In the last year, Twitter has become a popular online social network for professional athletes and teams seeking to connect with their fans (Fisher, 2009). For example, Allen Iverson kept fans abreast of his off-season conditioning and possible trade talks through the online social network (Sheridan, 2009). Lance Armstrong posted a message on Twitter asking fans to join him for a bike ride at a specified time and location. Several hours later, more than 1,000 cyclists showed up to participate (Cromwell, 2009). Athletes can now connect directly with fans versus having their messages filtered through the public relations departments of sport organizations and traditional media outlets. Online social networks have created a significant shift in the sports communications paradigm. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the nature of this newest communication tool and how it may affect the relationships between athletes and fans specifically and sport communications in general.

Started in 2006, Twitter has grown from 2.3 million US users in August 2008 to an estimated 50 million global users to date (Fisher, 2009). Twitterers, or users of the online social network, can post messages ("tweets") of 140 or fewer characters on their personal Twitter pages. They can also follow the tweets of others (Pogue, 2009). For sports fans, Twitter gives users the ability to connect with other fans as they discuss and read tweets provided by their favorite sports, teams, and athletes (Williams, 2006). Social networking sites like Twitter offer fans unprecedented access to the personal and social lives of professional athletes. Accessibility to teams, and more importantly players, is an important antecedent to the development of team identification (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997; Wakefield, 2007). This can be an important outcome as highly identified sports fans engage in supportive, or loyal, behaviors directed towards the team. Such behaviors include greater frequency of game attendance (Matsuoka, Chelladurai, & Harada, 2003; Wakefield, 2007; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), more time and money invested into the team (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), and greater intentions to purchase sponsor products (Dees, Bennett, & Villegas, 2008; Lings & Owen, 2007).

Athletes, teams, and leagues, have long used traditional media to communicate with their publics to achieve these outcomes, and considerable research has investigated the nature of these communications. However, new technologies, like Twitter, have changed the nature of communication between athletes and the sports fan. As such, little is known about what is being communicated and how it is being communicated. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to examine the content of professional athlete tweets in order to explore the communication exchanges between athletes and fans.

The sample was drawn from sportsin140.com, a website devoted to identifying verified athlete Twitter accounts. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure representation from multiple sports. Athletes from the following sport categories were randomly selected for inclusion in the study: NFL, MLB, NHL, NBA, WNBA, MLS, PGA/LPGA, Auto Racing, Minor League Baseball (MiLB), and Other Sports (e.g., mixed martial arts and tennis). Within each sport product category, every fifth athlete was randomly selected for inclusion. The 20 most recent tweets were chosen from each athlete's Twitter account. In total, 1,962 tweets were analyzed. Content analysis was employed to categorize and analyze the tweets. Six categories were developed based on motives predictive of online sport consumption identified by Seo and Green (2008) and Clavio (2008). Each response was sorted into the appropriate category by independent raters. Raters agreed on over 90 percent of the tweets, indicating a high level of inter-rater reliability. Where raters disagreed, differences were resolved through discussion.

The category with the most tweets was interactivity (671 tweets, 34%), indicating athletes use Twitter as a medium for direct, interpersonal communication with friends and fans. Diversion, or non-sport related communication, had the second highest number of tweets (545, 28%). Sport information directly related to the athlete's team or sport, had significantly fewer tweets than the prior non-sport related categories (298, 15%). Content (254, 13%) had the next highest number of tweets, as athletes used Twitter to direct readers to personal pictures, websites, and blogs of
athletes. The promotional category had relatively few tweets (102, 5%) as athletes did not devote much communication to promoting or publicizing upcoming sport-related events and activities. Similarly, the fanship category had the fewest tweets (92, 5%), indicating athletes did not spend much time communicating about sports other than their own.

This study was one of the first attempts to examine Twitter content as it relates to sport and understand this new and growing phenomenon. Over a third of the athlete tweets were direct interactions between users, indicating this new medium is providing a more personalized, unfiltered method of communication not found in traditional media. This finding is important, because according to Sutton et al. (1997), accessibility to players through interaction helps build fan identification, which may lead to desirable marketing outcomes like increased consumption and decreased price sensitivity to sports products (Sutton et al., 1997; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Interestingly, the vast majority of tweets were on non-sport related issues. This finding suggests Twitter is providing fans with unique insight into the personal lives of athletes on topics not found to the same extent in traditional media. Further, of the 1962 tweets analyzed, only 102 were categorized as promotional. This represents an underutilized opportunity to achieve marketing objectives through online social media. Twitter is an excellent opportunity for sport marketers and athletes to reach a captive audience as evidenced by Shaquille O'Neal's 2.5 million followers and Lance Armstrong's has 2.2 million. The study's findings suggest that while fans flock to follow these athletes, Twitter is not currently being used as a marketing tool by professional athletes.

In summary, this exploratory study sought to understand the nature of athlete tweets and the potential for Twitter to be used as a marketing tool. The study's findings suggest Twitter offers fans unprecedented accessibility to the personal lives of athletes, which may lead to increased identification with the team. However as evidenced by the lack of promotional tweets, the potential for online social media applications to be used to achieve marketing objectives has yet to be realized by athletes.