

Twitter and Sports: Analyzing the Rapid Ascent of a Line of Literature and its Future Direction

Stephen Dittmore, University of Arkansas
Jimmy Sanderson, Clemson University
Galen Clavio, Indiana University
Ann Pegoraro, Laurentian University

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Perhaps no technological innovation has altered the way in which sports brands, athletes and consumers interact more than the way Twitter has since it burst upon the sport business scene. From hashtags painted on football fields to Twitter handles placed on uniforms, the reach of Twitter has been wide and swift.

Researchers have worked equally as fast to apply theoretical frameworks to understand why individuals use Twitter in consuming sport, as well as why and how athletes and organizations use Twitter for marketing and public relations purposes. In addition, the instantaneous nature of Twitter has fundamentally altered the way in which sports journalists approach their job (Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012).

Twitter is “a real-time information network that connects [users] to the latest stories, ideas, opinions and news about what [they] find interesting” (About Twitter, n.d.). The network has grown by leaps and bounds since its inception in 2006 with more than 15% of online adults using Twitter, with 8% of online adults using it daily (Smith & Brenner, 2012). Utilizing only 140 characters at a time, users are able to write short, concise, and timely posts that appear in a timeline in reverse chronological order.

While all social media sites have revolutionized sport consumption, it appears Twitter is the social media channel of choice for sport stakeholders (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Hutchins (2011, p. 250) concluded this evolving form of communication has facilitated “changes in athlete self-expression and representation, journalist behaviour and reporting, and sports organization communications practices and policies.” Indeed, sport organizations are using Twitter to engage fans via promotion and marketing activities and athletes are employing Twitter to build personal brands (Pegoraro and Jinnah, 2012). Broadcast networks have begun to take advantage of a “second screen” phenomenon and are encouraging dialogue on Twitter as fans watch live sports.

The scholarly literature on Twitter is still in its infancy, yet most work encompasses two theoretical trajectories: (a) uses and gratifications theory; and (b) parasocial interaction. With respect to uses and gratifications, Hambrick et al. (2010) analyzed 510 professional athletes’ Twitter accounts and discovered they used Twitter in the following ways: (a) interactivity; (b) diversion; (c) information sharing; (d) linking to content; and (e) fanship. Clavio and Kian (2010) surveyed followers of a retired female athlete and discovered that participants followed this athlete because they perceived her to be an expert in her sport and possessed affinity for her writing style. They also discovered three gratification factors: (a) organic fandom - such as viewing the athlete as a role model and perceived entertainment value of the athlete; (b) functional fandom - composed of impersonal elements of fandom such as purchasing the athlete’s products; and (c) interaction - containing elements of fandom linked to the Twitter experience, such as interacting with the athlete and camaraderie with other followers. Pegoraro (2010) examined 49 professional athletes’ Twitter feeds and discovered that athletes primarily used Twitter to post content about their personal life and to answer questions from fans.

Parasocial interaction (PSI) also has been fruitfully applied to Twitter research in sports. Kassing and Sanderson (2010) explored tweets from American and English cyclists during the 2009 Tour de Italy and found that they cyclists tweets enhanced immediacy with fans as athletes provided commentary, fostered interactivity and promoted insider perspectives. Kassing and Sanderson suggested that Twitter may promote more of a social versus a parasocial relationship. In that vein, Frederick et al. (in press) examined the differences between athletes whose tweets promoted social versus parasocial interaction. The results indicated that athletes who used Twitter in more

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social ways fostered interpersonal closeness with followers. In other words, athletes who used Twitter in ways that engaged followers in more of a two-way than a one-way conversation heightened attributes in followers (e.g., perceived realism) that mimicked actual, social relationships.

Additional work on Twitter has utilized social network analysis to explore information dissemination in Twitter communities (Clavio et al., in press; Hambrick, 2012); how sports journalists use Twitter to frame sports news (Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012); and using dialogical self-theory to investigate how student athletes perceive and respond to critical tweets from fans (Browning & Sanderson, in press).

Practical uses of Twitter in the sport industry initially clustered around the communication functions of sport teams and their associated media. Investigations by scholars (e.g., Schultz & Sheffer, 2010; Sheffer & Schultz, 2010) into sports journalists' perceptions of Twitter as a work tool revealed considerable generational gaps within that industry. Other studies of Twitter in sports have revealed its use as a media bypass mechanism, allowing fans and athletes to communicate directly with one another (e.g., Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). Twitter also plays a growing role in the public relations aspects of sport teams, both in terms of the official team public relations efforts (Dittmore et al, under review) and in relation to college athletes' utilization of the medium (Sanderson, 2011). As sports fans and consumers continue to adopt Twitter as a regular form of communication, the practical uses of the medium are bound to expand exponentially, affecting management, marketing, and sales functions in sport generally, and compliance and donor relations in collegiate sport specifically.

Twitter research in sports is in its youth, a characteristic it shares with other academic disciplines. Work on Twitter in these spheres is valuable to sports management and communication researchers and can greatly inform further research. For instance, Schmierbach and Oledorf-Hirsch (2012) found that college students perceived news reported via a mainstream media organization's Twitter feed to be less credible than news reported on the same organization's website. Similarly, Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) studied news storytelling on Twitter and noted that the resulting intermingling of news, opinion, and emotion made it difficult to discern between these constructs. Do similar perceptions exist amongst consumers of sports news? This is but one of many future directions.

The purpose of this symposium, therefore, is to examine the trajectory of Twitter research in sport during the past five years, and to provide a platform for open dialogue about both its current state and its future applications. The symposium format allows for a much-needed open dialogue about the theoretical and practical implications of Twitter in sport, and the application of existing research to areas of sport beyond simply communication and marketing.

The symposium format will include an overview of key literature in Twitter and sports, and an illustration of the research line's development over the past five years. Following this, a directed discussion will take place between the panelists, inviting contributions and questions from the audience. Key elements of this discussion will focus on the primary theoretical implications of existing Twitter research in sport, its connections with other social media research, the expanding realm of practical application across the sport management spectrum, and conceptualizations of the near-term future of research in Twitter and sport.