The immediacy and reach offered by digital social media has triggered a shift in the delivery of sport content, including messages containing brand information (Christ, 2005). This ever-increasing reliance on digital technology has significantly altered the sport marketing landscape, as evidenced by the obfuscation of the traditional roles of producers and consumers (Mahan & McDaniel, 2006). In fact, one particular platform—Twitter—is considered to be popular amongst both organizations and consumers alike (Clavio & Kian, 2010). Accordingly, social-mediated content (e.g., via Twitter) has become a point of emphasis in the world of sport, with sport organizations and sponsors among those turning to such innovations for communicating with consumers.

Though digital social media has experienced a rapid rise in sport communication, the phenomenon is not without boundaries. Early scholarly research in this area has suggested there are two constructs important to understanding such limits: message source (Kwak et al., 2010) and message type (Mahan, 2011). Kwak and colleagues (2010) found significant differences among certain types of online sources (i.e., mainstream vs. user-generated) on perceived expertise. This finding provides initial evidence that sport consumers perhaps ‘consider the source’ in evaluating digital-mediated messages. In addition, the authors put forth that constructs related to source credibility should be incorporated into future research in this context (Kwak et al., 2010).

In a study of consumer preferences for social-mediated sport content, Mahan (2011) offered that certain types of marketing messages may be more successful via social media. Specifically, perceived enjoyment emerged as a predictor of consumer attitudes toward using social media for sport content. As such, the author concluded that crafting messages that ‘match’ the interactivity of the medium—for example, inviting a visit to a brand website or sweepstakes entry by including a URL—may be more effective than more passive messages (e.g., those that simply include brand information).

The importance of examining message type in an online context has also been explored in the sport marketing literature. Weeks et al. (2008) investigated the use of the internet in leveraging sport sponsorship in part by manipulating the level of message ‘activation’. Activational messages are those designed to encourage consumer engagement, which may be done through tactics such as contests or sweepstakes (Weeks et al., 2008). Study findings pointed to the activational messages as influencing more positive attitudes than messages that simply included information related to the sponsorship (i.e., non-activational). While these results provide support for the utility of activational messages in a digital media context, there have been calls to extend this research into the social media sphere (e.g., Mahan, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of certain social-mediated messages by exploring the underlying factors of consumer response. Specifically, the current research explored the following hypotheses:

H1: After controlling for Involvement, messages from an official source will result in more favorable source evaluations (i.e., trustworthiness and expertise) and attitudes than messages from an unofficial source.

H2: After controlling for Involvement, activational messages will result in more favorable source evaluations (i.e., trustworthiness and expertise) and attitudes than non-activational messages.

Potential participants were recruited by e-mail from among subscribers to a sports e-newsletter published by a newspaper in a major city in the eastern United States. The pool (N=2,555) included those subscribers that expressed interest in participating in research studies by a university in the same city. A total of 603 (23.6%) responded to the invitation, with 471 (18.6%) participants completing all items. The resultant sample (n=471) was predominately male (80%), Caucasian (89%), well-educated (74% with at least Bachelor’s degree), and reported an annual income of at least $50,000 (72%).

Two mock Twitter messages (i.e., “tweets”) were developed as stimuli for the experiment. The tweets were designed to conform to the conventions of the platform (i.e., maximum of 140 characters) and all content was held constant
except for the intended message source and message type manipulations. Messages were created to depict a sponsor relationship between a professional hockey team (in the same city as the university where the research took place) and a fictitious brand and either included (activation condition) or excluded (non-activation condition) a sweepstakes offer. Source (official vs. unofficial) was manipulated by indicating the message was sent by either the team (official) or a fan club (unofficial).

The researcher sent an invitation to the participant pool via e-mail that included a URL for an online survey created using Qualtrics survey software. Participants responded to a series of survey items related to internet-related behaviors (e.g., social media use) and demographics. Personal relevance of the specific professional hockey team utilized in the study was assessed using a five-item version of Zaichkowsky’s (1994) Personal Involvement Inventory. Participants were then randomly assigned (by Qualtrics) to view one of four treatment conditions. Following the timed exposure (60 seconds), participants responded to dependent measures, including Trustworthiness and Expertise subscales of Ohanian’s Celebrity Endorser-Credibility Scale and a four-item attitude toward-the-ad measure (Karson & Fisher, 1995).

Validity and reliability of all scaled measures was in line with existing research (e.g., Karson & Fisher, 1995; Ohanian, 1990). Results of a series of 2 (source) x 2 (message) ANCOVAs revealed significant source and message main effects across the dependent variables yet there were no significant interaction effects. A significant source main effect (p < .001) was found for both dimensions of credibility (i.e., trustworthiness and expertise) as well as for attitudes toward the ad (p < .001), providing full support for H1. Conversely, message main effects were significant (p < .001) for expertise (not trustworthiness) and attitudes (p < .05), demonstrating partial support of H2.

The above results generally support the literature in that varying source and message type can influence consumer response to sport marketing messages (e.g., Weeks et al., 2008). The current study extends existing research into a social media context and, as such, provides a foundation for future scholarly inquiry into the effectiveness of social media as a sport marketing platform. Similarly, the results herein can serve to inform sport marketing practice by pointing to the importance of utilizing the interactivity afforded by technological innovations, such as Twitter, in designing sport marketing messages. Given that social media is becoming more and more accepted as a ‘new frontier’ in sport marketing (Morrison, 2010), industry professionals perhaps could benefit from a greater understanding of this medium.