The Positives and Negatives of Twitter: Exploring How Student-Athletes Use Twitter and Respond to Critical Tweets

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Twitter has become a popular topic in sport communication research. Little research to date, however, has examined Twitter from the perspective of student-athletes. This research explored how student-athletes at an NCAA Division I university used Twitter and reacted to critical tweets from fans. Semistructured interviews with 20 student-athletes were conducted. Analysis revealed that student-athletes used Twitter in 3 primary ways: keeping in contact, communicating with followers, and accessing information. With respect to critical tweets, student-athletes reported various perceptions about them and diverse strategies for responding to them. The results suggest that Twitter is a beneficial communicative tool for student-athletes but also presents challenges, given the ease with which fans attack them via this social-media platform. Accordingly, athletic departments must be proactive in helping student-athletes use Twitter strategically, particularly in responding to detractors.

**Keywords**: college athletics, sports and identity, social media and sports

Social-media technologies are important players in sport communication (Sanderson, 2011a; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Although there are multiple social-media platforms operating in the sports market, Twitter is at the forefront with sports stakeholders (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Indeed, athletes, coaches, and broadcasters from nearly every sport maintain a Twitter presence, which allows sports fans to obtain immediate information directly from these sports figures. It is not surprising that sports teams are capitalizing on Twitter’s popularity and have integrated Twitter into their promotional and marketing activities (such as tweeting clues to guide fans on a scavenger hunt for free game tickets). Twitter has also introduced profound changes for sports journalists (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010; Sheffer & Schultz, 2010), who now find themselves in direct competition with athletes and sports teams in breaking and reporting news (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011), and Twitter is the “place” for instant, breaking sports news (Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012).
Twitter is exploding in use and in February 2012 exceeded 500 million users. A more telling statistic is that while Facebook currently boasts 900 million users, “if Twitter keeps growing at this rate, it will reach 1 billion users in about a year and a half—but it might even be sooner than that, as its growth continues to accelerate” (Dugan, 2012). Twitter’s emergence corresponds to increased attention from sport communication and sport media researchers. Scholars have investigated how athletes use Twitter (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010), characteristics of athletes’ Twitter followers (Clavio & Kian, 2010), and Twitter’s influence on sport media production and consumption (Hutchins, 2011; Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012). These studies have all shed important light on the Twitter phenomenon in sport. However, one key voice is underrepresented from this growing literature—that of the student-athlete. On one hand, this is not surprising, as it is difficult for researchers to obtain access to student-athletes. While balancing both their academic and athletic requirements can be daunting, the term *student-athlete* is one that is challenged by some scholars who contend its use (see Staurowsky & Sack, 2005), but we will employ this frequently used and accepted identifier throughout the article. As athletes at any level are arguably the reason for Twitter’s popularity in their sport, their perceptions and evaluations of Twitter are essential components that must be included in scholarly repertoire on Twitter. This study begins to fill this void by examining student-athletes’ motivations for using Twitter, along with how they manage and respond to critical commentary they receive there. This research provides valuable information that will assist athletic department personnel in their quest to help student-athletes harness the power of social media.

There are several reasons that student-athletes were chosen for this study. First, unlike their professional counterparts, student-athletes have much stricter monitoring and consequences attached to their Twitter use (Sanderson, 2011b). Whereas professional athletes are fined and censured for perceivedly inappropriate tweets, they still maintain their ability to play—yet with one tweet a student-athlete can lose his or her eligibility. Such was the case with former University of North Carolina football player Marvin Austin, who sparked an NCAA investigation after he was tweeting from a Miami nightclub, which ultimately resulted in the loss of his eligibility (Mandel, 2010). Many athletic departments are now contracting with social-media-monitoring services such as UDiligence and Varsity Monitor. These organizations install applications that track student-athletes’ social-media activity and alert athletic department personnel when specific words appear in a social-media post.

Second, student-athletes are college students, a demographic in which inappropriate social-media postings have become normalized (Miller, Parsons, & Lifer, 2010; Peluchette & Karl, 2009). Accordingly, when student-athletes tweet something that is deemed inappropriate by athletic department personnel, they may fail to understand why there is a problem. This perceptual divergence often results from athletic departments’ failing to define what constitutes an “inappropriate” social-media message (Sanderson, 2011b).

Third, student-athletes are teenagers and young adults. Via social-media sites such as Twitter, fans attack student-athletes with hostile and demeaning language (Trotter, 2012). The blinders of fandom overpower the realization that the target of the attack is an amateur; nevertheless, given the propensity with which they use social media, it
is plausible that student-athletes are quite cognizant of what is being said about them via social media. These aspersions can produce potentially negative emotional and psychological effects. Social media are not going away, and it is imperative that both academic and industry personnel keep pace with the changing social-media landscape. With this introduction provided, we now discuss pertinent literature.

**Review of Literature**

**Student-Athletes and Twitter**

Social media have become an unavoidable part of the current college experience. Accompanying this popularity, however, are questions about the content that students are posting (Peluchette & Karl, 2009, Miller et al., 2010). College students are very free in disclosing information via social media, and this behavior appears to be driven by status needs. For example, McKinney, Kelly, and Duran (2012) found a significant, positive relationship between college students’ attitude about sharing information and the frequency with which they used Facebook and Twitter. They further discovered that higher levels of narcissism were associated with the number of self-focused tweets. Just as their peers have flocked to social-media sites, so, too, have student-athletes. Twitter has become a popular haven for student-athletes, albeit one that has generated considerable controversy, as the following cases illustrate.

On December 10, 2011, a fight marred the end of a basketball game between the University of Cincinnati and Xavier University. Multiple players were suspended and the proverbial “black eye” was affixed to the game in press coverage. Some of the players for both schools had been trash talking each other via Twitter before the game. This behavior continued into the game, ultimately leading to the disastrous finish. While these two universities have a long-standing rivalry, Twitter certainly facilitated trash-talking between student-athletes and perhaps had a role in escalating the feud in this rivalry.

Student-athletes also tweet information that hinders their professional future. Zach Houchins, a baseball player from Louisburg College in North Carolina, was a 15th-round draft choice of the Washington Nationals in the 2011 Major League Baseball amateur draft. Immediately after the draft, a Nationals fan blog posted tweets from Houchins that appeared from April to June 2011. In a blog post titled “Nats Draft a Bigot?” (2011) one sample tweet stated, “My teacher just told me not to worry ab a make up test bc he’ll pass me. Whatta boss nigga.” This was possibly the least alarming of several racist tweets, and the blog posted ended with a tweet by Houchins stating, “Gotta watch what I say up here ha,” which was titled “Too late.” The Nationals chastised Houchins for his tweets and he ultimately returned to school (Kilgore, 2011).

Inappropriate tweets generate considerable media attention, and athletic departments understandably emphasize the negative aspects of Twitter and other social-media tools. Sanderson (2011b) analyzed the social-media policies of Division I athletic departments and found that the policies overwhelmingly framed social media negatively. However, this is only one side of the story—Twitter possesses tremendous connective and identity-building capabilities (Sanderson, 2013), benefits that receive very little mention in student-athlete instruction. Sanderson (2011b) recommended that athletic department social-media policies be more balanced and
that more attention be given to the perspective of student-athletes in shaping those policies by incorporating student-athletes’ motivations for using social media. To that end, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: What motivations do student-athletes report for using Twitter?

One reason for Twitter’s popularity is the increased access it gives fans to athletes and sports figures (Sanderson, 2011a, 2013). While this enhanced immediacy can be positive, it brings with it problems, particularly for student-athletes.

Twitter, Student-Athletes, and Fan Behavior

For many people, sports fandom is a significant component of their social identity (Trujillo & Krizek, 1994; Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000). This identity, grounded in attachments to teams and athletes, can provoke maladaptive behaviors (Wakefield & Wann, 2006), particularly if athletes or teams do not meet fans’ expectations. Wakefield and Wann (2006) noted that highly identified fans have a greater propensity to enact dysfunctional behaviors at sporting events and are heavy consumers of sport media formats that promote confrontation (e.g., talk radio). The emergence of social media has created another realm for confrontations, especially between fans and athletes (Sanderson, 2011a). Via social media, fans now have direct access to athletes and routinely direct hostile and vitriolic language toward them. For instance, consider this tweet from a fan to Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice, who apparently cost the fan a victory in his fantasy league: “@RayRice27 rice u f*cking pussy, how about u become a real RB and stop being ur teams leading WR every week?? Just lost fantasy cuz of u” (Kassing & Sanderson, in press).

Student-athletes are also targets for such inflammatory language, and as noted earlier, this is perhaps more problematic, given their age and amateur status. For example, during the 2012 college football recruiting period, ESPN.com reported on two student-athletes who received numerous derogatory tweets from fans after they decommitted from football programs they initially announced they would attend (Trotter, 2012). For one of these athletes, Ja’Quay Williams, the abuse was so awful that he turned over his Twitter account to a friend, who subsequently censured fans by tweeting, “It’s bad that my boy Quay can’t even run his twitter anymore cause you people won’t even let the kid have fun and enjoy himself in HighSchool” (Trotter, 2012). A similar story, albeit with Facebook, occurred with C.J. Johnson, a high school football player from Mississippi during the 2011 college football recruiting season. Johnson initially committed to Mississippi State but after an assistant coaching change elected to attend the University of Mississippi instead. Mississippi State fans attacked him on Facebook to the point that he deactivated his profile (Staples, 2011).

Finally, as evidence of how derogatory these attacks can be, consider Baylor women’s basketball player Brittney Griner. Griner, currently viewed as the best player in women’s college basketball, is routinely subjected to hostile tweets about her appearance, such as, “Why is Brittney Griner so good at basketball? Because she’s actually a man. #haveyouheardhertalk” (Dixon, 2012). As these brief examples illuminate, student-athletes are no strangers to vitriolic attacks from fans. As such, it is important to know how they perceive these comments and respond to them. Thus, we pose the following research questions:
RQ2a: How do student-athletes perceive critical tweets?

RQ2b: How do critical tweets affect student-athletes?

RQ3: How do student-athletes respond to critical tweets?

Theoretical Background

Motivations for media use are highly informed by uses-and-gratifications theory, which serves as the theoretical framework for the first portion of this study. For the study component dealing with how student-athletes respond to critical tweets, dialogical self theory was used as the guiding framework. Each of these theories is now discussed.

Uses-and-Gratifications Theory

According to uses-and-gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) media use emanates from goals, as media consumers select specific, targeted channels to satiate needs and achieve gratification (Clavio & Kian, 2010). Motivations help media users frame what they stand to gain from consuming a media channel or what they will lose by avoiding or opting out of that media source. Whereas uses-and-gratification theory has been extensively applied to traditional media, the emergence of the Internet and social media has created fruitful directions for further extension of the theory. Ruggiero (2000) observed three uses and gratifications for Internet consumers: interactivity—corresponding and sharing information with others and developing relationships; demassification—selecting activities and interests that are user driven, customizing the Internet to their needs; and asynchronicity—flexible communication that allows users to send and respond to messages when personally convenient. Other research has found that people use the Internet to dispense information and receive social support (Anderson, 2011). With respect to social media, researchers have found that social interaction is a primary factor underpinning consumption (Anuc & Cozma, 2009), that communicating with offline friends is a salient motivation for using Facebook (Barker & Ota, 2011), and that the strength of one’s habits is a significant predictor of playing social-networking games (Wohn, 2012). Several scholars (Armstrong & McAdams, 2011; Hollenbaugh, 2011) recently examined the motivations of individuals with regard to blogging, which is another form of social media.

Uses and gratifications also has been extended to research on sports and new/social media (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Frederick, Clavio, Burch, & Zimmerman, 2012; Hambrick et al., 2010). Clavio (2008) surveyed college-sport message-board users and noted four primary areas of uses and gratification for these individuals: interactivity, information gathering, diversion, and argumentation. Ruihley and Hardin (2011) surveyed fantasy-sports users to ascertain their reasons for using message boards and discovered that participants used them as part of the fantasy-sport experience for logistical conversation, socializing, surveillance, and advice and opinion. Hambrick et al. (2010) content-analyzed professional athletes’ tweets and found that Twitter was used in six ways: interactivity, diversion, information sharing, linking to content, fanship, and promotion. Clavio and Kian (2010) surveyed Twitter followers of a retired professional golfer and discovered that people
followed her because they perceived her to be an expert about her sport and they had an affinity for her writing style.

**Dialogical Self Theory**

Hermans, Kempen, and Van Loon (1992) view the self, or *I*, as fluctuating between multiple positions as a person adapts to change. The self continually moves between different positions and imaginatively endows each position with a “voice,” thereby establishing dialogical relations between them. These voices exchange information, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self with a hierarchy of positions (Hermans, 1996a, 1996b, 2001). Hermans (2004) further elaborates that over time, the self assumes different positions, as voices are influenced by externalities, reflecting the internal discussions in a person’s mind and his or her ongoing interaction with the world (Lysaker & Hermans, 2007). This process is fluid, as positions move within the hierarchy in response to change. Thus, a predominant position can quickly become suppressed, while a previously neglected position moves to the forefront. Dialogue between voices does not follow established protocol, and the self-repertoire is frequently rebuilt in response to an individual’s inner thoughts and interpersonal encounters (Dimaggio, Catania, Salvatore, Carcione, & Nicolò, 2006; Lysaker & Hermans, 2007).

Hermans (2004) observed that the expansion of digital media escalates dialogical possibilities. That is, individuals become multivoiced and enact the dialogical self through digital channels, offering one exposure to a wide variety of people, whose voices, culture, and communication become part of one’s private world, creating new contexts for dialogue. Hermans (2004) posits that participation in a complex and hybrid computer-mediated world affects the dialogical self in three prominent ways. First, the self becomes composed of a higher density of positions and becomes subject to an increasing number of positions and voices. Next, these self-positions become more heterogeneous and integrate into a broad, interconnected system. Third, the self is prone to larger position leaps (one’s ability to negotiate and move between positions, paying close attention to their specific purposes, memories, and experiences) than ever before. Via digital media, people have a wealth of options to conveniently express identity and quickly navigate between identity positions.

In terms of sports, Sanderson (2008) used dialogical self theory to explain how former Major League Baseball pitcher Curt Schilling used his blog to counter sports reporters who questioned his athletic integrity and to respond to backlash for criticisms he leveled at fellow player Barry Bonds. Sanderson (2008) observed how Schilling shifted between presenting himself as a sport-media critic, committed individual, and accountable person and argued that blogging extended Schilling’s dialogical possibilities. That is, his blog enabled him to present his identity in a manner of his choosing, without media filtering, and he also could assess fan responses to his self-presentation. These luxuries would have been difficult for Schilling to obtain using traditional-media channels. Sanderson (2013) used dialogical self theory to investigate how rookie athletes in Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, the National Football League, and the National Hockey League used Twitter to build identity after entering the professional ranks. He noted that Twitter enabled these athletes to display a multifaceted identity that allowed them to emphasize aspects of their identity that would have remained submerged via traditional media.
Critical tweets from fans, defined as messages that attack a student-athlete personally or athletically, are at their core an identity hit. When these messages are received, student-athletes must navigate between various identity positions to interpret these messages and decide, how, if at all, to respond. How this process plays out is likely attributable to which competing identity voice gains primacy. With the theoretical background in place, we now move into a discussion of the methods used in this study.

Method

This study employed qualitative methods to examine themes that emerged from semistructured interviews with student-athletes. Student-athletes at a midsize private educational institution in the southern United States at the Division I level were recruited via snowball sampling to participate in an interview about their Twitter use. Before the recruitment effort, institutional review-board authorization was obtained. The first author contacted student-athletes known to have Twitter accounts and who competed in major sports to ascertain if they were interested in participating in the study. These student-athletes also were asked if they knew of other student-athletes who would be interested in participating in the study, and the first author contacted those individuals, as well. Student-athletes who met these criteria then scheduled a specific time, date, and place for the interview. In all, 20 student-athletes participated in this study. Ten of the participants were football players, 5 were men's basketball players, 3 were women's basketball players, and 2 were baseball players. Considering the fact that the football program has the largest number of student-athletes of any athletic team, the participants being more heavily skewed to football was not considered problematic. While football players made up half of the participants in the study, they actually had a lower percentage of participants than either basketball team. There are 80 scholarship football players, which means that 12.5% were involved in the study, whereas men's (5/13, or 38.5%) and women's (3/15, or 20%) basketball had higher overall percentages of their teams involved in the study. Participants reported having used Twitter for as little as 5 1/2 months and for as long as 4 years (M = 18 months). They reported having Twitter followers ranging from as few as 100 to 18,263 (M = 3,207). Participants reported checking Twitter frequently throughout the day, ranging from 20 to hundreds of times each day (these student-athletes shared that they configured Twitter to alert them each time they were mentioned or that they would simply look at their phone every few minutes). All student-athletes stated they accessed Twitter on their cellular phone due to convenience, and they stated that only in the rarest of cases would they access Twitter via a computer.

A semistructured interview format was chosen because this method enables participants to offer spontaneous comments that produce rich data and increase the chances for candid and representative responses (Brown, 2011; Karim, Bailey, & Tunna, 2000). All 20 interviews were conducted face to face by the first author on university premises. Examples of interview questions included “Why did you start using Twitter?” and “If you receive negative tweets, how do they make you feel?” The length of the interviews ranged from 17 to 36 minutes (M = 25 minutes). Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed by the first author and sent to the second author.
To answer the research questions, both authors independently familiarized themselves with the transcripts through careful initial reading and forming initial impressions. After this initial immersion in the data, each author isolated relevant material and classified these data into emergent categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After this initial categorization of data, each author independently returned to the data to gain insight into the usefulness of the developed categories (Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Durham, 2006). Through this constant comparative process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), development, clarification, and enhancement of categories continued until new observations failed to add significantly to existing categories. Both authors then discussed themes until reaching consensus regarding the content and nature of themes, a procedure that has been employed in other qualitative research (Karras & Rintamaki, 2012; Kassing & Sanderson, 2009). Each of these themes is now discussed along with exemplars drawn from the data.

Results and Interpretation

Motivations for Using Twitter

Student-athletes’ motivations for using Twitter fell into the following categories: keeping in contact, communicating with followers, and accessing information.

Keeping in Contact. Student-athletes shared that Twitter was a valuable and convenient resource to keep in contact with others. They indicated that Twitter enabled them to “see what my friends are doing; not to have to text them and say ‘what’s up?’ but just look and see what’s going on throughout their day,” and with Twitter, “you don’t have to have phone numbers—just hit them up on Twitter” and “you want to always see a friend tweet something and you wanna re-tweet or reply to their tweet or something like that—just a lot of interaction with your friends.” Beyond those in their immediate vicinity, Twitter’s utility also extended to the friends and family from whom they were separated. Via Twitter, one participant was able to provide “quotes and stuff like that just for people back home in [state] who really want to know what I’m doing,” while another student-athlete stated,

When you in college and your family is back home sometimes like your family have it so you can see what they’re doing and what they saying. So you can post pictures too, and so they can post pictures and I’ll just look back at what they’re doing.

Student-athletes also disclosed that Twitter allowed them to stay connected to their teammates and celebrities. For instance, “I follow Skip Bayless and NBA and certain people like that because I like to see what they say”; “I try to follow all my teammates, a lot of famous people I like to see what they have to say”; and

I follow pretty much all my teammates that tweet, like if they don’t really tweet I’m not going to follow them, but I follow pretty much everybody that I know really or professional athletes and actors, comedians stuff like that, I follow them.
Communicating With Followers. Another way that student-athletes reported frequently using Twitter was by communicating with their followers. For some student-athletes, this involved motivating and encouraging their followers: “I have more fans on there so it’s just communicating with them; giving young kids tips or whatever they need help with, and just trying to keep people’s spirits up by keeping positive” and “I use it to motivate other people who follow me because there are younger athletes that look up to me that I know, so I just give them encouraging words without actually saying it to their faces.” For other student-athletes, they interacted with their followers by requesting assistance from them, a task that has become popular for athletes using Twitter (Sanderson, 2013). Examples included “One time I just asked about this taco place and asked if I should eat there, and some people said you should and some people said it’s gross” and

I’m trying to find new cleats for next season. I always want new cleats; like this past year I had these [specific type] so I’m trying to find something, like some exotic cleat so I asked my friends and they all sent me pictures.

I’ll tell people, “Hey, let’s take this to Twitter.” If I’m in an argument with somebody about who’s better, Kobe or LeBron, I’ll just be like “Let’s take this to Twitter” and ask the question and get several replies and see what they have to say.

One time I did for this haircut I have now. I got this haircut right when school got out and I had asked “Should I keep my regular fade or get a “boosie fade”? And people started tweeting me back all their ideas.

Accessing Information. Student-athletes also conveyed that they used Twitter to keep abreast of game information, which at times they actually did during the game. For instance, “I mean, the kickers and snappers and me are kind of in the corner of the locker room and everyone else was like . . . so I’ll get on Twitter and I’m like “Great first half” and “Well, during a game I will be checking my timeline a lot.” Although student-athletes are prohibited from using social media during games, it appears that some of them willingly circumvent these rules, enticed by the ability to get “real-time” commentary about their individual performance or the collective performance of the team. Whereas some participants checked Twitter during games, others waited until after the game was over to obtain performance commentary. Examples included “But I’ll see like after the game they’ll send me like some direct message or something with my name like ‘good game’ or ‘I seen him do this’” and

I want to see what people said and who’s watching. Like, I didn’t play that much, but the little bit I did play, I would have 20–30 tweets saying “Good run, you did this on this run” you know, just a whole bunch of different stuff.

Several of the student-athletes also disclosed that they used Twitter to search out what people were saying about them after games. These participants noted that in many instances, the commentary was overwhelmingly critical, a topic we address in the following section.
Whereas it can be argued that criticism from fans “comes with the turf” of sports participation, social-media platforms such as Twitter seem to incite the worst in people, forcing student-athletes to adapt to criticism leveled at them in these digital domains.

**Critical Tweets and Identity**

Student-athletes perceived critical tweets in varied ways. Some reported that the critical tweets had no effect on them: “I could care less—it’s their opinion so it is what it is”; “It’s something where you just have to take it with a grain of salt—it’s nothing that is going to mean anything to you in the end. It’s just someone’s reaction to a situation”; and

I’m not going to waste my time writing you back or stating my piece or defending myself. At the end of the day, you’ve never been in our huddle, you’ve never been in our locker room, and you never will be so I could care less what you have to say.

For these individuals, criticism was something that was conveniently ignored and placed in proper perspective. These student-athletes recognized that their identity was not tied to fan perspectives, and although they might read critical tweets, they were perceived as inconsequential. Indeed, some student-athletes placed this commentary in the context of fans seeking to live vicariously through the team and, as such, deemed these critiques as unworthy of response.

Other student-athletes disclosed, however, that while they now ignored critical tweets, this decision had been a process. For example,

I just really now I understand it a bit more—anytime someone says something about you, I handle it totally different now. I laugh at it now and think I guess he wants to be in my position and wants to be where I am so anytime they say something negative I just laugh and be like “You want to be where I am, don’t you?” and they really don’t have something to say after that. I just kind of have that reaction to those things now—I don’t blow up anymore.

Another participant shared,

I ain’t going to lie, uh yes, sometimes I did respond to them and in a negative way and I’d tweet back to the world and I’d apologize for being upset; I should’ve handled it a little better you know and people would say “We understand—they don’t have a right to say that to you.” So really, I’d just block them when they say something negative.

Still other student-athletes noted that critical tweets provided motivation to excel in their performance and prove their detractors wrong. For instance, “I look at it as either motivation or you have no idea what you’re talking about” and

Every time I get a negative tweet, I use all the negative and turn it into a positive. Like I make it push me harder to not let it happen again so I don’t really let no negative stuff affect me—I always was above it and give thanks to the man upstairs and work harder and just don’t let it happen again.
Another student-athlete shared,

But me, I’m the type that’s like “Oh yeah, that’s how you feel? I’m about to go out and do exactly what you said I wouldn’t do.” I’m the type, I like proving people wrong. I’ve been doing it my whole life so I like that type of stuff.

Whereas critical tweets had minimal effect on some student-athletes, others conveyed that it was challenging dealing with the negativity. Examples included “Some of them that we get are very overwhelming and you’re like ‘really?’ You’ll send this to a student-athlete? I mean come on now” and

I try to stay away from them. They can’t say anything about how we play or what we can do—they just looking at it and don’t know what’s going on between our team. But I’ve actually been in a situation like that when we were in a tournament and the first time I looked at it after the game we played (team) and I got a tech and after the game some dude on Twitter said something crazy. He was like “You just need to shut up and play,” and I was like “If you didn’t see this game you can tell I had the first 10 points of the game so what are you talking about playing?” and then saying something like “If you really want to say something, you can come see me—come to my face and say it—don’t hide behind Twitter.” And he was like—he was talking about “I know your Coach” or something like that and I was like “I don’t care if you know my Coach, man—you don’t know me, though.” And then, he was like—he said something else and I was just like “I feel sorry for your parents they had to put up with you and how old are you?” This is like a grown man and he’s acting like this. I’m 21 and you’re probably 40+ and he didn’t tweet me back after that. I was like okay, I told him, “You sound—you talk real tough over Twitter, but he won’t come to me and say that” and he was like “I know your Coach” and I’m like “I don’t care if you know my coach.”

Another student-athlete shared,

Oh yeah, when I transferred there were a bunch of negative things like people saying I’m a quitter and they don’t even really know the inside story what happened. I really got . . . if they was really in that situation they’d have felt what I felt: low-balled, disrespected as an athlete, being pushed away to where you’re not even traveling with the team—like that’s so disrespectful to an athlete when I’ve been busting my butt, and they trying to put me on like Scout punt team or whatnot it was not cool at all. It was horrible and you know, my family was sick on top of that so there was nothing I could do.

Social-media platforms such as Twitter provide tremendous connective capabilities for fans and athletes (Sanderson, 2011a; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011) that can be both positive and problematic. The fact that student-athletes are amateurs and students appears to be lost on some fans, who feel the need to lambaste student-athletes via Twitter. Although some student-athletes refuse to let these critiques fracture their identity or use these challenges as motivation to improve, others are clearly affected by these tweets. Student-athletes must navigate between various identity positions such as athlete, student, and representative of the academic institution in determining how to handle critical tweets.
Responding to Critical Tweets

Student-athletes responded to critical tweets in varied ways. Some chose to ignore these tweets: “I just ignore it though—even if you want to reply you just can’t cause it’s nothing but trouble. Especially when you play rivals” and “I don’t want it to just sit there and have it burn in my mind and just let someone rip me like that, but I guess sometimes you gotta let that happen.” Another student-athlete indicated that while ignoring was the option he chose, it was nonetheless difficult:

No, I want to but my character . . . I’m a bigger person than that and I have true fans that really follow me and I don’t want to give a bad impression so I just blow it off. I look at it like this, everybody want to be in the athlete’s shoes and they’re probably 40, don’t have a job, and just watch college football or something and just trying to bring somebody down so you can’t pay that no attention.

But it’s tough and especially we have to be athletes and being at [school] we have to watch what we say on [school] and be role models so we can’t use foul language on there or say something out of the ordinary, you know? Uh, it’s tough . . . we talk about that all the time, my teammates—I wish I could cuss on Twitter, speak my mind on Twitter.

Others indicated that they deleted the person from their Twitter feed, although this apparently failed to stop fans who were intent on criticizing them: “I’ll delete it, or try to delete it, if I can. Or I block them, but they somehow find another name and get on and do it again” and

If I get a negative tweet, I just go and block that person. I just block them and that solves the problem. Once I block them they immediately go off my timeline and out of my “mentions” and they can’t tweet me, they can’t do nothing. You can ignore it, but it still going to be there, but if you block ’em, it’s basically like they never sent it.

Some student-athletes reported strategic ways they dealt with negative tweets. One noted, “I’ll probably retweet it and my little fans that follow me, they will go at him like that.” Other student-athletes talked about a practice they labeled subtweeting, whereby they would respond to a person without naming that person’s Twitter ID. “There’s a thing called subtweeting where you tweet about somebody, but don’t actually add their name” and

I sometimes will, it’s called subtweeting. It’s where you tweet about it, but you don’t mention the person that tweeted you. So I might say something like “That one tweet that I got didn’t really get to me as much as I would’ve thought it did.”

Student-athletes disclosed a variety of methods for responding to critical tweets, which ranged on a continuum from no response to strategically responding. Student-athletes’ responses seemed to reflect their position on an identity continuum, a process we elaborate on in the following section.
Discussion

Social media have become powerful sport media tools (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011; Sanderson, 2011a). Twitter appears to be the dominant social-media platform, and its trajectory of influence will only continue to escalate. Indeed, several of the student-athletes disclosed that Facebook had grown old and no longer merited their time, while expressing that Twitter was the newest and best social-media platform. Critics of Twitter are hasty to dismiss it as another fad enjoying a temporary visit in the limelight. However, while these criticisms are popular, they seem shortsighted. Whereas social-media sites use various growth strategies, Twitter’s growth is user generated. The motivation to follow and to be followed is strong not only with student-athletes but also with people in general (as the Twitter statistics alluded to earlier suggest).

Although student-athletes used Twitter to keep social connections and for information seeking (Farquhar & Meeds, 2007; Ruggiero, 2000), they also used it in ways that differed from other groups. Sayed (2012) studied political activists’ reasons for using Twitter and discovered that guiding followers to content and keeping informed of current events were primary motivations. For student-athletes, Twitter was a platform to obtain information from followers; thus, rather than steering followers to content, they solicited followers to obtain the data and report back to them. Given student-athletes’ time constraints, outsourcing information procurement to followers is an efficient way to deploy Twitter, and it should be noted that this trend is also being employed by professional athletes (Sanderson, 2013).

In addition, while a few student-athletes reported using Twitter to send updates to friends and family, for many of them, Twitter was a vehicle for information accumulation rather than information dispersion, a notable divergence from their peer group. Researchers have noted that college students use social-media channels (including Twitter) to disclose information (McKinney et al., 2012). It may be plausible that student-athletes mimic this usage behavior, but it may occur on Facebook or another social-media channel, not Twitter. Twitter serves as a medium for student-athletes to conveniently gauge the social “discussion” about themselves and their team, as well as staying abreast of happenings with their friends, teammates, and family.

Research on group motivations for using Twitter is still in its infancy, and we are hesitant to draw contrasts with other studies measuring Facebook motivations, but it seems clear that student-athletes use Twitter to gather information, both through information updates from their connections and by soliciting followers for information. In addition, student-athletes are in a unique position compared with their peers (although not from other athletes) in that they are the conversation on Twitter, as such, Twitter is a valuable resource for them to monitor what is being said about them. In accessing Twitter to view commentary, student-athletes encountered both accolades and criticism, which influenced their identity management. Indeed, the frequency with which many student-athletes checked Twitter suggests a strong need to see what people were saying about them, an action that is rooted in identity management.

Student-athletes handled identity-management issues stemming from critical tweets in diverse ways. Some were content with their athletic identity and framed fan behavior in ways that mitigated the personal attacks (e.g., misguided fandom) and anchored their identity to internal measures, rather than allowing critics to shape their worth in their sports. Similar to this first group, some student-athletes indicated
that they ignored the criticisms but did use them as motivation. For these student-
athletes, when their identity was challenged, it served as an impetus to prove their
detractors wrong. They responded by bolstering their commitment to their sport,
letting their performance, rather than their tweets, speak to their detractors. In this
type of response, identity was placed in a dialectical pull between wanting to ignore
criticism yet heeding the critiques so they could work harder to silence their detractors.

A third group of student-athletes attempted to ignore critical tweets by deleting
them, yet when their critics persisted, student-athletes reinforced their behavior
by continually attempting to erase these individuals. These student-athletes, while
openly professing that critical tweets did not bother them, nevertheless continued
to diligently scrub such comments from their Twitter profile. Whereas student-
athletes are subjected to negative behavior during athletic contests, their exposure
to these comments generally ends after the game. However, Twitter enables the
written word to linger on the profile, creating a perception of permanence that
fractures student-athletes’ identity, as evidenced by the labor they undertake to
remove offensive tweets.

Finally, a fourth group of student-athletes overtly responded to their critics,
which reflects an identity position where defense was a necessary reaction to any
personal attack. Although these student-athletes likely felt no different than their
fellow student-athletes about the effort they devoted to their sports, this was an inte-
gral identity component, and, as such, they could not stand by idly when critiqued.
There appears to be a progression that student-athletes undertake as they gain more
experience with Twitter criticism. Some indicated that they had responded only to
learn that this was not an optimal choice (likely after being reprimanded by their
coach or athletic department personnel), so they now used other ways to mitigate
the hit to their identity (e.g., working harder, subtweeting).

These varied responses underscore the diversity among student-athletes and
illustrate that athletic departments cannot assume that all student-athletes will ignore
critical tweets. Accordingly, it would be helpful for athletic departments to assess
where each student-athlete is with their identity management and identify ways to
help student-athletes respond to critical tweets, recognizing that this is likely to be
a process rather than an immediate cure-all.

Student-athletes’ being ripe candidates for criticism is nothing new, but two
things that appear to be escalating are the boldness of the critics and the immediacy
of their messages. Twitter’s rise has been accompanied by what appears, at least
anecdotally, to be a hypercritical society in which people seem to feel empowered
to send very demeaning or condemning messages to student-athletes via Twitter.
This brazen confidence stems from the protection users have behind the phone
or computer screen. Indeed, while many users list their real names, plenty hide
behind the security of anonymity when sending critical tweets. Again, negativity is
not something athletes are unaccustomed to, and most know that criticism comes
with job. For example, New York Yankees setup man David Robertson, who briefly
took over the closer role after legendary reliever Mariano Rivera was injured, had
a very rough outing and tweeted the following after the game: “I expected to be
slaughtered tonight on twitter, but the support y’all have shown reminds me how
amazing Yankee fans are.” It is tweet-worthy when fans show support because the
alternative is obviously the norm, yet even if there were negative tweets toward
Robertson, he is a paid professional athlete. Student-athletes are in a precarious
position because they are amateurs, are managing educational pursuits while
holding essentially a full-time job with their athletic demands, and are subject to
greater penalties for social-media missteps (e.g., loss of athletic eligibility) than
professional athletes. Moreover, if their scholarship is revoked, it means the loss of
not only eligibility but also what is hopefully a good trajectory vocationally as the
result of their academic education. Without the scholarship, some student-athletes
will no longer be able to pursue their degrees.

While hate mail has always been around, Twitter has exponentially increased
the ease with which such messages reach athletes. In fact, only 2 of the 20 student-
athletes reported having their Twitter accounts private. Essentially, this means that
18 of the 20 participants have their Twitter accounts set up in a way that enables
anyone who wishes to follow them to do so and, as such, have access to anything
that they tweet. Unlike Facebook, where users have to agree to be friends, Twitter
does not necessitate this step unless a user specifically configures the account to
review follower requests. Furthermore, one does not even have to follow a person
to send them a tweet. After a game, as long as an individual knows the Twitter
handle of the athlete they want to contact, they can send a tweet that the athlete will
likely view. As noted in the results, student-athletes are anxious to see what people
are saying about the game and quickly look up their own messages but also search
their names on Twitter. Thus, even if other Twitter users do not explicitly send an
athlete a message, if they simply use their name in a tweet, the athlete can see it.
Although some participants attributed this behavior to misguided fandom, the fact
remains that student-athletes are still 18–22 years old, and the rate and content of
critical tweets weighs heavily on these young minds.

Twitter’s rise in prominence corresponds to a need for sports organizations to
proactively monitor and address its influence (Sanderson, 2011a), particularly in
the realm of college athletics. As with most social-media tools, Twitter can elicit
both positive and negative outcomes. This is particularly true for student-athletes,
who may use Twitter in a way that they feel is innocuous but that ends up caus-
ing negative outcomes. For example, in December 2011 the NCAA suspended a
Lehigh University football player for retweeting another student athlete’s tweet
that contained offensive language and a racial slur (Thornton, 2011). From training
student-athletes on the front end to helping them absorb and respond to critical
comments they receive on the back end, it is imperative that athletic departments
acknowledge the powerful position that Twitter plays in the lives of student-athletes
in today’s world (Sanderson, 2011b). In undertaking these efforts, it is crucial to
acknowledge how student-athletes’ motivations for using Twitter influence the ways
they respond to criticism directed at them on Twitter. Recognizing that identity
management is an important factor that influences student-athletes’ experiences with
critical tweets will help athletic departments develop more meaningful approaches
to Twitter than simply banning its use.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This research, while providing important information about how student-athletes use
Twitter and respond to critical tweets, has several limitations that we now acknowl-
dge. First, the sample contained student-athletes at only one university. Maxwell
(2005) noted that even when careful attention is paid to participant recruitment and
data analysis, the information gleaned from small samples may not be typical. We
acknowledge that it is important to obtain the perspective of student-athletes at
other Division I institutions, as well as those at other levels of competition (e.g., Division II, NAIA), to see what similarities and differences exist. It may be that student-athletes at smaller institutions receive fewer critical tweets than those at Division I schools, who generally have a more visible media presence.

Second, the data are cross-sectional, and how student-athletes use Twitter and respond to critical tweets may change over time. Longitudinal approaches would be worthwhile in investigating how student-athletes use Twitter and respond over the course of their college careers. Finally, since the study aimed to constrain participants to one of the four major sports, there were significantly fewer female athletes interviewed than male athletes. Furthermore, although the “major” sports should attract more of a viewing audience, which should mean that there is more potential for those student-athletes to be followed on Twitter, this is certainly not guaranteed. In fact, a former collegian like Tiger Woods (golf) or future collegians and former Olympians like Gabby Douglas (gymnastics) or Missy Franklin (swimming) would not have qualified to be a part of this study even though they all have numerous followers on Twitter. However, each of these limitations also provides an exciting springboard into future directions for this intriguing area of research as it expands to additional contexts (e.g., student-athletes of other sports or other divisions) and to differences and similarities of gender-based research.

Additional future avenues of research may include looking at how student-athletes influence one another to use Twitter. For example, social-network analysis could be used to ascertain which student-athletes are at the “hub” of a team’s Twitter activity and how their Twitter content shapes that of their teammates. Comparing student-athletes’ Twitter activity across sports and athletic conferences may yield important data about how student-athletes in similar situations use Twitter. Finally, given the growth of Twitter, it would be worthwhile to investigate how high school athletes are using it and how they interact with critics. Such measures could identify positive and negative strategies that could be incorporated into training programs that may help student-athletes be better prepared to handle Twitter when they enter college.

**Conclusion**

Twitter currently has a preeminent role in college athletics. This is even reflected by various teams’ incorporating their student-athletes’ Twitter handles on the players’ athletic biography pages (e.g., USC football and Tennessee basketball). Twitter is now a permanent fixture in college athletics. Student-athletes, much like their peers, have gravitated to social media to connect. Athletic departments cannot expect that student-athletes will eschew Twitter simply because of fears about problematic content, yet several teams ranging from the Kansas football team last year to Connecticut’s women’s basketball team have banned players from using Twitter during the season. New Ohio State University football coach Urban Meyer made national headlines when he stated that he would be doing the same for his team. Inappropriate tweets can clearly harm the future prospects of an individual and also be detrimental to the university. For instance, a Florida State football player recently tweeted that “Child support is worse than AIDS” (Sorenson, 2012). In spite of an increase of social-media monitoring by athletic departments, problematic tweets continue to manifest. This suggests that education is a more optimal solution than surveillance. In this respect, sport communication scholarship has much to offer and
sport communication researchers should actively seek out partnerships with athletic departments to forge mutually beneficial partnerships. It is apparent that this study is merely scratching the surface of an emerging area of research that must continually be addressed to stay current on the rapid evolving topic of Twitter in college athletics.

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