A Cross-National Comparative Thematic Analysis of National Sport Organizations’ Twitter Activity

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Introduction and Purpose
The popularity of the microblogging service, Twitter, has impacted sport management research (Hutchins, 2010; 2011). Indeed, scholarship has examined the phenomenon in several contexts, ranging from issues in US collegiate athletics (e.g., Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Sanderson, 2011; Smith, 2011), fan interactions during a sporting event (e.g., Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Norman, 2012), sport journalism (e.g., Deprez, Mechant, & Hoebeke, 2013; Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012; Sheffer & Schultz, 2010), and professional athlete engagement (e.g., Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2014; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Lebel & Danylick, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010). But despite these recent examinations, Norman (2012) argued that microblogging, and Twitter in particular, “remains an understudied medium by sport scholars” (p. 310) due to the complexities of extracting data from big data sources (Jacobs, 2009), and the inability of scholars to conceptualize Twitter to truly advance sport communication (e.g., Billings, 2014; Hardin, 2014; Hutchins, 2014; Pedersen, 2014; Rowe, 2014).

With respect to organizations, though traditional ways of communicating are still important, social and new media provide a convenient and potentially more cost effective platform to connect to stakeholders (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). As such, given the opportunities that social media presents for not-for-profit organizations (NSOs; Curtis et al., 2009). Thus, the purpose of this presentation is to build upon the existing foundation of sport-Twitter scholarship (see Pegoraro, 2014) and introduce not-for-profit sport organizations into that discourse. Specifically, we seek to understand 1) how are NSOs utilizing Twitter to present themselves to external audiences; and 2) what are the differences and similarities of Twitter presentation between NSOs?

Theoretical Framework
Social presence theory is employed to frame this research. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), there are two dimensions to social media: Social presence and self-presentation. Social presence theory (SPT), as conceptualized by Short et al. (1976), suggests that media differs in their “presence” that they allow to emerge between two parties who are communicating to one another. Presence can be affected by the nature of the interaction, with multiple variables affecting it (e.g., synchronous/real time vs. asynchronous/delayed communication). But social presence can also be dictated in the richness (i.e., quality) of the media. Within communication, one of the primary goals is to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty in the message (see Daft & Lengel, 1986). In the social media context, SPT and the richness of the media can explain communication habits and processes when face-to-face interactions are limited or unavailable (see Keil & Johnson, 2002). The second dimension of social media is self-presentation, a concept connected with literature on impression management (see Leary & Kowalski, 1990). As Goffman (1959) documented, individuals seek to control the impression of their self to others. For instance, Schau and Gilly (2003) discussed self-presentation in terms of creating personal webpages for a virtual representation of their self. Indeed, the two dimensions of social media are useful in conceptualizing social media presence. We are interested in how not-for-profit sport organizations (i.e., NSOs) are presenting themselves to their stakeholders on social media.

Methodology
We are using a qualitative phenomenological method of inquiry (Creswell, 2013), a design best suited to explain “shared experiences” (p. 81) which, in this instance, are that of NSOs on Twitter. A purposeful sampling technique with a thematic analysis is used to allow for holistic assertions. The purposeful sample consists of NSO twitter feeds (the unit of analysis) from three jurisdictions: Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The purposeful sample is derived from that of Girginov et al.’s (2009) work. NSOs selected represented the following sports: Alpine skiing, athletics, badminton, (ten-pin) bowling, cycling, gymnastics, ice hockey, rowing, swimming, and volleyball.
However, when assessed for their fit in this study (i.e., if the NSO had a Twitter account), it was revealed that the governing body of ten-pin bowling Canada did not have a feed. Therefore, it was removed, and left nine sports remaining. In addition to extracting data from multiple sports, data would also be extracted from NSO Twitter accounts in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. These three jurisdictions offer similar socio-economic contexts and have similar sport systems, with some variations in structure and resources allotted (e.g., financial). Thus, in total, 27 feeds are being assessed from nine sports and three nations; the NSOs chosen represent a ratio (3.5:1) of summer to winter sports, a similar figure based upon current Olympic offerings (i.e., 4:1). In addition, two out of the nine NSOs selected belong to the (Canadian) “Big Six”, and have significant revenues through corporate sponsorship (i.e., alpine skiing and ice hockey; Seguin, Teed, & O'Reilly, 2005).

Tweets from each of the 27 feeds will be downloaded and parsed to address the research questions proposed. To do so, the NCapture software component, an arm of the NVIVO qualitative analysis tool (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013), is used. NCapture is able to download a maximum of 3,200 tweets from a particular feed’s history (a number rate limited by Twitter themselves). The extraction of data will include the most recent tweets (i.e., up to 3,200 recent historical tweets – the maximum allotted by Twitter, although some accounts may have less than the maximum). The total number of tweets from all 27 accounts is expected to be well beyond the 1,200-tweet benchmark set by previous Twitter and sport research (cf. Frederick et al., 2014; Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). Once all tweets are organized, they will be analyzed for themes using Leximancer (an automated thematic analysis tool). Leximancer is able to perform automated thematic analyses (and visual concept maps), and thus is beneficial in terms of limiting the expense of time, financial, and human resources (see also Sotiriadou, Brouwers, & Le, 2014). Data collection and analysis will occur in November 2014 and retrieve up to 3,200 tweets per organization. Data will be parsed using NVIVO and analyzed using Leximancer over a two-week period. The results of the thematic analysis will be presented at the conference.

Findings that emanate from this study will tell us how NSOs present themselves using a social media platform (i.e., Twitter) given their constraints on resources. In knowing what sport organizations in similar categories (e.g., seasonal based and activity based) are presenting on social media sites like Twitter, managers are able to use this knowledge in their decision making processes to align their social media presentation in a similar or dissimilar fashion (i.e. mimetic behaviour or differentiation tactic). As an empirical work, the study builds upon social media and not-for-profit sport organization research through a cross-national comparative in addition to extracting presentation of the NSOs over an extended period of time. While Abeza and O'Reilly (2014) looked at NSOs and social media previously, their work was delimited to a three-week period, 5% of a calendar year. As the current study examines social media presentation that has been extracted over an elongated period (i.e., tweets are not limited by date, but by quantity), it is able to better capture the phenomena under review and position future discussions to engage in explanatory works such as network analyses and depth interviews with practitioners.