

Public relations strategy in a Japanese college tennis team during COVID-19: Factors for joining the team

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ABSTRACT

The spread of the novel coronavirus infection that began in 2020 has forced the cancellation of many competitive sports events. This has made it difficult for college sports teams to recruit top athletes at athletic venues and has also forced the cancellation of face-to-face recruiting activities for general freshmen. Under these unprecedented circumstances, online publicity strategies have become particularly important. In this study, we attempted to analyze the effectiveness of the public relations strategy of the Y tennis team of K University by focusing on the factors that were decisive in new students' decisions to join the team. The results showed that the decisive factors were "enriched practice environment" and "compatibility with academic work." It was also found that approximately 40% of the new members decided to join the team after receiving information on Twitter and participating in online information sessions. In this paper, we propose effective public relations strategies while drawing actual examples from public relations strategies in practice.

Key words: Public relations strategy, college sports, tennis

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the activities of college student athletes in particular have been attracting a great deal of social attention, and colleges have been expanding entrance examinations with sports recommendations as part of their public relations strategies to attract top athletes (Tomozoe, 2006). In fact, 87% of all universities in Japan have a sports recommendation entrance examination system (Japanese Association of University Physical Education and Sports, 2014), and accordingly, coaches and managers of college athletic teams conduct rigorous recruiting activities, such as visiting athletic competition venues, in an effort to enroll excellent athletes (Shimizu et al., 2011).

However, the spread of the novel coronavirus infection that began in 2020 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2021) deprived us of our daily lives and led to the cancellation of many competitive sporting events. This not only made it difficult to recruit top athletes at competition venues, but also led to the cancellation of in-person recruiting activities of new students (Yoshida, 2021).

Under these unprecedented circumstances, online publicity strategies have become particularly important. It is reported that 95.6% of high school students own a smartphone today, and that 53.6% of them have increased the amount of time they spend using it as a result of voluntary restraints on face-to-face activities following the spread of the novel coronavirus infection (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2021). Under such circumstances, it is beneficial for college athletic clubs



to execute online publicity strategies using social networking services (SNS), as an alternative to face-to-face recruiting and club enrollment activities. Regardless, it is expected that online public relations strategies will become increasingly important in the future, even after the novel coronavirus outbreak is under control.

Nevertheless, there have been few academic studies on public relations strategies of student-led college athletic teams. In fact, Amiso (2008), who examined public relations strategies for student recruitment in colleges, Taninouchi (2020), who studied college public relations departments, and Takeuchi (2010), who analyzed college public relations media, all

have studies focused on public relations strategies in larger organizations.

In this study, in order to examine effective publicity strategies for college athletic clubs, we analyze the effectiveness of the publicity strategy implemented by the K University Y Tennis Club (Y Tennis Club), which has its training base in Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan (Hotta et al., 2022a), with a focus on the factors that were influential in the decision of new students to join the club. The Y Tennis Club has a history of more than 80 years and is based at the tennis courts on the campus of K University. The club is characterized by the diversity of its members, and although it does not conduct entrance examinations with sports recommendations, it is known for its high competitiveness in the Kanto Polytechnic College Tennis League (Hotta et al., 2022b). The men's team belongs to the first division out of 13 divisions and won the second place in 2019, and the women's team also won the first place the second division in 2018. In addition, the team is also making efforts to nurture "supporting" personnel (Hotta, 2021), and has the largest number of certified officials of the Japan Tennis Association among Japanese college tennis clubs, with many members of the team having been hired as management staff at competitive international sporting events (Hotta, 2023). Furthermore, there are other college tennis teams at K University, such as K University H Tennis Club (H Tennis Club) and K University Tennis Circle (Circle). Considering how Y tennis club and the other tennis teams are in a competitive relationship in terms of recruiting new members, the Y tennis club is optimal for studying the effectiveness of public relations strategies, which is the objective of this study.

PROCEDURE AND DATA ANALYSIS

55 members of Y tennis club were targeted (Table 1). 46 responses (83.6%) were received, all of which were valid (100.0%). In the Y tennis club, the teams are divided into A, B, C, and D in order of the competitiveness of the members. The survey period was from June 16, 2021, to June 23, 2021.

Table 1
Demographics.

		Count	%
Grade (n=46)	Freshman	20	43.5
	Sophomore	13	28.3
	Junior	13	28.3
Gender (n=46)	Men	36	78.3
	Women	10	21.7
Competitiveness (n=46)	A	9	19.6
	B	12	26.1
	C	14	30.4
	D	11	23.9

The survey items consist of their demographics, items related to the operation of SNS and official homepages, items related to the brand image, and items related to the recruiting. All the items were filled out on the web using a survey form with Keio University Authentication System enabled. The survey form was protected by SSL/TLS encryption, server certification, firewall access control, and other security and privacy protection measures. Simple tabulations were performed for all survey items. Data collected was the following:

- Demographics: Grade, gender, and competitiveness were asked.
- Items related to the operation of SNS and official homepages: The respondents were asked to evaluate the frequency and content of their team's SNS such as Twitter and YouTube, as well as their official website, using a five-point scale from "1: evaluate lowly" to "5: evaluate highly." The respondents were also asked to provide free comments regarding their specific evaluations, if necessary.
- Items related to the brand image: The respondents were asked to evaluate brand image, including the contents of the logo and catchphrase, using a five-point scale from "1: evaluate lowly" to "5: evaluate highly." The respondents were also asked to respond to multiple-choice questions (Goto et al., 2003) and to provide free descriptions regarding their specific evaluations, if necessary.
- Items related to the recruiting: The respondents were asked to respond to multiple-choice and open-ended questions regarding the media they used to gather information and the types of events they participated in before joining the club.

Regarding the ethical considerations of the study, prior to the survey, the purpose of the survey, the survey method, and the protection of information were explained in writing to the representatives of Y tennis club, and the method of conducting the survey was discussed. Then, the URL of the survey form was distributed to the 55 members of the Y tennis club through the representatives of the Y tennis club. In the survey form, the following explanatory text was written in a position easily recognizable by the respondents: (1) the purpose of the survey, (2) the voluntary nature of the responses, and (3) the fact that the information would not be disclosed to the public as personally identifiable information.

RESULTS

Items related to the operation of SNS and official homepages.

First, Twitter is a social networking service with 320 million users worldwide and 45 million users in Japan (Onodera, 2018), and the majority of high school and college students use it daily (Toyoda, 2015; Aoyama, 2018). In this respect, it is the most important medium for the Y tennis club in terms of publicity strategy to attract new members and to communicate with the outside world. In fact, in the survey of Y tennis club members, 39.1% of the total respondents answered that they first learned about the Y tennis club through Twitter posts. Therefore, during the period from October 2019 to September 2020, including periods amidst the COVID-19 Disaster, 330 posts were made. This is the highest number of posts per year since the account was opened in 2015, and 6.6 times the number of posts made from October 2018 to September 2019, periods unaffected by the COVID-19 Disaster. The posts were designed to appear at the top of Twitter's algorithm (Onodera, 2018) by adding images and video content. This was also done in order to provide a more concrete understanding of the expressions and activities of the club members in the absence of face-to-face recruiting activities during the COVID-19 Disaster. In addition, in the period immediately prior to the September university enrollment, the information was also provided in English, since the the September university enrollment is mainly for foreign students. In terms of content, they sought

to enhance the introduction of the club members, facilities, and events, as well as the style of writing to make it seem more familiar to younger readers. In addition, the communication with the viewers was also emphasized by replying to all direct messages and comments on posts.

As a result, the number of followers increased from 440 as of October 2019 to 563 as of May 2021, and the cumulative number of postings viewed exceeded 1 million during that period. In fact, in a survey of Y tennis club members, the content of Twitter posts received a high rating of 4.50 on average. In the free comments section, the following comments were also made by the respondents: "It was very good that there were posts on a wide range of topics, such as introductions of members, events, and reports on external competitions," "It was easy to understand what kind of events were held and where to contact during the new member period."

Next, YouTube is a medium mainly for posting videos and is used by many high school and college students (Toyoda, 2015; Aoyama, 2018). Therefore, in addition to distributing videos of matches, the Y tennis club also focused on creating and posting image videos. The image video expresses the history of the Y tennis club and the diversity of its members, and it also tries to convey the atmosphere of respect for all the players, supporters, coaches, referees, ball players, and alumni (MEXT, 2017) who "experience, watch, and support" (MEXT, 2017). The video is composed mainly of images taken by individual members before the COVID-19 disaster, and was edited by the Public Relations Strategy Committee members using the standard Windows 10 application "Photos." The image video was completed in March 2021, and the completed video was posted not only on YouTube but also on Twitter.

As a result, as of May 2021, the video has been viewed more than 10,000 times in total. In a survey of Y tennis club members, the video received a high overall evaluation of 4.35 on average, and the following comments were also given by the respondents in the free comments section: "It was good that the passion for tennis was conveyed," "Many new students waver between joining the Y tennis club or a circle, but the former has more focus on tennis itself, while the latter is more about socializing."

Next, the official website of the Y tennis club was completely revised in February 2020, because the visibility of the website was not good. The design of the official website was mainly yellow and black, referring to the color tone of the official website of K University, and in terms of contents, the history and activity records of Y Tennis Club were enriched.

As a result, the site was viewed 6,086 times cumulatively from October 1, 2019 to September 30, 2020 (Period A), including the post-renovation period. This is 2.07 times as many as the cumulative number of views during the period from October 1, 2018 to September 30, 2019 (Period B) before the renovation. The average time spent in period A was also 3 minutes and 09 seconds, which is 1.3 times longer than that in period B. In fact, in the survey of Y tennis club members, the content of the official website was rated extremely high with an average of 4.59, and the design was also rated high with an average of 4.57. In addition, in the free comments, respondents reported that "the website is easy to read and provides a variety of information," and "the Q&A about joining the club helped me to resolve my doubts and concerns before joining the club."

Items related to brand image.

In the operation of SNS and official homepages, an important public relations strategy is how to present the Y tennis club to the target audience, i.e., the brand image of the club. In the case of Y Tennis Club, in order to win the championship in the Kanto Polytechnic College University Tennis League for both men and women, it was necessary to recruit new members with high competitiveness, and to recruit women in order to secure the number of members necessary for the women's team to participate in the team competition.

Therefore, when recruiting new members for the 2020 and 2021 academic years, we targeted (1) those who have played tennis before and (2) female members in our public relations strategy. In order to differentiate the Y-tennis club from competing clubs such as the H tennis club and circles, we created a catchphrase, "a club for anyone who values the joy of tennis," reflecting the characteristics of the Y tennis club as described in the introduction, and displayed it with the logo in each media. The catchphrase was displayed in each media along with the logo and logotype. In addition, the contents of each media were also considered to be in line with this catchphrase. The catchphrase received a high evaluation in a survey of Y tennis club members, with an average rating of 4.37. The results were as follows: "It is good that the rigid impression of an athletic association is dispelled," "It is good that we can enjoy tennis on the premise of having fun," and "It is good that we are firmly oriented toward competitions" and "It was easy to convey the attitude of facing competition firmly while assuming the enjoyment of tennis."

Next, 40 (87.0%) of the respondents chose "enriched practice environment" as the deciding factor in their decision to join the club, followed by 27 (58.7%) for "compatibility with academic work," 13 (28.3%) for "little difference in opportunities to participate in matches and practices based on ability."

The most common characteristic of the Y tennis club, which was not found in the H tennis club, was "Balance with schoolwork" with 30 (65.2%), followed by "Fewer differences in participation in matches and practices depending on tennis ability" with 24 (52.2%), "Social contribution activities such as refereeing" with 24 (52.2%), and "Interaction with various club members and friendly atmosphere" with 22 respondents (47.8%).

As for the characteristics of the Y-tennis club that were not found in the circle, 40 (87.0%) of the respondents selected "enriched practice environment" the most, followed by 35 (76.1%) for "good teaching environment," 30 (65.2%) for "social contribution activities such as refereeing," and 27 (58.7%) for "connection with alumni."

Based on these results, it can be seen that "enriched practice environment" and "good coaching environment" were recognized as superior characteristics by the Y tennis club members compared to the circle, and "balance with schoolwork" and "little difference in participation opportunities in matches and practices depending on the level of tennis ability" were recognized as superior characteristics compared to the H tennis club. These characteristics also appeared at the top of the decisive factors for the decision to join the Y tennis club, and the agreement between the characteristics of the Y tennis club and the decisive factors for the decision to join the Y tennis club was confirmed.

From the above, it can be concluded that the Y-tennis club's publicity strategy using SNS and official homepages has been effective in promoting the membership of the Y tennis club, as the club has been able to build up its contents with an awareness of the characteristics of prospective members and its differentiation from other clubs.

Items related to the recruiting.

Finally, we examined how the members of the Y tennis club decided to join the club. First, when the members were asked how they first heard about the Y tennis club before joining, the most common answer was "from an acquaintance" at 27 (58.7%), followed by "Twitter" at 18 (39.1%), "official website" at 7 (15.2%), and "Instagram" at 6 (13.0%) (Table 2). Based on the above, it can be understood that the Y tennis club's emphasis on publicity strategies using Twitter and Instagram has been effective. It should be noted here that none of the members of the Y tennis club had the opportunity to learn about the Y tennis club through the online welcome party officially conducted by K University amidst the COVID-19 Disaster. This implies that the Y tennis club could not have obtained new members unless they voluntarily carried out the public relations strategy. However, the most common answer was "from an acquaintance," which indicates that it is important not only to publicize the Y tennis club comprehensively through SNS, but also for each member to solicit his/her acquaintances to join the club personally.

Next, we asked the 22 members who joined the Y tennis club in FY2020 and FY2021 about the types of events organized by the Y tennis club that they attended during the welcome period during the COVID-19 disaster and found that "online information sessions" was the most frequent event with 18 respondents (81.8%), followed by "online exchange meeting" with 17 respondents (77.3%) (Table 2).

The online information sessions were a plan to explain about the Y tennis club in a format similar to a real-time lecture at college. Those who participated in the event said, "It was good that I was able to resolve my questions during the question-and-answer session at the explanatory meeting on club activities," "I felt the atmosphere of the club was well balanced, and I was attracted to the fact that it had not only the strictness of an athletic club but also an easy-going atmosphere."

The online exchange meetings are meetings between current club members and new students before they join the club, and those who participated in this meeting reported that the atmosphere was "homey and lively" and "very cheerful and reassuring." On the other hand, some of the participants said that they would like to have more individualized meetings.

The "Practice Experience" was a plan to have students participate in actual club activities, but most of the new students did not have a chance to participate in this program due to the declared state of emergency caused by the COVID disaster.

Table 2

Simple tabulation results of multiple-choice responses to items related to the recruiting.

Items related to the recruiting	Options	Count	%
How they first heard about the Y tennis club	From an acquaintance	27	58.7
	Twitter	18	39.1
	Official website	7	15.2
	Instagram	6	13.0
	Youtube	1	2.2
	Facebook Page	0	0.0
	Online welcome party conducted by K University	0	0.0
The types of events organized by the Y tennis club that they attended during the welcome period (answer only freshman)	Online formation sessions	18	81.8
	Online exchange meeting	17	77.3
	Practice experience	1	4.5

CONCLUSIONS

The process of deciding where to enter a college is generally divided into five stages: (1) learning about the college, (2) becoming interested in the college, (3) researching the college, (4) taking the entrance exam, and (5) sharing the information with others (Iwata, 2013). Applying this process to the case of the Y tennis club, we can observe the following:

1. Members learn about Y tennis club through SNS, acquaintances, and other publicity media,
2. The applicants become interested in Y tennis club through catchphrases, postings, videos, etc. on the SNS,
3. Those who are interested in Y tennis club visit the official website and online information sessions to obtain information,
4. Those who are interested in Y tennis club participate in online exchange meeting and practice sessions to get to know Y tennis club firsthand,
5. Those who are interested in Y tennis club exchange information with other prospective members and new students at the online exchange meeting and practice sessions.

Normally, steps (4) and (5) would all be conducted in person, but this was not possible during the COVID disaster. Even with such limitations, it can be evaluated that Y tennis club compensated for this problem of recruitment through online publicity strategies and events. From the above, we suggest that college tennis clubs should understand the characteristics of prospective members, disseminate information with the awareness to differentiate from other clubs, and provide opportunities to share information through social gatherings and other occasions.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

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