

---

## CASE STUDY

---

*International Journal of Sport Communication*, 2010, 3, 501-514  
© 2010 Human Kinetics, Inc.

# Look Who's Talking—Athletes on Twitter: A Case Study

**Ann Pegoraro**

Laurentian University, Canada

This case study investigated athletes' use of a specific social-media platform—Twitter. Social media are a rising force in marketing and have been fully embraced by the sport industry, with teams, leagues, coaches, athletes, and managers establishing presences. Primarily these presences have been focused on Twitter, a microblogging site that allows users to post their personal thoughts in 140 characters or less. Athletes, in particular, have engaged in tweeting at a fast pace, which raises the question, What are they saying? This case study investigated the tweets of athletes over a 7-d period in an attempt to answer that question. The findings indicate that athletes are talking predominantly about their personal lives and responding to fans' queries through Twitter. The results indicate that Twitter is a powerful tool for increasing fan-athlete interaction.

**Keywords:** social media, sport fans, fan engagement, sport communication

In their very short history, social media have had a profound effect on sport, as many leagues, teams, and athletes have embraced these platforms as a way to talk directly about their lives without having their messages filtered by any marketing or public relations figures. Perhaps the most-adopted social-media tool has been Twitter; the entire sports world is obsessed with the microblogging platform (Johnson, 2009). Twitter has brought fans closer to their sport heroes because it allows athletes to communicate as openly and honestly as they wish without any third-party mediation.

Of course this type of open communication, which “peels back the curtain on an athlete's existence, showcasing personality layers never seen at press conferences” (Johnson, 2009), is not without its controversies. For every Twitter success (e.g., Lance Armstrong, Shaquille O'Neal), there are Twitter disasters. For example, Charlie Villaneuva, a player on the Milwaukee Bucks, tweeted from his cell phone during halftime and got fined by the National Basketball Association (NBA; Johnson, 2009). Mark Cuban, owner of the Dallas Mavericks, was fined \$25,000 for criticizing the referees after a game on Twitter (Sefko, 2009). Antonio Cromartie of the San Diego Chargers tweeted about the food at training camp being “nasty” and was fined \$2,500 by his team (Azpiri, 2009). And in perhaps in the most famous

---

The author is with the School of Sports Administration, Laurentian University, Greater Sudbury, ON, Canada.

misstep by an athlete on Twitter, Larry Johnson of the Kansas City Chiefs got fired for a tweet tirade against his coach that contained an antigay slur (King, 2009).

Given the positive uses of Twitter by some athletes and the very obvious blunders by others, it is apparent that the microblogging tool has found a home in the sport world. Even with the growing use of social media in sport and its potential to break down barriers to fan access, relatively few studies have looked at what athletes are saying on Twitter. Are they talking about their personal lives, their professional lives, or sport or just talking? Therefore, this study will examine what athletes are saying on Twitter and investigate how they engage fans through one of the fastest growing social-media tools.

## Social Media

Social media are a rising phenomenon and can be defined as “relating to the sharing of information, experiences and perspectives through community-oriented websites” (Weinburg, 2009, p.1). This use of media in a social way has brought the world closer together, breaking down geographic barriers that have historically divided individuals, cultures, and nations and allowing new online communities to emerge and grow. Social media are part of what is referred to as Web 2.0. Web 1.0, its predecessor, was characterized by mostly a one-way communication experience (Weinburg, 2009). In Web 1.0, a person or company would build a Web site, populate it with content, and then wait for people to visit the site and read the content. The Internet provided very limited ways for individuals to interact, have dialogue, or create unique content to share with others, including the Web site’s owner. Individuals browsed the Internet from a PC or laptop and could only interact with other users through e-mail, message boards, or forums; very few individuals had their own Web space (Weinburg, 2009).

In the new Web 2.0, the world has drastically shifted. User-generated content has become the norm, and individuals can now interact and generate and share multimedia content seamlessly. Technology changes, together with decreasing costs, have allowed the Internet to become participatory, conversational, social, and decentralized, with individuals having their own Web sites, hosting blogs, and connecting through social sites through a variety of devices including net books, smart phones, and game consoles (Weinburg, 2009). Now that Web technology is more cost-effective and content is produced more easily, the Internet has become a means for all individuals to share whatever they feel is relevant through social media; essentially everyone now has a voice. Social media exist in many forms and can include, but are not limited to, blogs, forums, message boards, online sites to share video and pictures, wikis, user-generated sites, and podcasts.

### Twitter

The social-media revolution is still unfolding. Facebook use is growing (ROI Research Inc., 2010), and new social-media tools are emerging. According to Edison Research, 48% of people in the United States currently have a personal profile page on a social-media site, up from 34% in 2009 and 24% in 2008 (Edison Research, 2010). In the past year Twitter has become the tool of choice for many to engage socially through the Internet. Twitter “is a free micro-blogging service that allows users to communicate with one another using short text-based mes-

sages, or ‘tweets,’ that can be a maximum of 140 characters in length” (Weinburg, 2009, p. 125). Tweets can be about anything from “what someone had for lunch to feedback on a live event, like a presidential press conference” (Ovadia, 2009, p. 202). Since it was launched in 2006, awareness of Twitter has exploded, growing from a mere 5% of the population in 2008 to 26% in 2009, with 87% of Americans currently indicating they are aware of Twitter (Edison Research, 2010). Despite its rapid growth in awareness, Twitter still lags behind Facebook in use, with just 7%, or 17 million individuals, in the United States currently using or ever having used the microblogging site (Edison Research, 2010). In marketing terms, Twitter is a broadcasting medium allowing users to share a single 140-character message with all their friends, or, in Twitter language, followers (Thomases, 2010).

Twitter users sign up for an account, which is free, and then select individuals to “follow.” Following enables a Twitter user to see the followed user’s tweets and respond if they wish. Therefore, “Twitter at its core, provides access to conversations” (Ovadia, p. 204, 2009). Twitter revolves around personal relationships, and one of the keys to Twitter success is growing one’s numbers of followers so that with one short message, a user can reach hundreds or thousands of people. Twitter’s popularity has attracted a large range of users including celebrities (e.g., Ashton Kutcher), athletes (e.g., Shaq), technology experts (e.g., Bill Gates), politicians (e.g., Barack Obama), and everyday people.

Although Twitter does not provide a representative sample of any one population, it does provide insights into what its users are talking about at a given point in time (Ovadia, 2009). Twitter has a large social component, facilitating conversations between users, but this does not mean that it accurately reflects real-life relationships. Huberman, Romero, and Wu (2009), in their study of Twitter and its social relationships, found that a link between two Twitter users did not imply an interaction between them and that indeed most of the relationships found in Twitter were meaningless from an interaction point of view.

## Social Media and Athletes

The rise in social media has not gone unnoticed in the world of professional sport; it, too, has become engulfed in the trend, with the increasing acceptance and integration of social media by teams, athletes, and sport organizations. Social media and Web 2.0 have also transformed the interaction between sport fans and their sport heroes.

In Web 1.0, fans could visit a team, league, or athlete Web site and peruse the content posted on the site. The only interaction available to them was through e-mail or, if the Web site had one, a message board. Any interaction fans had with their favorite athletes was through planned and controlled environments such as autograph signings, corporate-sponsored events, or the traditional media. These meetings were seldom deemed authentic, at least not in the eyes of the fans, and were often mediated by a third party such as a public relations individual or marketing firm. There was always the potential for a chance meeting at the arena or ball field, but these were few and far between. Indeed, fans were kept at arm’s length, which resulted in a widening of the gap between athletes and fans. Trail, Anderson, and Fink (2000) defined fan identification as “an orientation of the self in regard to other objects, including a person or group, that results in feelings or sentiments of close attachment” (pp. 165–166). Researchers have shown over the

years that a key predictor of sport-fan behavior is team identification or attachment to the team (Cialdini et al., 1976; Sloan, 1989; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). In addition to attaching to a specific team, Robinson and Trail (2005) found that sport fans formed attachment to sport based on connection with a specific player. Indeed, Sutton, McDonald, Milne, and Cimperman (1997) indicated that one of the keys to increasing fan identification was increasing player accessibility, and although Web 1.0 was an improvement on pre-Internet player accessibility, it was still limited in its ability to provide points of attachment to sport through increased access to specific players.

With Web 2.0, the situation has changed. Teams, leagues, and athletes are embracing social media and using them to bring fans closer to the game. The new transparency offered by social media allows athletes to give fans a glimpse behind the celebrity curtain and really see how their sport heroes live. Indeed, fans can “like” their favorite athletes on Facebook and engage with them when these athletes drop in on fan-driven communities in the virtual world. Recently, professional athletes have embraced Twitter because it offers the potential of facilitating their connections with fans in a way that never existed before. Every day, fans from all over the world can take an unprecedented look into the lives of their favorite sport stars, or at least a look at what these athletes are “tweeting” about. Shaquille O’Neal, Dwight Howard, and Paul Pierce of the NBA; tennis player Andy Roddick; golfer Stewart Cink; cyclist Lance Armstrong; and Chad Ochocinco and Larry Fitzgerald of the National Football League (NFL) are just a few examples of the hundreds of athletes who have embraced Twitter (as can be found at [twitter-athletes.com](http://twitter-athletes.com)). Sport fans can get a real, unmediated look into the lives of their sport heroes and, in the process, possibly develop a greater appreciation for the talent, dedication to their sport, and day-to-day lives of these athletes (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009; Sanderson, 2008). Of course, fans should be cautious of taking this content too literally, because athletes are still controlling the message and, through that message, their image. The emergence of social media in sport has important implications; Phua (2010) noted that the Web, through its ability to be a major socializing agent and communication channel for sports fans, will continue to play a vital role, eventually superseding traditional media such as broadcast and print. According to Leggatt (2008), sports fans currently represent 19% of all U.S. Internet users and also tend to be early adopters of new communication technologies. Therefore, the importance of social media and the access they provide in building fan attachment in the era of Web 2.0 bears investigation.

Given the recent and rapid rise of social media, it is not surprising that there is scarce literature relating to social media in general, and research pertaining to social media and sports is in its very beginning phase (e.g., Phua, 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2009, 2010; Sanderson, 2008). Therefore, this research seeks to add to the nascent literature in this area by examining what athletes are saying on Twitter and investigating how they engage fans through one of fastest growing social-media tools.

## Methodology

To examine how athletes have engaged Twitter as a tool to close the access gap with sport fans, this study collected data from Twitter for a 1-week period in January 2010. It should be noted that the data-collection period fell during the off-season for two of the sports under consideration, Major League Baseball and

professional soccer. The purpose of this research was to investigate the following research questions:

RQ1: Which athletes are using Twitter the most, and is there a difference in Twitter use between athletes from different sports?

RQ2: Do athletes respond directly to fans, or do they just “talk”?

RQ3: What are athletes saying on Twitter? Are they talking about their sport, products they endorse, or their everyday lives?

RQ4: Have athletes realized the potential of Twitter as a marketing tool?

The first step in the data-collection process was to identify the top five Twitter accounts for athletes in various sports. This was done using the Web site [Twitter-athletes.com](http://twitter-athletes.com). The resulting list of athletes can be found in Table 1 and is composed of athletes from the NFL, the National Hockey League (NHL), the NBA, Major League Baseball, professional golf, professional soccer, motor sports, winter sports (e.g., snowboarding), and mixed martial arts. Once the list was compiled, the tweets for each of these athletes ( $n = 49$ ) were collected over a 7-day period,

**Table 1 Most-Followed Athletes on Twitter**

Athlete	Sport or league	No. of followers	Twitter name
Shaquille O’Neal	NBA	2,765,415	@THE_REAL_SHAQ
Serena Williams	Tennis	1,559,210	@serenajwilliams
Paul Pierce	NBA	1,458,980	@paulpierce34
Dwight Howard	NBA	1,458,185	@DwightHoward
Stewart Cink	Golf	1,216,224	@stewartcink
Nick Swisher	MLB	1,177,352	@NickSwisher
Ian Poulter	Golf	959,882	@Ianjamespoulter
Reggie Bush	NFL	879,531	@reggie_bush
Chad Ochocinco	NFL	668,665	@OGOchoCinco
Lamar Odom	NBA	534,814	@RealLamarOdom
Venus Williams	Tennis	410,560	@Venuseswilliams
Derek Fisher	NBA	401,364	@derekfisher
Larry Fitzgerald	NFL	400,907	@Lfitzgerald11
Kerry Rhodes	NFL	325,628	@kerryrhodes
Shaun Phillips	NFL	323,275	@ShaunPhillips95
Freddy Adu	Soccer	311,558	@FreddyAdu11
Rubens Barrichello	Motor sports	310,053	@rubarrichello
Jozy Altidore	Soccer	160,076	@JozyAltidore17
Andy Roddick	Tennis	157,322	@andyroddick
Kaka	Soccer	136,495	@RealKaka

*Note.* Compiled from <http://www.twitter-athletes.com> on January 4, 2010. This is a shortened version of the actual list of athletes included in the study. NBA = National Basketball Association; MLB = Major League Baseball; NFL = National Football League.

resulting in 1,193 tweets for analysis. The first step in analyzing the tweets was to categorize the format of each tweet, indicating whether the post was a direct message or retweet and whether it contained a photo or link to another Internet site. Twitter provides indications of certain activities in the tweet content. For example, if an athlete's tweet is in fact a retweet of someone else's message, then a note appears below the athlete's tweet, indicating where it originated. If the athlete's tweet contains a link, either to an article or to an uploaded photo, this is indicated by a "tiny url" (e.g., <http://ustre.am/4sHM>) or reference to a photo-uploading site (e.g., <http://twitpic.com/xm65j>). These indicators, unique to Twitter, were used to help code tweets' format.

Once the tweets were collected and their format categorized, content analysis was used to analyze and categorize the content of each tweet. A codebook was developed from previous literature (Clavio, 2008; Funk, Mahony, & Ridinger, 2002; Seo & Green, 2008; Wolfradt & Doll, 2001), resulting in seven content categories for coding: relating to personal life, relating to business life, relating to another sport or athlete, relating to their sport, responding to fans, responding to other athletes, and relating to pop culture. The content of each tweet was coded according to the category definitions found in Table 2. It was possible for some tweets to be assigned to two categories based on the content (e.g., personal life and pop culture). Two independent coders completed the coding, and any disagreements were resolved through discussion, resulting in an overall 85% score for intercoder reliability as measured by Scott's pi.

## Results

To simplify data collection, the top five Twitter-using athletes in each of the leagues included in the study were selected, and their tweets were collected during the research time frame. This resulted in 49 athletes posting messages for a total of 1,193 tweets. Because many of the athletes provided only a few messages, for display purposes, only those who tweeted 10 or more messages during the 7 days are included in Table 3. As the table illustrates, the top tweeters come from the NFL (five athletes), followed by professional golf (five athletes) and then by soccer (three athletes), tennis (three athletes), the NBA (two athletes), the NHL (one athlete), motor sports (one athlete), and mixed martial arts (one athlete) each with one or more athletes in the top 20 during the data-collection period. Therefore, from the initial stage of data analysis, it would appear that professional golfers and NFL players are the heaviest users of Twitter, providing a partial answer to RQ1.

### Tweet Format

The data illustrate that the largest percentage of tweets were direct messages (547, 45.85%), with only 7.21% containing a link and 4.27% containing a picture. Retweets were not very popular; only 1.93% of the total tweets collected were in this format. Athletes from the NFL were the most active in the period of data collection, accounting for 619 tweets, or 51.93% of the total tweets collected. There was a significant drop to the second most active league or sport, professional golf (231, 19.3%), followed by soccer (95, 7.97%). The rest of the leagues or sports each accounted for less than 6% of the tweet activity during the study time frame.

**Table 2 Athletes on Twitter: Category Definitions**

Category	Definition
Relating to personal life	Any comments that refer to their personal life: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• daily routines</li> <li>• weather</li> <li>• party reference</li> <li>• charity work</li> <li>• family life</li> </ul>
Relating to business life	Any comments that relate to their business life: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• training</li> <li>• traveling</li> <li>• game preparations</li> <li>• promoting products</li> </ul>
Relating to their sport	Any comments directly related to their sport but not directly related to them: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• other games in their league</li> <li>• college or minor-league games of the same sport</li> <li>• equipment</li> <li>• large events that take place in this sport and do not include the athlete</li> </ul>
Other sport or athlete reference	Any comments that refer to another sport or athlete. Aside from athletes, any references to coaches, general managers, owners, or broadcasters from other sports are applicable to this category.
Responding to fans	Any replies to comments their fans or nonfans have sent them, plus responses to spouses or family members and sports journalists.
Pop culture or landmark reference	Any comments on pop culture: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TV show</li> <li>• movie</li> <li>• musician or group</li> <li>• actor or actress</li> <li>• politician</li> <li>• famous landmark</li> </ul>

To address the second part of RQ1, the results were then tested for significance using *T* tests to identify any statistical significance in the number of tweets by sport or league. The results shown in Figure 1 illustrate that the total number of tweets by NFL players (619) is significantly different than all other sports at the  $p < .05$  level. At the same level of significance, the total number of tweets by professional golfers (231) was significantly different than all other sports except the NFL.

**Table 3 Top 20 Active Athletes on Twitter During Study Period**

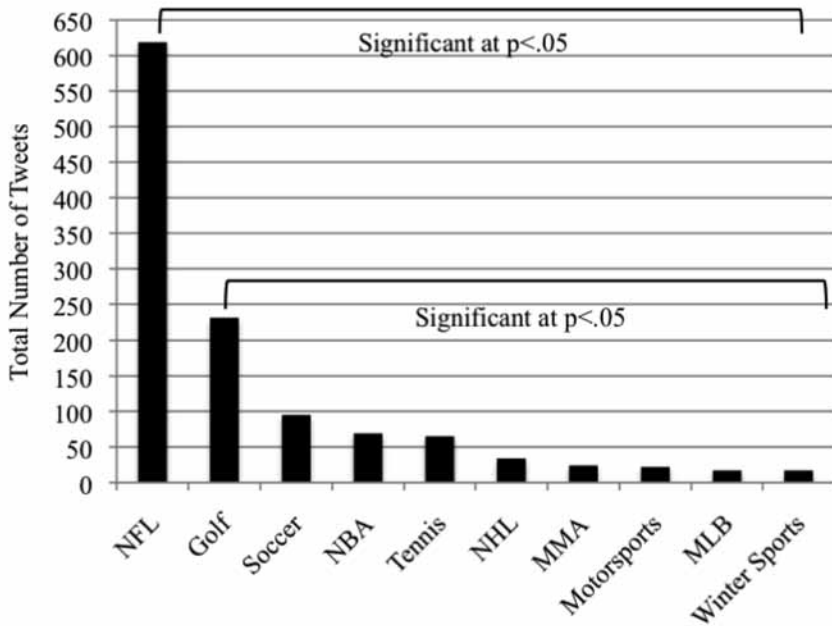
Athlete	Sport or league	Twitter name	Followers	Tweets
Kerry Rhodes	NFL	@kerryrhodes	325,628	187
Chad Ochocinco	NFL	@OGOchoCinco	668,665	159
Larry Fitzgerald	NFL	@Lfitzgerald11	400,907	117
Shaun Phillips	NFL	@ShaunPhillips95	323,275	117
Ian Poulter	Golf	@Ianjamespoulter	959,882	68
Shaquille O'Neal	NBA	@THE_REAL_SHAQ	2,765,415	49
John Daly	Golf	@PGA_JohnDaly	39,432	45
Stewart Cink	Golf	@stewartcink	1,216,224	41
Natalie Gulbis	Golf	@natalie_gulbis	31,647	41
Reggie Bush	NFL	@reggie_bush	879,531	39
Paul Casey	Golf	@Paul_Casey	18,327	36
Darren Bent	Soccer	@DBTheTruth	28,922	35
Jozy Altidore	Soccer	@JozyAltidore17	160,076	29
Serena Williams	Tennis	@serenajwilliams	1,559,210	26
David Perron	NHL	@DP_57	4,408	25
Freddy Adu	Soccer	@FreddyAdu11	311,558	21
Venus Williams	Tennis	@Venuseswilliams	410,560	19
B.J. Penn	MMA	@bjpenndotcom	30,452	15
Juan Pablo Montoya	Motor sports	@jpmontoya	120,995	11
Lamar Odom	NBA	@RealLamarOdom	534,814	10

*Note.* NFL = National Football League; NBA = National Basketball Association; NHL = National Hockey League; MMA = mixed martial arts.

Direct messages, or tweets that were directed at another Twitter member, were the most common format of the tweets analyzed. The athletes from the NBA led the way, with 59.42% of their tweets referencing other Twitter members, and all other sports or leagues with over 22% of tweets being direct, with the exception of professional tennis, in which only 1.54% of tweets were direct messages. Although the remaining format categories had one or two sports or leagues disproportionately represented, the actual numbers of tweets for these categories were so low that the percentages were not considered.

### **Tweet Content**

When the content of the collected tweets was examined by sport or league some interesting results emerged, which are presented in Table 4. The top content category for most leagues was responding to fans; the NFL (362, 58.48%) led the way, followed by the NBA (39, 56.62%) and professional tennis (13, 20%). In fact, the



**Figure 1** — Number of tweets by sport or league. NFL = National Football League; NBA = National Basketball Association; NHL = National Hockey League; MMA = mixed martial arts; MLB = Major League Baseball.

percentage of tweets responding to fans was over 17% for all sports, the highest overall category result, thereby illustrating that, in response to RQ2, athletes are attempting to converse with fans and not just “talk.”

Once the results according to sport or league were examined, the next step was to investigate individual athletes’ tweets. Again, several of the athletes focused their tweets on responding to fans, most notably Kerry Rhodes (156, 83.42%), Larry Fitzgerald (85, 72.65%), and Shaq (37, 75.51%). With regard to postings related to their personal lives, Juan Pablo Montoya (10, 90.91%), Jozy Altidore (17, 58.62%), and Chad Ochocinco (72, 45.28%) provided the most in-depth glimpses into their home lives. Business life was generally talked about less, but all of Lamar Odom’s (10, 100%) tweets were business-related, providing links to articles on his official fan page. Both soccer’s Freddy Adu (11, 52.38%) and tennis star Venus Williams (9, 47.37%) also spent a large portion of their tweets on their business affairs. Football’s Reggie Bush (15, 38.46%) talked the most about his sport, and B.J. Penn (2, 13.33%) talked the least about his, mixed martial arts. There was, as noted, very little chatter between athletes, with Ian Poulter (5, 7.35%) doing the largest amount of posting about other athletes. In terms of which athletes exhibited their sport fandom by mentioning other sports or athletes, Reggie Bush (12, 30.77%) was the most prolific, followed by the Williams sisters from tennis, Venus (5, 26.32%) and Serena (6, 23.08%). Soccer players, as noted previously, talked the most about pop culture, led by Darren Bent (9, 25.71%) and Jozy Altidore (6,

Table 4 Tweet Content by Sport

Sport or league	Total tweets	Personal Life		Business Life		Other Sport or Athlete		Their Sport		Fans		Other Athletes		Pop Culture	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
NFL	619	147	23.75	64	10.34	52	8.40	44	7.11	362	58.48	25	4.04	30	4.85
Golf	231	67	29.00	62	26.84	37	16.02	8	3.46	106	45.89	5	2.16	20	8.66
Soccer	95	29	30.53	22	23.16	12	12.63	3	3.16	35	36.84	1	1.05	15	15.79
NBA	69	9	13.04	17	24.64	5	7.25	2	2.90	39	56.52	1	1.45	4	5.80
Tennis	65	30	46.15	21	32.31	16	24.62	0	0.00	13	20.00	2	3.08	6	9.23
NHL	34	3	8.82	13	38.24	4	11.76	3	8.82	16	47.06	1	2.94	5	14.71
MMA	24	4	16.67	13	54.17	1	4.17	2	8.33	8	33.33	1	4.17	1	4.17
Motor sports	22	16	72.73	3	13.64	0	0.00	0	0.00	5	22.73	0	0.00	0	0.00
MLB	17	3	17.65	12	70.59	1	5.88	0	0.00	4	23.53	0	0.00	2	11.76
Winter sports	17	4	23.53	10	58.82	1	5.88	0	0.00	3	17.65	0	0.00	2	11.76
Totals	1,193	312	26.15	237	19.87	129	10.81	62	5.20	591	49.54	36	3.02	85	7.12

Note. NFL = National Football League; NBA = National Basketball Association; NHL = National Hockey League; MMA = mixed martial arts; MLB = Major League Baseball.

20.69%). Reggie Bush (8, 20.51%) and golf's Natalie Gulbis (8, 19.51%) were the other athletes to refer to pop culture in their tweets. These results provide a mixed set of answers to RQ3. The content of an athlete's tweets seems to vary by sport, with no discernable trend. The athletes who talked the most about their personal lives came from motor sports, soccer, and the NFL. Athletes from the NFL posted the most about their own sport, and soccer players talked the most about pop culture. Perhaps these mixed results are more reflective of the immediacy provided by Twitter, where athletes can post a message related to whatever they are experiencing at a specific moment. When looking at RQ4, it becomes obvious that only a few athletes (e.g., tennis's Williams sisters) have recognized the marketing potential of Twitter by talking about their business affairs; the rest made little to no mention of their business affairs or products they endorse.

## Discussion

This research, though an early attempt to investigate athletes' use of Twitter, provided some results of note. Athletes from two sports, NFL and professional golf, used Twitter significantly more than any of the other sports in the study, indicating that these athletes have embraced this social-media tool as a means of communicating and building their fan base. In terms of format, the direct-message tweet dominated over all other formats. This result, together with the high percentage of tweets responding to fans and tweets about personal life dominating the content categories, all illustrate that Twitter is indeed providing increased unmediated access to what athletes want to say to their fans, something not readily present in traditional media and in Web 1.0. These specific results, indicating that athletes are responding directly to fans, support previous research that found that online media provided the greatest impact on the fan-athlete interaction (Phua, 2010). The fact that athletes are sending out messages and increasing access to fans should provide the opportunity for increased fan attachment to sport as outlined by Sutton et al. (1997). The dominance of the direct-message format, the interaction with fans, and athletes' tweets about their personal lives also build on the work of Kassing and Sanderson (2010), who suggested that Twitter has a capacity "to function as a medium for athletes to offer commentary and opinion and as a mechanism for fostering immediacy with fans through interactivity and insider perspectives" (p. 124).

The study's findings also suggest that although fans follow these athletes in large numbers, athletes are not capitalizing on this audience of consumers. Although Twitter is offering fans unprecedented access to athletes, its potential as a marketing tool is not being realized by athletes. Most athletes are not tweeting about their products, providing links to their Web sites, or referencing brands that they use. Perhaps this is a careful calculation on their part, because their current endorsement deals may not provide remuneration for social-media marketing efforts. As the power of Twitter grows, this could be a potential new area for product-endorsement revenue for athletes.

The results of this exploratory study provide fertile ground from which future research can be launched. For example, future research could investigate whether the different Twitter styles could somehow be linked to indicators of popularity. For example, do athletes who tweet about their personal lives have more followers

than those who do not? Is there a significant relationship between the content of athletes' tweets and the number of their followers? In addition, research should investigate whether the athletes are actually posting their own tweets or whether a public relations firm or individual does the tweeting, as seems to be the case for Lamar Odom of the NBA. Perhaps a next step in research would be to query fans on Twitter who follow these athletes to investigate whether Twitter plays a role in increasing their attachment to a sport, to the athletes they follow, or to both.

Sport teams and leagues are using Twitter to communicate with fans, and they are also recognizing the impact that an athlete's use of Twitter can have on their entities. In response to this, sport leagues are setting time limits around Twitter use by athletes while in competition, but the power of athletes' use of Twitter outside these limits has yet to be fully exploited by leagues and teams. Individuals are following athletes in large numbers; leagues and teams should be investigating how they can capitalize on these audiences. Athletes are creating content; how can public relations functions capitalize on that content? If Twitter use by athletes continues to grow and fans continue to flock to follow these individuals, individuals in the sport industry will not be able to ignore this social medium and will have to find a way to embrace athletes' use of it.

Although the results of this study are promising, there are some limitations that should be noted. Being that it is one of the first studies focused on evaluating the content of tweets, further research is required to validate the approach and the results. In addition, Internet content, and in particular social-media content, changes rapidly, so this research should be viewed as an examination of a point in time. Future research could help identify trends in Twitter use and content over time. Finally, as noted in the Methodology section, the data were collected during a 7-day period in January, the off-season for MLB and professional soccer, which could have played a role in tweet production, or lack thereof, for athletes in those sports.

## Conclusion

In the very competitive worlds of sport and marketing, professional athletes are increasingly looking for positive exposure to attract fans, gain publicity, and ultimately attract sponsorship and lucrative contracts. As this research shows, several athletes have embraced Twitter as a way to create positive exposure, engage fans, and increase their visibility. Twitter seems poised to have a large impact on sports communication because of the interactivity it offers to both fans and athletes and its rapid uptake by the sport industry (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). As the growth in social-media use by athletes continues, so will the concerns associated with its impact and influence on the important interaction between fans and athletes, providing interesting opportunities for the sport industry and for further investigation by researchers.

## Case Questions

- In this case, athletes talked about everything from their personal lives to their business. What do you think is the most appropriate use of Twitter for athletes? Are there issues or items they should not converse about?

- If you were a sport communication professional in one of the professional sport leagues (e.g., the NFL), how would you capitalize on the content created by athletes on Twitter?
- This case study revealed that athletes communicate directly with fans through Twitter. How can the fan–athlete relationship be further strengthened through the use of Twitter? Is there a way that this relationship could be damaged? Provide a concrete example.
- What other social-media platforms do athletes and fans use? What advantages does Twitter provide, if any, over these other platforms? Which platform do you think is the most effective for athletes to communicate with fans? Suggest a possible solution to integrate content across these platforms.

## References

- Azpiri, J. (2009, June 5). *Antonio Cromartie Twitter: Chargers fine \$2500 for food tweet*. Retrieved June 30, 2010, from <http://www.nowpublic.com/sports/antonio-cromartie-twitter-chargers-fine-2500-food-tweet>
- Cialdini, R.B., Borden, R.J., Thorne, A., Walker, M.R., Freeman, S., & Sloan, L.R. (1976). Basking in reflected glory: Three (football) field studies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *34*, 366–375.
- Clavio, G. (2008). Uses and gratifications of Internet collegiate sport message board users. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, *69*(08). Retrieved June 30, 2010, from ProQuest Digital Dissertations database (Publication No. AAT 3319833).
- Cooke, S. (2010). Stop the presses. *The Sport Journal*, *13*(2). Retrieved June 27, 2010, from <http://www.thesportjournal.org/article/stop-presses>
- Dimmock, J.A., Grove, J.R., & Eklund, R.C. (2003). Fan identification and spectator behaviours relevant to sport teams. *Proceedings of the Australian Psychological Society*, *1*, 62–63.
- Edison Research. (2010). *Twitter usage in America: 2010*. Retrieved June 30, 2010, from [http://info.edisonresearch.com/Default.aspx?app=LeadgenDownload&shortpath=docs%2fTwitter\\_Usage\\_In\\_America\\_2010.pdf](http://info.edisonresearch.com/Default.aspx?app=LeadgenDownload&shortpath=docs%2fTwitter_Usage_In_America_2010.pdf)
- Funk, D.C., Mahony, D.F., & Ridinger, L. (2002). Characterizing consumer motivation as individual difference factors: Augmenting the Sport Interest Inventory (SII) to explain level of spectator support. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, *11*(1), 33–43.
- Gregory, S. (2009, June 5). Twitter craze is rapidly changing the face of sports. *Sports Illustrated*. Retrieved June 30, 2010, from [http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2009/writers/the\\_bonus/06/05/twitter.sports/index.html](http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2009/writers/the_bonus/06/05/twitter.sports/index.html)
- Huberman, B.A., Romero, D.A., & Wu, F. (2009). Social networks that matter: Twitter under the microscope. *First Monday* *14*(1). Retrieved September 6, 2010, from <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2317/2063>
- Johnson, S. (2009, June 5). How Twitter will change the way we live. *Time*. Retrieved September 3, 2010, from <http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1902604,00.html>
- Kassing, J.W., & Sanderson, J. (2009). “You’re the kind of guy that we all want for a drinking buddy”: Expressions of parasocial interaction on floydlandis.com. *Western Journal of Communication*, *73*, 182–203.
- Kassing, J.W., & Sanderson, J. (2010). Fan–athlete interaction and Twitter tweeting through the Giro: A case study. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, *3*, 113–128.
- King, P. (2009, November 10). Chiefs make right call on Johnson. *Sports Illustrated*. Retrieved June 30, 2010, from [http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2009/writers/peter\\_king/11/10/mailbag/index.html](http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2009/writers/peter_king/11/10/mailbag/index.html)

- Leggatt, H. (2008, July 22). Serious sports fans online. *Biz Report*. Retrieved June 27, 2010, from [http://www.bizreport.com/2008/07/jupiterresearch\\_serious\\_sports\\_fans\\_online.html](http://www.bizreport.com/2008/07/jupiterresearch_serious_sports_fans_online.html)
- Ovadia, S. (2009). Exploring the potential of Twitter as a research tool. *Behavioral & Social Sciences Librarian*, 28, 202–205.
- Phua, J.J. (2010). Sports fans and media use: Influence on sports fan identification and collective self-esteem. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 3, 190–206.
- Robinson, M.J., & Trail, G.T. (2005). Relationships among spectator gender, motives, points of attachment, and sport preference. *Journal of Sport Management*, 19, 58–80.
- ROI Research Inc. (2010). *S-Net—The impact of social media*. Retrieved June 25, 2010, from [http://blog.performics.com/search/social\\_media](http://blog.performics.com/search/social_media)
- Sanderson, J. (2008). The blog is serving its purpose: Self-presentation strategies on 38pitches.com. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(4), 912–936.
- Seo, W.J., & Green, B.C. (2008). Development of the Motivation Scale for Sport Online Consumption. *Journal of Sport Management*, 22, 82–109.
- Sefko, E. (2009, March 30) Dallas Mavericks owner Cuban fined for Twitter comments. *Dallas News*. Retrieved June 30, 2010, from <http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/spt/basketball/mavs/stories/033009dnspomavsbriefs.834c7cb0.html>
- Sloan, L.R. (1989). The motives of sports fans. In J.H. Goldstein (Ed.), *Sports games and play: Social and psychological viewpoints* (2nd ed., pp. 175–240). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Sutton, W.A., McDonald, M.A., Milne, G.R., & Cimperman, J. (1997). Creating and fostering fan identification in professional sports. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 6(1), 15–22.
- Thomases, H. (2010). *Twitter marketing: An hour a day*. Indianapolis, IN: Wiley.
- Trail, G.T., Anderson, D.F., & Fink, J.S. (2000). A theoretical model of sport spectator consumption behavior. *International Journal of Sport Management*, 1, 154–180.
- Wann, D.L., & Branscombe, N.R. (1993). Sports fans: Measuring degree of identification with their team. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 24, 1–17.
- Weinburg, T. (2009). *The new community rules: Marketing on the social web*. New York: O'Reilly.
- Whiteside, K. (2009, April 29) Sports world chirping about Twitter to keep fans informed. *USA Today*. Retrieved June 27, 2010, from [http://www.usatoday.com/sports/2009-04-28-twitter-cover\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/sports/2009-04-28-twitter-cover_N.htm)
- Wolfradt, U., & Doll, J. (2001). Motives of adolescents to use the Internet as a function of personality traits, personal and social factors. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 24(1), 13–27.