Fitness Communication: An Examination of Fitness Messages on Twitter

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Although social media research has received an increasing amount of attention among academics, there still is a lack of published material in many disciplines. Within the sport industry, the fitness sector has received little, if any, attention in terms of social media research. This is problematic due to the importance placed on exercise and fitness in our society. In the United States alone, there are over 50 million health club members and over 30,000 health club facilities (IHRSA Global Report, 2013). Additionally, the fitness and health club industry totaled over 21 billion dollars in revenue in the United States in 2012 (IHRSA Global Report, 2013). Therefore, the current study examined Twitter messages among fitness/health clubs. Specifically, we used content analysis to place tweets from top fitness/health clubs in order to develop an understanding of the types of messages used by such accounts. The following research questions guide this study:

RQ1: What types of messages are used by fitness and health clubs on Twitter?
RQ2: Are the types of messages used by fitness and health clubs on Twitter different from messages used by other entities in the sport industry?

The fitness sector is included in the overarching field of sport, but the products and services provided are unique to the industry. The fitness segment of the sport industry includes the fitness-related businesses and certified personnel that manufacture, instruct, and operate exercise-related goods and services (Williams & Pedersen, 2012). Additionally, fitness communication has been defined as the process by which fitness practitioners inform, influence, and motivate about health, sport, and fitness-related services in a fitness setting (Williams, 2012). Therefore, the current study will be the first attempt to categorize organizational communication from an online source in the fitness and health club context.

To date, social media research in sport has examined a number of different areas including, but not limited to, social identify on Facebook (Sanderson, 2013), social media utilization in college athletics (Clavio & Walsh, 2013), and motivations for following athletes on Twitter (Frederick et al., 2012). Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, and Greenwell (2010) examined Twitter use among professional athletes to better understand the communication that occurs between athletes and their fans. Many of the social media studies in sport have applied the uses and gratifications theory, which was initially used to understand audience involvement in mass communication (Blumler, 1979). More recently, uses and gratifications theory has been used to understand how and why users engage in particular communication activities (Ruggiero, 2000). With regard to social networks, uses and gratifications theory may help explain Twitter’s impressive growth (Hambrick et al., 2010). Therefore, the current study aims to examine the types of messages utilized by popular fitness and health clubs on Twitter in order to better understand the benefits and motivations of such messages. Ultimately, this study will provide an opportunity for researchers to understand what users can gain from following health and fitness clubs on Twitter and, perhaps more importantly, what they miss by opting not to follow these accounts.

Previous social media research in sport has identified six categories of tweets for professional athletes (Hambrick et al., 2010). These categories include interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content, fanship, and promotional. While it is expected that some of the categories will be consistent in the current study, we also anticipate including other categories better suited to fit the context of the fitness industry (e.g., motivation). Therefore, we conducted a pilot study of a health club’s Twitter account not included in the forthcoming analyses to better understand what types of categories we are likely to find. In the pilot study we placed tweets in the following categories identified by previous sport-related research (i.e., Clavio, 2008; Hambrick et al., 2010): interactivity, information sharing, and content. In addition, based on the pilot study, we anticipate placing tweets into the following additional categories: motivation and external information (e.g., nutritional information or workout routines not from the club’s website).
In order to complete this research, the following methodological steps will be taken. First, to identify fitness clubs for our analyses, we used a ranking of the top fitness and health clubs from a reputable source in the fitness industry (www.clubindustry.com). The online version of the Club Industry Fitness magazine ranks the top 100 fitness clubs based on factors such as revenue, revenue change, number of locations, number of states of locations, number of employees, and number of locations to open in the subsequent year. Using the 2012 rankings, we plan to include the top 20 fitness clubs with Twitter accounts in our analyses. Second, we will categorize the 100 most recent tweets from each account, which will provide an acceptable amount of Tweets based on previous studies (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2010; Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012). Content analysis will be then be employed to examine and categorize tweets from our sample. This method has been chosen due to the use in previous similar studies (Hambrick et al., 2010) and its ability to identify core consistencies and meanings of qualitative material (Patton, 2002). Two raters will code each tweet independently and place them into one of the proposed categories (e.g., interactivity, information sharing, content, motivation and external information). If tweets do not fit into any of the proposed categories, new categories will be developed and agreed upon by the raters based on the theme of the tweet and the new category will be a placement option for subsequently coded tweets. After the tweets have been placed into the respective categories, our analyses will aim to answer the study’s two research questions. Ultimately, this study should provide insight into the types of messages used by fitness and health clubs on Twitter, enhancing the comprehension of social media communication in an encouraging, but unexplored, sector of sport.