashtag hijacking did not involve major corporations selling food and drink. Instead, it was “mom and pop” establishments, frequently in the town that hosted the team, that were deploying the team hashtags for marketing purposes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study showcased the posting of food and drink photos of SEC tailgaters on social media. With the goal of learning the outcomes attained and meaning comprising such actions, the current study discovered that fans valued the opportunity to share the tailgating experience with others, experience a sense of community, and attain a feeling of personal validation. Furthermore, findings suggest that fans accrue symbolic meaning from their ability to express their identity, compete with other fans, and experience nostalgia. These results exhibit the importance of tailgating to SEC football fans, and the impact showcasing these experiences on social media has on fans socially and psychologically. Future research should continue to explore the role of social media in the tailgating and overall gameday experience in attempt to yield further practical and theoretical outcomes.

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Appendix A: List of “Spirit” Hashtags for SEC Schools Utilized for the Present Study

University of Alabama — #rolltide
 Arkansas University — #razorbacks
 Auburn University — #wareagle
 University of Florida — #gogators
 University of Georgia — #godawgs
 University of Kentucky — #weareUK
 Louisiana State University — #geauxtigers
 University of Mississippi — #hottytoddy
 Mississippi State University — #hailstate
 University of Missouri — #mizzou
 University of South Carolina — #gamecocks
 University of Tennessee — #govols
 Texas A&M University — #12thman
 Vanderbilt University — #anchordown

Appendix B: Online Questionnaire

1. What food and drink makes your team’s tailgating experience memorable and unique?
2. You were contacted for this survey because your Instagram photo contained both your team’s official hashtag, and a picture of food and/or drink. What inspired you to capture that image and post it to Instagram?
3. Why is food and drink important to your experience of football tailgating?
4. What do you gain from the act of sharing photos on Instagram about food and drink?
5. How does social sharing of pictures of food and drink display allegiance to your team?
6. In what ways do you interact on social media with other fans of your team who post pictures of food and drink to Instagram?
7. How does this process of interacting with your team’s fans on Instagram add to your football fan experience?