From the Driver's Seat: Fan Expectations of IndyCar Driver Twitter Usage

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Research into Twitter in a sports-centric context has largely focused on content producers and/or those who compose and publish tweets. Research into these producers and the content they produce includes examinations of individual athletes (Blair & Sanderson, 2012; Danylchuk, 2012; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwall, 2010), teams (Price, Farrington, & Hall, 2013), and sport organizations (Campos, Anagnostopoulos, & Chadwick, 2013). This study attempts to differentiate itself by looking at the followers of individual athletes and what they expect from those athletes on Twitter.

The sport of IndyCar racing is at the top echelon of open-wheel racing in the United States and represents an interesting and relevant avenue from which to study Twitter audience expectations. This is because the IndyCar series is an individual sport that relies heavily on the star power of its drivers to fuel interest in the sport. In turn, it is important to understand audience desires for those stars on the rapidly growing social-media avenue of Twitter—a medium that every driver on the IndyCar Series uses.

To better understand the expectations and motivations of various IndyCar drivers’ Twitter audiences, this study uses a Uses and Gratifications framework. Uses and Gratification is a common approach for studying new media audiences because it is rooted in the belief that the audience is active and aware of the choices it makes when choosing what media to consume (Ruggiero, 2000). This approach is also effective for understanding audience motivations (i.e. goals) for their media consumption (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974).

These elements of the Uses and Gratifications approach has made it an effective tool for researchers to study audiences on social media. Clavio and Kian (2010) used this approach to study the followers of a retired female tennis player's Twitter followers. Browning and Sanderson (2012) examined student-athletes use of Twitter through a Uses and Gratifications framework. Previous research also suggests that an athletes’ level of interaction with their Twitter followers affects their followers feeling of closeness to them. This research suggests that athletes who are more social on Twitter create follower bases who feel more engaged with them (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012).

With this research in mind, we propose the following research question:

RQ1: What traits of IndyCar drivers do their Twitter followers report as the ones they want to see the drivers display on Twitter?

This study explores the expectations Twitter users possess when they follow IndyCar Series drivers on Twitter. These expectations were determined by asking users what traits they want to see from those drivers when they follow them on Twitter. This data was gleaned from an open-ended question included in a survey designed by the researchers and tweeted out by the official IndyCar Twitter feed, as well as from a number of official driver and team accounts.

Similar to the approach used by Clavio and Kian (2010), when they asked a retired tennis player to post a survey on their Twitter account, a number of IndyCar drivers were asked to post a link to a survey on their Twitter accounts in September 2013. Most prominently, the official Indycar Twitter account (@IndyCar) tweeted the survey link on numerous occasions and also retweeted tweets from drivers asking followers to fill out the survey. From this link, 574 usable surveys were collected. The survey included the question “Please list three aspects or traits of IndyCar drivers that you like to see in their Twitter accounts.” Of the 574 surveys collected, 170 of them indicated a response to this question. These free-form responses varied in length from one or two words to entire sentences.
To understand these submissions from Twitter users, a textual analysis will be performed. Rooted in grounded theory, this is a qualitative analysis method which allows the researcher to understand and identity themes in the text. To identity the overarching themes expressed by the survey participants, responses will be read multiple times and commonly used descriptors will be placed in overarching thematic categories. Once this occurs, the categories will be discussed among the researchers and further refined to better represent the emerging themes coming from multiple coding cycles of the Twitter users’ responses. This continuing process of pruning and development is common in qualitative research of this nature (Browning & Sanderson, 2012).

Discussion of the results of the textual analysis will revolve around the results’ theoretical and practical implications. Theoretical implications include advancing researchers understanding of Twitter users’ motivations for following athlete accounts on Twitter and the expectations this particular audience has for those athletes. These results will also add to what is at a present, a small body of research on Twitter followers of professional athletes. In an effort to advance that research body, the categories which emerge from the analysis will be compared and contrasted to existing Uses and Gratifications research on Twitter audiences (e.g., Clavio & Kian, 2010; Clavio & Walsh, 2013).

Practical implications include the ability for IndyCar drivers to understand what their followers want to see from them on Twitter. Understanding the desires of one’s audience, is the first key to crafting an effective message for them. As IndyCar struggles to grow an audience in the United States because of its minimal television ratings and coverage, these results will help the racing circuit understand the expectations of their Twitter audience. This will help them provide the content their audience desires and in turn help grow that audience through the emerging online medium of Twitter.