One Nation One Team: An Examination of the 2015 U.S. Women’s Soccer National Team Players’ Self-Presentation on Twitter

Matthew Blaszka, Indiana State University
Molly Hayes Sauder, York College of Pennsylvania

Abstract 2016-166

Social media has changed the way athletes communicate, giving them the opportunity to bypass public relations departments of sport organizations or mainstream media outlets (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhaigh & Greenwell, 2010) and connect directly with their fans (Clavio & Kian, 2010). With over 360 million monthly active users (Twitter, 2015), Twitter is an especially popular social media platform and its use has become second nature to many athletes. Athletes can disseminate short, 140 character bursts of information to their Twitter followers thereby developing a vehicle through which they can converse, self-promote and endorse products they sponsor.

Set in the landscape of research exploring Twitter in sport (e.g. Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012; Clavio, Burch, & Frederick, 2012; Clavio & Kian, 2010; Reichart-Smith & Smith, 2012; Sanderson, 2011) are several studies that have examined athlete usage of Twitter. Hambrick et al. (2010) and Pegoraro (2010) developed content categories to more fully understand how athletes engage fans through this social media platform. Both found that athletes were using Twitter to interact, rather than for promotional purposes (Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). In 2012, Frederick, Lim, Clavio, and Walsh examined both a social and parasocial athlete’s followers. The social athlete was viewed as more interactive than the parasocial athlete. Research also shows that Twitter allows athletes to be unique and to develop their brands (Blaszka, 2015). Finally, studies by Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) and Hull (2014) explored the self-presentation strategies of athletes on Twitter, a topic of importance since “one of the more compelling capabilities” of information and communication technologies like Twitter is that they enable “individuals to strategically and selectively self-present to the public” (Sanderson, 2008, p. 912).

Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) examined self-presentation strategies of both male and female athletes on Twitter during the 2011 U.S. Open Tennis Championship. The authors developed a coding protocol that featured six backstage frames and four front-stage frames, consistent with Goffman’s (1959) notion that people engage in both candid “backstage” performances and calculated, professional “front-stage” performances while navigating social interactions in order to create a desirable image for the world. The study found that the majority of tweets for all athletes could be categorized as backstage; however, gender differences were also apparent as male athletes paid greater attention to sports outside of tennis than female athletes and female athletes spent more energy on brand management than male athletes (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). Hull (2014) extended the work on self-presentation and Twitter at the 2013 Masters Golf Tournament, finding that the golfers predominantly used tweets that could be classified as front-stage. Further, the golfers used Twitter to engage with fans, a result consistent with prior research on athletes and Twitter (Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010).

Responding to calls for research on female athletes’ self-presentation on Twitter during major sporting events (Hull, 2014) and the inclusion of athletes on team sports as a new focus (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012), the purpose of this study was to examine the U.S. Women’s National Soccer Team players’ self-presentation on Twitter. Specifically, this study examined the 23 players’ tweets before, during, and after the 2015 World Cup. Women’s soccer is a particularly intriguing area for research; as Coche (2014) notes, while women’s athletics in America is still subject to forms of institutional inequality (especially with respect to underrepresentation in the traditional mass media), women’s soccer has demonstrated on multiple occasions that it can attract an audience. Thus, this study may have significant practical applications for the sport industry while it simultaneously serves to advance the academic literature on the subject of athlete self-presentation on social media.

Tweets were collected through online data collection software known as NVIVO10. NVIVO10 is text analytic software that allows researchers to capture web content directly from web pages or social media sites and import it as a static data set. Tweets were collected over a 90-day period from each of the 23 U.S. Women’s National Soccer team players that participated in the 2015 Women’s World Cup. The tweets were broken down into three time
frames, “before” the World Cup, “during” the World Cup, and “after” the World Cup. Each tweet collected is being coded as part of the data set, yielding a sample size of 2,613, which is consistent with acceptable sample sizes of sport communication research examining Twitter (i.e. Blaszka et al., 2012; Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010).

Content-analysis methods were then used to analyze the tweets; the ten coding categories from Lebel and Danylchuk’s (2012) self-presentation research were adopted. The units of analysis were type of tweet, time of tweet, self-presentation tweet focus, number of retweets, and if the tweet was a retweet, the source that originally tweeted it. Prior to conducting the analysis, Alyssa Naeher’s 34 tweets were used as a practice set so that concerns could be identified and resolved. Then, two independent coders coded a 20% subsample (516 tweets) of the data set to achieve intercoder reliability. Per Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (2008), 10-20% of the subsample is acceptable to establish intercoder reliability. All Fleiss kappa coefficients were deemed at the acceptable level of 92.4.

To date, 16 of the 23 Women’s National Team Soccer players have been coded which equates to a total of 1,880 tweets. Of the 1,880 tweets analyzed, 645 (34.3%) were collected before the World Cup, 579 (30.8%) were collected during the World Cup, and 656 (34.9%) of the tweets were collected after the World Cup. Individual players tweeted at varying levels during this 90-day data collection period. For example, so far Carli Lloyd (255 tweets) was the most active while May Rodriguez (17 tweets) was the least active.

At present, the most salient self-presentation categories amongst all players were the Informer (530, 28.2%), the Publicist (380, 20.2%), and the Conversationalist (278, 14.8%). Of the 530 tweets in the Informer category, 91% were retweets; players were retweeting mostly the media, official World Cup communication, and various soccer organizations. The least salient categories were the Superintendent (8, 0.4%), the Superfan (20, 1.1%), and the Brand Manager (42, 2.2%). More in-depth analysis will occur once all 23 players are coded, but initial findings prove to be intriguing with respect to prior research. For instance, Hull’s (2014) work found athletes spending relatively little time using Twitter to promote themselves or their sponsors, but players on the U.S. Women’s Soccer National Team frequently assumed the Publicist role to do just this when tweeting. A similarity can be found between the athletes in this present research and Lebel and Danylchuk’s (2012) study in that the Conversationalist role was commonly used in both.

The initial findings also demonstrate that each member of the team is unique in her self-presentation, which is an interesting result within the previously unexplored team sport context. Further, the data shows that the overall amount of tweeting remained relatively stable before, during, and after the World Cup; these numbers can provide some insight into the athletes’ views on the importance of Twitter under varying external circumstances. Additional analyses will continue this preliminary work and also focus on a number of other topics, including differences in athletes’ use of self-presentation strategies across the three time frames, as well as exploration of relationships between each self-presentation category and the frequency at which these different types of communication were retweeted.

In sum, the interesting preliminary results from this study suggest that the final analysis will yield findings that can meaningfully contribute to both the academic literature and the sport industry.

References


