Advancing Social Media Research

Nicholas Watanabe, University of Missouri
Ann Pegoraro, Laurentian University
Grace Yan, University of Missouri
Michael Naraine, University of Ottawa
Rebecca Achen, Illinois State University

Communication

Thursday, June 2, 2016

Abstract 2016-058

2:05 PM

60-minute symposium, roundtable, or workshop (Legacy South 1)

Recent publications by Filo, Lock, and Karg (2014) and Abeza, O’Reilly, Séguin, and Nzindukiyamana (Forthcoming) reviewing the literature of sport social media studies highlighted the need to advance this area of research beyond its current realm. That is, in analyzing 70 published sport management related social media papers, the authors noted that many of these studies have followed similar theoretical and methodological approaches. It is exactly because of this research trajectory, that debate over the suitability of using Twitter and other forms of social media to conduct research has emerged (Wenner, 2014). One heavy criticism of using platforms such as Twitter is that these platforms provide venues for researchers to be able to collect and analyze small samples of data with relatively little effort (Hardin, 2014), thus leading to repetition in research contexts and themes (Hutchins, 2014).

Considering this, Wenner (2014) argues the need for those working with various forms of social media to carefully contemplate how they may continue to evolve their research so that it will be valuable and have long lasting impact in academia. Reflecting on this and the growing interest and publication of social media research in sport, this panel will provide a forum for discussion on these topics and the debate around social media research. Additionally, through gathering academics with wide ranging expertise - network analysis, economics and consumer behavior, communications and management, sociology and cultural studies, marketing – this panel will provide insight into how research can explore a range of new theoretical and methodological approaches in studying social media in a sport context.

Abeza et al. (Forthcoming) specifically call for the need for more advanced data collection, highlighting programs that have been designed in order to organize and capture large quantities of social media data. To help address data collection and analysis concerns, the panel members will also highlight a number of specific programs including Netlytic, NodeXL, Leximancer, and other software that allows for everything from analyzing user generated content, all the way to visualizing advanced spatial networks. Additionally, the panel will discuss how statistical methods such as multilevel modeling can be used to examine interaction and other outcomes on these platforms. Thus, the proposed panel will focus on the following areas of specialized discussion with the goal of highlighting how social media research can continue to make important contributions to the sport management research.

Finding the Right Recipe: Advancing Social Media Data Collection and Analysis in Sport

One of the issues identified by social media research in sport (cf. Abeza et al., Forthcoming; Filo et al., 2014) is the need to move beyond the current methods of data collection and analysis. Collecting data from social media can pose a challenge from an ethical (e.g., requiring ethical review for a scraping of comments on a sport organization’s Facebook page) and technical (e.g., how to go about scraping data from a social media platform) standpoint. While the former is certainly cause for debate, the latter is often more challenging for sport management scholars to mitigate, particularly for those who are unfamiliar with the current capabilities of popular social media data collection and analysis tools. Here, we introduce platforms that have been previously utilized in sport management research such as NodeXL (e.g., Hambrick & Pegoraro, 2015), NCapture (e.g., Abeza, Pegoraro, Naraine, Séguin, & O’Reilly, 2015), and others that have yet to be incorporated into the discourse (e.g., Netlytic) with the intent of assisting scholars in “finding the right recipe” for future social media research. Specifically, we show how name networks emerge from datasets to produce sociograms that can contribute to a scholarly understanding of community, interaction, and influence in a social media network.

Sport Social Media Dynamics: From a Sociological Perspective
The communicative patterns of social media have changed the traditional landscape of sport communication by allowing for more communicative interactivity, flexibility, and social connectivity through user-generated content (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Murthy, 2012). From this, it presents manifolds of sociological questions.

Firstly, from the perspective of making representations, a transformation of sport fans from passive media consumers into active participants in making and distributing sport representations can be captured (Deller, 2011; Jenkins, 2006). Whereas traditional media is often believed to play the role of the gatekeeper for sport knowledge, the questions are how active participation have created different dynamics of knowledge construction through sport social media. In other words, have digital technologies enabled us to subvert hegemony and power agendas in sport, or reinforce them, or perhaps create complicated patterns of both?

Secondly, whenever individuals deploy digital media, there will be reimaginings, revisionings, and remakings of a range of representations athletes, sporting events, and so forth (Deller, 2011). An exploration of changing textual and pictorial representations of sport social media content circulated at different levels will thus allow us to understand the power of individual agencies – the greater autonomy of sport audiences as we enter the new era of sport media.

Thirdly, in addition to the overarching framework of knowledge production and power, it is also important to understand that sport social media composes a critical context where “capillaries of power” (Foucault, 1977, 1982) flows between networks and individuals from moment to moment. To investigate the dynamics of relationships between fans, athletes, teams, and other stakeholders on social media is thus to understand how power exists in and circulates through day-to-day activities of sport communication, through millions of interpersonal moments in which concepts such as “masculinity” or “femininity” is reinforced, policed, or resisted (Marwick, 2012).

An Economic Approach to Analyzing Social Media in Sport

Social media research in sport has yet to focus on the economics of use of and behaviors on these and other Web 2.0 platforms. Generally, while some researchers have considered factors such as motivations and other demographics which may be related to social media use, the positioning of these studies have not placed emphasis on economic theory or methods. At the same time, the use of social media has been theorized to be part of a “Like-economy” where the use and interactions that occur on social media are considered to be micro-transactions. Along these lines, understanding the economics of social media use is of increasing importance, especially as organizations eek to understand the value of creating, develop, and managing content and interactions with consumers.

Recent research (Jensen, Ervin, & Dittmore; 2014; Watanabe, Yan, & Soebbing, 2015) has begun to explore the value that social media following and interactions may have for sport entities. Jensen et al. (2014) for example, use social media following as a way to measure the popularity that individuals have in college coaches. Similarly, Watanabe et al. (2014) argue that the following of sport teams on Twitter can be considered to be a form of derived demand, especially in that social media interactions can serve as an input into the marketing and sales campaigns of sport organizations (Borland & Macdonald, 2003).

Thus, the economic approach to examining social media is one which can help to build better understanding of the behaviors of individuals on these platforms. In this, it is possible to not only use economic theory and models to try and estimate how and why individuals may choose to interact with other users, but it may also be able to provide the financial value of operating on these platforms. Furthermore, an economic approach to social media can also provide useful tools for analysis through econometrics, which may be of greater importance in future years as researchers move away from examining small data sets, and focus on a Big Data approach to social media research.

A Relational Perspective on Social Media Strategy and Measurement in Sport

Social media meet relationship marketing goals when organizations use them to understand customer needs, increase their satisfaction, and enhance relationship value for customers (Abeza, O’Reilly, & Reid, 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010). While relationship marketing is commonly used as a theoretical framework in social media studies (Filo, et al., 2014), it has not been used as a driving strategy for measurement. Social media are unlike traditional forms of media and marketing communications. The two-way nature of these platforms supports interaction between sport teams and fans, which helps to build relational bonds.
Thompson, Martin, Gee, & Eagleman (2014) suggested social media be measured based on its ability to help organization’s reach their specific objectives. If social media are going to be used to build relationships with customers, as researchers have suggested they should, then they should be measured by their ability to do so. Connecting the literature on relationship marketing measurement to the research on best practices for social media use, which suggest organizations build conversation and interact with customers, provides a potential answer to how sport organizations should measure social media use outcomes. This perspective allows marketers to see social media as part of a larger strategy to retain fans and encourage long-term loyalty. Statistical tools such as multilevel modeling and structural equation modeling allow researchers to systematically analyze engagement on social media networks and survey data to make connections between social media as marketing tools and customer relationships.

Considering the wide range of perspectives, methodologies, and viewpoints which will be represented in this forum, another focus of this panel will be to extend the discussion of social media research in sport. Furthermore, the ability to bring a number of experienced social media researchers together also can help to advance the dialogue centered on critical and emerging issues in sport social media studies. In this manner, this panel will not only reveal new and innovative approaches to conducting research in sport, but will also foster discussions which could help to develop new linkages and projects to help advance academic studies.