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## The Utilization of Twitter by Drivers in a Major Racing Series

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# The Utilization of Twitter by Drivers in a Major Racing Series

## **Abstract**

Twitter continues to make significant inroads into sport management, marketing, and communication processes. The usage of Twitter has garnered significant attention in motorsports, with NASCAR's Brad Keselowski receiving considerable attention for Tweeting during the 2012 Daytona 500. Twitter has been studied as a tool through which athletes can communicate directly with fans (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2013), as well as an appropriate tool for marketing engagement (Schoenstedt & Reau, 2013). This study addresses a vacancy in the existing sport Twitter literature by examining Twitter usage among IndyCar series drivers through qualitative interviews. Drivers were asked a series of questions relating to their Twitter usage, and the responses were analyzed through first cycle and second cycle coding (Saldana, 2009). Several themes for Twitter usage emerged, including foci of authenticity, personal branding, promoted surveillance, and social extension. These findings were then discussed within the context of existing literature on Twitter and sport, and recommendations were made for future study.

## **Keywords**

twitter, social media, indycar, communication, marketing, management, public relations, relationship marketing

## Introduction

The continued growth of social media has opened up new avenues of marketing and communication for sport entities over the past decade. Thousands of leagues, teams, and athletes have acquired social media accounts, and use those accounts on a daily basis to communicate with stakeholders. The growth in social media is explosive, with millions of new users being added every year. Within social media, the service known as Twitter has demonstrated tremendous growth potential for brands and companies which use the service, outstripping rival service Facebook in follower growth by 55 percent (Ha, 2013).

Twitter is a real-time, internet-based social network which allows users to post 140 character messages known as *tweets*. Tweets are shared with a user's *followers*, or people who have opted to see the user's tweets via their own account. This is known as "following" another account. Following other accounts is the primary avenue of receiving updates from other Twitter users. Twitter users are also able to directly address each other by using the @ reply function. In addition to posting 140 text character messages, users are also able to share pictures, videos, and hyperlinks.

Since its launch in March 2006, Twitter has grown rapidly. It now boasts more than 200 million active users (Schroeder, 2012). As of the fall of 2012, about 400 million tweets are sent per day—an increase of more than 250% from the previous year (Kessler, 2012). Research into why people use Twitter has found that its users are interested in satisfying the social need to connect with other people (Chen, 2011). This has profound ramifications for athletes and professional sport organizations interested in enhancing their image with the public.

Twitter's impact reaches beyond the back-and-forth nature of 140 character updates. In 2012 the television ratings firm Nielsen announced that it was in the process of developing a Twitter TV rating to measure the social media activity around televised shows and events. Some television executives have suggested that buzz about a sporting event on Twitter can translate to increased television ratings for some sporting events (Ourand, 2013).

Recently, *Sports Illustrated* dubbed Twitter, "a permanent part of the sports firmament" (Wertheim, 2011). The benefit of Twitter for athletes is that it allows them to directly connect with fans, their messages not having to travel through the mainstream media. This direct communication between athlete and fan has been recognized as major change in the sport communication paradigm (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010). Because of Twitter, athletes who choose to use the service are more accessible to fans. This access also represents a significant change in the way athletes are able to present themselves to their fans and the public at large (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Despite the growth of Twitter usage by athletes, and the potential positive benefits

that can be derived by its use, no research has attempted to determine athlete perceptions of the medium through a qualitative methodology. This is the first known study to interview professional athletes directly and examine how these athletes are utilizing Twitter in an effort to engage with fans and for promotional purposes.

### **Twitter and Motorsports**

NASCAR formed one of the first official sport partnerships with Twitter in 2012. The popular racing league went as far as to rename one of its races with a *hashtag*, a popular tool on Twitter to discuss topics. This partnership included a dedicated webpage on the Twitter website where fans could view collected tweets, pit lane photos, and videos (Laird, 2012). This partnership with Twitter resulted from NASCAR's research into growing its fan base, research that suggested that social media could help fans feel connected to a specific driver and in turn increase their interest in the sport (Belson, 2012).

Twitter executives also chose a NASCAR race for the medium's first television ad. First aired in June 2012, the ad featured driver Brad Keselowski taking a picture with his iPhone while parked in his car on what appears to be pit row. The ad ends with the tagline "See what he sees" and invites viewers to visit the Twitter NASCAR webpage (Ngak, 2012). Keselowski is well known for the picture he tweeted during the 2012 Daytona 500, which showed a section of the racetrack burning with jet fuel. Keselowski's Twitter followers more than tripled in the hours after he tweeted his picture. Rather than punish Keselowski for violating NASCAR's ban on using electronic devices during races, a spokesman for the racing body said he was "the poster child for an engaging athlete – the type of athlete that the fans really connect to in a multitude of ways (Sandomir, 2012, ¶17)."

NASCAR's embrace of Twitter has produced a significant response on the social media platform. The racing circuit boasts more than 1.1 million Twitter followers, and many of its top drivers have more than 100,000 followers. In contrast, a series such as IndyCar lags behind in medium popularity. The official IndyCar Twitter account has around 100,000 followers, and with one exception, every full-time IndyCar driver has fewer than 100,000 followers (Schoettle, 2013). There is room for growth on Twitter for IndyCar and its drivers, and as such, IndyCar drivers are the focus of this current study.

NASCAR's official partnership is only one example of the relationship between sports and Twitter. In today's landscape it is rare to find any sporting event or sports league that does not utilize Twitter. Most major sporting events are designated their own Twitter hashtag (i.e., #ASG for Major League Baseball's All-Star game). Tweets from athletes are often featured in broadcast and print news stories. Athletes themselves have embraced twitter in ever-increasing numbers to do things as diverse as announce their retirements (Shaq, 2011) and

discuss popular movies with their followers (BMcCarthy32, 2013). There are now entire websites, such as *Twitter Athletes*, devoted to tracking verified professional athletes on Twitter. *Sports Illustrated* recently added a feature called “Tweets of the Week” that highlights newsworthy, funny, and interesting tweets from the sports world.

### **Twitter and Sport Research**

Due to the growth of Twitter usage by sport organizations and athletes, research has begun to examine the use of Twitter throughout the sport industry. For instance, Kassing and Sanderson (2010) studied how cyclists used Twitter during the 2009 *Giro d'Italia*. Their study found that the racers were tweeting about race conditions as the event progressed and allowing their followers a behind-the-scenes look at the race. The authors also found that the racers' interactivity with other Twitter users lead to an increase in immediacy between the riders and their fans.

Clavio and Kian (2010) studied the Twitter followers of a retired professional athlete to determine their motivations for doing so. They found that the athlete's followers were interested in elements of the athlete's persona, such as their writing, personality, and opinions.

The popularity of Twitter among professional athletes has motivated researchers to examine their use of the medium. Hambrick et al. (2010) performed a content analysis on 1,962 tweets from professional athletes and sorted them into six categories. The most popular category was interactivity (34%), followed by diversion (28%) and non-sports related topics (15%). Only 5% of the tweets were promotional in nature.

Pegoraro (2010) also examined athlete tweets to discover what they were tweeting about and what kind of tweets they were publishing. This research revealed that the most common type of tweet by the athletes in the study were tweets directed at another Twitter user. This research also revealed that the athletes in the study were highly interactive with their fans and were more likely to tweet about their personal life than their business life, their sport, or another sport (Pegoraro, 2010). Twenty-two athletes from motor sports were included in this athlete sample. Their tweets fell into three categories which were not mutually exclusive: personal life (72.7%), business life (13.6%), and responding to fans (22.7%).

An examination of tennis players' Twitter feeds revealed similar results. According to Lebel and Danylchuk (2012), these published tweets primarily fell into four categories: *conversational* (interaction with others), *sport insider* (behind the scenes info of practices and travel), *behind-the-scenes reporter* (elements of the athlete's persona, such as extracurricular activities), and the *super fan* (discussing other sports).

Witkemper, Lim, and Waldburger (2012) examined sport Twitter consumption as it related to motivations and constraints of users following athletes. The authors' findings indicated that four measures of motivation, *information, entertainment, pass time, and fanship* contributed to sport Twitter consumption, while *accessibility, economics, skills, and social* measures acted as constraints to consumption.

Twitter has also been studied as a factor in marketing efforts in sport and social media. Schoenstedt and Reau (2013) utilized an editorial schedule to increase the web traffic, social media audience, and ticket sales for a professional tennis tournament. The usage of the tournament's Twitter feed under the devised schedule led to a marked increase in engagement, popularity, and trust among fans.

In a separate study, Hambrick and Mahoney (2011) evaluated celebrity athletes as virtual spokespeople for products, examining the promotional elements of their tweets. The authors found that athletes tweeted in a promotional manner 12% of the time, and focused their efforts in these tweets on corporate sponsor products, charity, and personal activities.

Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, and Burch (2013) evaluated relationship promotion by athletes on Twitter, utilizing the theoretical lens of parasocial interaction (PSI). This approach evaluates athletes on a continuum, with athletes classified as parasocial using Twitter as a one-way mode of communication, and athletes classified as social using it as a two-way mode of communication. The study found that professional athletes focused their attention on both social and parasocial tweets. Socially active athletes on Twitter communicated primarily with lay people and other athletes, and focused the content of their tweets on personal life insight or general statements.

### **Purpose and Significance**

While research on Twitter usage in sport has been a popular recent area of inquiry, most analysis has focused on understanding why individuals use Twitter (Clavio, 2011; Clavio & Kian, 2010; Clavio & Walsh, 2013; Frederick, Lim, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012b; Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012) and the categorization of the types of messages that are being portrayed through Twitter by sport organizations and athletes (Frederick et al., 2013; Hambrick et al., 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro; 2010). While previous research has laid the foundation of examining Twitter usage in sport, it is necessary to take the next step and determine how professional athletes themselves are utilizing Twitter to engage with fans, drive interest in their own brands and their sport, and promote their sponsors. From a scholarly perspective, this research can allow greater insights into the thought process behind Twitter usage by athletes attempting to maintain and extend their own brands. This information may allow for new approaches to theory in the realm of social media,

an area which is still relatively new and unexplored, particularly in the areas of sport marketing and sport communication.

From a practitioner perspective, this research allows sport organizations to have a first-hand account in regards to their athlete's openness to using Twitter as a communication tool. This will allow the organizations to determine the best approach to utilizing Twitter to further the popularity and business objectives of the sport and their athletes. This is particularly important for a motorsports series such as IndyCar, which trails NASCAR in popularity and sponsorship dollars (Ryan, 2013). The research will also provide athletes and public relations managers with insights into how others in the field are utilizing Twitter, and allows the development of best practices in this area.

Given that this is the first such study to examine Twitter usage from the athletes first-person perspective research questions were deemed appropriate, and the following research questions were formulated for this study:

RQ1: Which individuals produce tweets on IndyCar driver Twitter feeds, and what experience do those individuals have with Twitter?

RQ2: What strategic or promotional plans are utilized with IndyCar driver Twitter feeds, if any?

RQ3: Do IndyCar driver Twitter feeds purposefully interact with fans and other drivers, and if so, why?

RQ4: What role does Twitter play in creating interest in the driver(s) or the series?

RQ5: Do sponsors make special requests of drivers regarding mentions of their products or services via Twitter?

### **Methodology**

Given the lack of prior research into Twitter usage from the athlete's perspective, as well as the lack of literature relating to social media use in motorsports, a qualitative methodology was deemed the most appropriate approach in this study. In the absence of data or knowledge relating to phenomena, qualitative research is considered an appropriate first step in building that knowledge, allowing for potential variables to be identified for use in future studies and potential hypothesis-building (Auerback & Silverstein, 2003).

In order to address the study's research questions, open-ended, semi-structured interviews (Hesse-Bever, & Levy, 2006) were conducted with seven professional drivers, hereby referred to as Driver A, B, C, etc., that compete in the IZOD IndyCar series. Drivers were chosen via convenience sample, an appropriate method of selecting qualitative interview participants (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). With cooperation from representatives at IndyCar, each driver's Public Relations (PR) representative were contacted asking for their interest in participating in the study. For those that agreed to participate, a mutually acceptable time was agreed upon between the PR representatives and the

researchers, at which time the driver agreed to call the study researchers and participate in the interview. The seven respondents included five drivers who have won at least one race in their careers and one former series champion.

Data was collected using a series of 10 questions, and depending on the length of answers given the interviews lasted between 10 and 30 minutes. In order to allow for transcription after the interview, each driver's interview was recorded. The 10 questions asked (see Appendix A) captured a variety of topics designed to understand the drivers familiarity of and use of Twitter, if they had a set plan for how they were going to use Twitter during the race season and how they promote themselves, their level and quality of interactions with fans and other drivers via Twitter, their perceptions of what fans want to hear from the drivers via Twitter, the role Twitter plays in promoting themselves and Izod IndyCar series, and the nature of sponsor interactions on Twitter.

Once complete, the interviews were transcribed to allow for coding to take place. Quotes were transcribed word-for-word, and were not "cleaned up" or otherwise altered by the transcription process. For the present study three individuals who are familiar with Twitter, Twitter research, and the motorsports industry were used to code the data. Specifically, two different coding procedures were utilized. First cycle coding was conducted in order to identify fragments of text from each individual interview response (Saldana, 2009). This allows for an overall understanding of what was found in the data and for original categories to emerge for further analysis. Second cycle coding was then conducted in order to develop in-depth categories of themes that emerged from each of the questions (Saldana, 2009). The coders then met to compare the themes that were found and came to an agreement to develop the most salient themes that emerged from the interviews.

## **Results**

RQ1 asked what individuals produce tweets on IndyCar driver Twitter, feeds, and what experience those individuals have with Twitter. Questions 1 and 2 (found in Appendix A) were used to investigate this research question.

The responses to Question 1 indicated unanimously that the drivers themselves were the sole operator of their Twitter accounts, with the exception of tweets sent out during actual on-course racing action. During those times, several drivers indicated that a public relations representative would tweet on their behalf, and in some cases these tweets were notated as being from someone other than the driver. One respondent owned a racing team and possessed a Twitter account specifically for the team, and said that people ran that account on his behalf. However, that driver's personal account was run completely by himself.

Question 2 inquired about the introduction of Twitter to the driver, and whether any training or instruction had been given on its usage. The date of adoption of Twitter usage varied among drivers, with some having joined as early

as 2009, and others joining within the last two years. None of the drivers reported having been given any formal instruction. Some indicated that they had received irregular advice or tutoring from marketing or public relations companies, while others indicated they had learned how to use the service through trial and error.

RQ2 asked what strategic or promotional plans, if any, are utilized with IndyCar driver Twitter feeds. Questions 3 and 4 were used to investigate this research question.

Question 3 asked whether the driver had a plan in place for Twitter usage during the upcoming season, and what that plan consisted of. Four primary themes emerged from the responses given. The first theme, *authentic information*, focused on providing both personal and professional information directly to fans via the Twitter feed. As noted by Driver D, “I try to keep [my Twitter feed] as genuine as possible and give people as much insight that they wouldn’t be able to gain anywhere else.” In that same vein, Driver E commented, “The biggest plan we have is to get more updates during races, because a lot of people who follow IndyCar...go to Twitter feeds while they are watching the race to get more information on what’s actually going on from the team accounts and the driver accounts.”

The second theme, *interactivity*, focused on using Twitter as a platform for direct interaction with fans. One participant noted the following:

I definitely am going to try and be a little more interactive with fans this season...that’s what’s so engaging about Twitter, the fact that you can interact with people that you follow, and for fans to get to know us and be able to ask us questions and get direct answers, that’s the beauty of it (Driver A).

A third theme that emerged from this question was *promotion*, as some respondents indicated a desire to market themselves and the series directly through Twitter. Some of these promotional efforts included giveaways, contests, and marketing campaigns, all specific to Twitter users.

The fourth and final theme uncovered from this question’s responses was *cross-platform integration*, which saw drivers attempting to use other media platforms in concert with Twitter. One driver indicated that he was planning on using the video streaming service uStream and a specially designed mobile application in conjunction with his Twitter account. Another spoke of opportunities with television and video programming, and using that approach to increase interest and follower numbers on Twitter.

Question 4 asked whether the driver uses Twitter to promote a certain image to their followers. There were two concepts that emerged from these answers, *authenticity* and *personal branding* which sometimes were complementary and sometimes were not. Driver E had the following to say:

To promote a certain image? Not knowingly, no. It's [a representation of] who I am. I'm not receiving any funds for any tweets, like from an advertiser. The image of who I am is an American race driver, who lives a down-to-earth life and loves everything about the water. And that's basically what you get in my tweets (Driver E).

Driver B's approach to Twitter focused primarily on the concept of authenticity:

I use Twitter to let my followers learn who I really am. It's not an image or a character or something I'm told I should be doing. Why I love it and why I sort of signed on and agreed to start using it is because it really lets people get to know who I actually am. I am just myself on there and so I guess some people learn more about me and who I am by following me on it (Driver B).

RQ3 focused on interaction between the drivers and others, including fans and other drivers in the series. Question 5 asked whether drivers went out of their way to mention or engage other drivers in their tweets. Most of the respondents indicated that they did, and the answers to this question revealed a theme which we have dubbed *promoted surveillance*. Drivers were consciously attempting to bring the "backstage" conversation into a public sphere, inviting fans to observe the interactions between drivers. As noted by a respondent:

I read other drivers' tweets, and there's often things that I can relate to, so I reply or talk to them about it...it's easier to relate to the other drivers and give the followers an idea of the kind of stuff we talk about. Rather than sending texts, we just do it over Twitter (Driver G).

Question 6 inquired about whether drivers directly interacted with fans via Twitter. All respondents verified that they did, and the quality of those interactions can be described in two generalized themes. The first, *social extension*, illustrates the ability of the driver to utilize Twitter to fulfill the dreams or wishes of the audience by actively interacting with the audience when it is requested. Driver C indicated that his interactions are "mainly reactive to conversations instigated by fans," while Driver B saw the interactivity as an important part of required fandom:

I think back to when I was a young child and something like Twitter existed and I could have tweeted at, and subsequently received, a tweet back from a sporting hero of mine or someone I watched on TV --- I thought that would be the coolest thing in the world. So for me, when I get the opportunity to tweet back at fans, I try to do that as much as possible (Driver B).

The second theme, *personality transference*, represents a desire on the part of the drivers to ensure that their public persona matches their Twitter persona. As

Driver D noted, “I basically want people to know I’m not just friendly in person, I can also be friendly on the Internet, too.”

RQ4 focused on the perception that drivers have about Twitter as a marketing and promotion tool. Three questions were asked to evaluate the facets of this research question, with Question 7 focusing on the role of Twitter in fans gaining interest in the series or the individual drivers. The primary theme for the medium’s role, *emotional facilitation*, dealt with Twitter’s ability to foster connections between fans and the series. Driver A noted the following:

To create new fans, whether it’s for me or the series, if you can get people engaged emotionally, they’re gonna follow what I do, what the series is doing, and feel an attachment to this sport. I think that’s what’s great about [Twitter], that interaction can really get people engaged in this sport, make them feel a part of it, make them really feel like they’re more than a fan, they have an actual connection to what we’re doing (Driver A).

Driver F’s comments supported this sentiment, noting that “[Twitter] is actually helping a little bit make the people more emotionally connected with a guy that is in a suit and helmet 95% of the time, and also exposing a sport where only 10% of it is shown on TV.” Similarly, Driver C stated, “I think that without that one-on-one interaction [via Twitter], it’s harder for [fans] to get personally invested in my success and my success within the series.”

One driver did question whether Twitter was the appropriate medium for growing the sport as compared to other social media. Driver D stated that while Twitter was obviously important, it might be better to focus attention on items such as viral videos on YouTube.

Question 8 dealt with driver perceptions of what fans are most interested in hearing about from them on Twitter. There were two clear themes that emerged from the responses: *insider information* and *personal commentary*.

The theme of insider information focused on the occurrences at the track, in the series, and dealings with other drivers. Driver E noted that fans were most interested in hearing his personal point of view about a race, material which may not have been expressed in the broadcast of the race. Driver D indicated that fans were most interested in behind-the-scenes material dealing with IndyCar, particularly information that they can’t find anywhere else.

The personal commentary theme encompassed both the drivers’ opinions on topics as well as their lives away from the track. Driver C stated that fans were interested in seeing what drivers do when not wearing a fire suit and helmet. As noted by Driver A:

More than anything, fans are interested in who we are, not just what we’re doing within our sport. It’s easy to find out information about what we’re doing at the track or professionally, so giving fans an insight into what we do when we’re not at the track, whether it’s going to a [basketball] game,

or being on a vacation...I think that's almost more interesting because it's something they don't get through IndyCar.com or other places...it's a much more personal level (Driver A).

Question 9 asked drivers to evaluate the overall importance of Twitter as a marketing tool for themselves and the racing series, when compared to other media types. The consensus response was that television was the most important medium because of the size of the audience that it reached, but that most drivers felt Twitter was very important. The consensus placed Twitter in the top three of media platforms for their marketing and fan interaction efforts.

Finally, RQ5 asked whether sponsors made special requests of the drivers in terms of tweeting out information regarding their products and services. Three of the drivers said that sponsors made those requests, but the majority of respondents indicated that they approach such messages as naturally as they can. Driver F noted that messages regarding products can't sound like a commercial, but must rather appear authentic and be couched in interaction. Driver A indicated that his main sponsor doesn't have to push him to create special messages, because he tries to be supportive of the company and what they are doing in their marketing efforts. Driver D noted a similar approach, stating "My philosophy on it is if it's not genuine enough, it's not worth doing. It just does not come across correctly for a sponsor in my opinion. I think people can tell if it's just a generic, paid-for tweet." Driver C indicated that his sponsor does not require or encourage him to tweet on their behalf, saying:

I know there are professional athletes that are encouraged or even contracted to have certain tweets or certain messages. Even other drivers have those obligations. [My sponsors] do not require it. It's something that if we are talking about certain things, certain messages on TV interview or radio sports and not on Twitter, that doesn't make any sense. So I try to integrate that message. There's no obligation. It's something that I feel completes the package (Driver C).

### **Discussion**

The results of the study suggest that drivers are not only aware of the power of Twitter, but are more than willing to put a concentrated effort into improving their interactions to further the interests of not only their own personal brand, but the IndyCar series as well.

The data gleaned from RQ1 indicated that drivers control their own Twitter accounts, with exceptions occurring when the driver is racing and unable to tweet. Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) raised the point that controversy exists over whether messages tweeted by individuals other than the stated account holder might be considered compromised from an authenticity perspective. Twitter itself has valued authenticity in its users, even going so far as to verify that accounts of popular users are actually officially connected to those individuals, and publicly

display that verification on the users' pages (FAQs about verified accounts, n.d.). However, these verified accounts are judged primarily on their connection to the athlete or team's business office, not the authenticity of the message creator being the athlete or team itself. Media commentary has highlighted authenticity as a primary factor in effective Twitter use within the sports world (McManus, 2012). The implications of this finding indicate that drivers and their teams feel there is a value in authenticity as it relates to Twitter usage. This is an area that appears ripe for future study, including both feelings of authenticity importance among athletes from other sports, and evaluations of fan perceptions of athlete authenticity on social media.

The importance of authenticity stemming from the running of accounts interconnects with the findings of RQ2. One of the primary themes uncovered when drivers were asked about strategic plans for using Twitter was that of *authentic information*, with a focus on information that is both unique to the driver and authentically from that driver. The quests for authentic (Clavio & Walsh, 2013) or unique information unattainable elsewhere (Clavio, 2008; Frederick, Clavio, Burch, & Zimmerman, 2012a; Frederick et al., 2012b) have been encountered in prior studies of new and social media. Drivers appeared convinced that their personal participation in the Twitter communication process was important to fans and consumers. Previous research has suggested that Twitter provides a forum to build relationships with fans (Clavio & Walsh, 2013; Frederick et al., 2012b; Schoenstedt & Reau, 2013), and this study was the first to show that athletes are consciously making an effort to develop personal and meaningful relationships with fans via Twitter.

This attitude extended beyond simply the strategic plan for Twitter usage, and into the question of whether drivers tried to promote a certain image to followers via Twitter. Both *authenticity* and *personal branding* were primary foci of drivers in response to what image, if any, they portrayed on Twitter. Drivers felt that their individual stories and lives were of value to the audience, and sought to position those elements prominently in their self-presentation on social media. These findings are similar to what was uncovered in Hambrick et al. (2010), who noted the following:

“Twitter may provide fans with unique insight into the personal lives of athletes and address topics not found to the same extent in mainstream-media sources. The information provided in these tweets gives followers the chance to learn more about their favorite players beyond their athletic activities” (p.464).

The findings of Lebel and Danylchuk's (2012) content analysis of tennis figures found elements of authenticity and personal branding within several of their established frames. The examples cited for the *conversationalist, sport*

*insider*, and *behind-the-scenes reporter* all contain some elements of the *authenticity* theme discovered in this study.

This desire on the part of drivers to provide the audience with authentic stories and viewpoints can be connected to non-sports communication theory of the past. The findings of Goffman (1959; 1974) in relation to self-presentation and framing both provide a potential framework for future studies of athlete authenticity via Twitter. The work of Papacharissi (2002), which evaluated self-expression on personal web pages, also could act as a baseline for evaluating the attempts at authentic self-expression suggested by the drivers' responses. While there are some structural differences between web pages and Twitter feeds, the concept of self-presentation in an online space may be consistent across these media.

Drivers were also found to value *interactivity*, yet another factor found in prior literature relating to new and social media (e.g., Clavio, 2008; Clavio & Walsh, 2013; Frederick et al., 2012a; Frederick et al., 2012b; Hambrick et al., 2010). The findings of Hambrick et al. (2010), in their study of professional athletes' Twitter usage, indicated that interactivity was the primary source of tweets, including both athlete-to-athlete interactions and athlete-to-fan interactions. While not specifically measured in this study, these interactions may build a fan's attachment with the athlete, leading to an increase in merchandise purchase, watching races, or engaging in other consumer behavior.

The emergence of *promotion* as a theme also ties in with prior research, as Hambrick et al. (2010) indicated that a small percentage of their coded tweets fell into a promotional category. That study noted the underutilization of Twitter as a promotional vehicle, and the responses of drivers indicate that while promotional considerations do permeate their usage patterns of Twitter, matters of authenticity, information, and interactivity appear to be more important.

Also uncovered was a *cross-platform integration* theme, which indicates that some drivers in this series are conscious of differences in audience between the various social media. As noted in prior research (Clavio, 2011; Clavio & Walsh, 2013), there does not appear to be unanimity among social media audiences, with demographics and psychographics varying among users of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and others. In one instance, a driver indicated a desire to promote Twitter via non-social media such as television, in order to gain a greater number of followers. This theme highlights the strategic thought process from some drivers relating to their overall media exposure and usage, and also illustrates that future social media studies should evaluate each medium as an independent entity with unique characteristics and audiences.

The responses to questions relating to RQ3 nominally focused on interactions and how the drivers perceived them. An interesting finding related to this research question came in the emergence of the *promoted surveillance* theme,

where drivers were purposefully placing their conversations with other drivers in plain view of fans and the public. The concept of surveillance is prominent in uses and gratifications studies of both traditional media (e.g., Blumler, 1979; Lin, 1999) and new media (e.g. Charney & Greenberg, 2002; Garramone, Harris, & Anderson, 1986). In this case, drivers appear to use the audience's desire to observe from a distance as a marketing tactic, by providing them with a window into driver interactions. This method could serve dual purposes, both increasing the affinity of fans towards the drivers individually, and encouraging fans to follow multiple drivers on Twitter, so as to be sure to catch both sides of the conversation. This is due to the manner in which Twitter deals with tweets sent directly to other accounts. Generally, if a person starts a tweet with the "@" symbol, users will not see that tweet in their timeline, even if they follow that person. However, if a user follows both the original account and the tweet destination account, they can see the tweets being sent, even if the tweet starts with a "@" symbol.

When looking at drivers' reflections on their direct interactions with fans, the themes of *social extension* and *personality transference* arose from the responses. Social extension saw the drivers attempting to fulfill public demand for their time and attention, and has implications both in terms of sport communication theory and sport marketing theory. Further investigation is warranted into these areas, particularly to see whether fans view this type of interaction as a sort of digital autograph, or whether they are interested in deeper and more meaningful interaction. Personality transference appears to tie back to the earlier concepts of authenticity, where drivers want to ensure that they come across on Twitter in a manner that is representative of who they are. Elements of this finding appear to tie in with the conclusions of Frederick et al. (2013), which evaluated social and parasocial use of Twitter by athletes and found that athletes were engaging in Twitter conversation with lay people, and were providing insights into their personal lives.

RQ4 examined the marketing and promotional aspects of Twitter in IndyCar. When evaluating the role of Twitter as an interest driver for the series and its drivers, the responses coalesced around the theme of *emotional facilitation*. Drivers appeared convinced that getting people engaged on an emotional level with the drivers and the series was a key element of their Twitter usage. This is again an area for future study, to see whether Twitter interaction and consumption creates greater emotional bonds between fans and the drivers. Given the nature of the theme, it appears that there may be obvious crossovers between this function of driver Twitter use and theoretical concepts such as relationship marketing, which can be generally described as the ways in which an entity attracts, develops, and retains customers (Bee & Kahle, 2006). In the context of the present study, Twitter may be utilized as a forum to attract fans to a

particular athlete or series. Then, the ability for fans to engage on the emotional level with the athletes can be seen as key drivers of an athlete's ability to develop a relationship and keep those individuals as fans of not only the athlete but the series as well. This notion is also supported by Williams and Chinn (2010) who indicated that social media provides a strong platform to meet relationship marketing goals such as increasing an understanding of customers, developing long-term partnerships, increasing loyalty and customer satisfaction, and building their brand.

When drivers were asked to identify what fans were interested in seeing them tweet about, the primary themes which emerged were *insider information* and *personal commentary*. Both of these themes would appear to tie into the traditional areas of information or information gathering found in uses and gratifications studies of new and social media. Furthermore, both of these items connect closely with RQ2's finding of authentic information being a primary strategic component of driver Twitter usage. Personal commentary appears to have particularly interesting theoretical implications, with respondents convinced that the audience is at least as interested in driver's personal lives and actions as they are in sport-specific information. This stands in contrast to findings from other studies, which indicated that fans of other sports were more interested in sport-related information than in personal information (Holder, 2013).

RQ5 inquired about sponsor requests in relation to Twitter usage by drivers. The results suggest that not all corporate sponsors are requiring that their sponsored athletes promote their brands via Twitter. Given the direct and instant interaction that Twitter provides this result was somewhat surprising. This may suggest that companies have not fully embraced Twitter as a means to promote their brands or that they may prefer to control their brand messaging through their own Twitter feed or other mediums. It is suggested that this is a potential missed opportunity for IndyCar driver sponsors given that there was a consensus among the drivers that they are not only willing to promote their sponsors via Twitter, but are even doing so at times without being contractually obligated to. In addition, the drivers are Twitter savvy in that they suggest that the promotion of the sponsors brand via Twitter needs to be natural and genuine in order to have the proper effect.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study does contain some limitations. First, as a qualitative study, the results are not intended to be generalizable beyond the group of drivers interviewed. Second, access to the drivers was based upon cooperation between the researchers, the series, and the individual drivers' public relations representatives. As such, the sample should be classified as a convenience sample. Third, the interpretation of the interviews with the drivers is based upon accurate transcription of their responses. While every effort was made to ensure 100%

accuracy in transcription, it is possible that words or meanings may not have fully transferred from the driver's response to the transcribed text.

As noted in the discussion section, there are a variety of avenues for future research in this area. It would be worthwhile to investigate IndyCar fans who follow drivers on Twitter, and evaluate their uses, gratifications, and overall perceptions of driver Twitter use, as a comparative piece to the drivers' own perceptions. Such evaluations could take on both qualitative and quantitative methods, and produce a robust evaluation of the efficiency and importance of Twitter within the IndyCar fan/driver exchange. Of particular interest is fans' perceptions of driver authenticity, as well as their interest in both interactivity (with drivers and other fans) and surveillance (of driver-driver communication via Twitter).

Another area of future study lies in sponsor perceptions of Twitter usage. The general lack of required sponsor tweets leads one to wonder whether sponsors perceive Twitter as a different type of medium than traditional advertising venues, or whether other factors are at play. Given the sponsor-driven nature of motorsports in general, and IndyCar in particular, this avenue of research could have considerable practical implications for the industry.

It is also important to compare the findings of this study with the perceptions of Twitter usage among athletes in other series (such as NASCAR and F1) and in sports other than racing. Would the interpretation of Twitter utility as a marketing and communication tool be different for athletes who are not part of a sport that primarily focuses on individuals? Do athlete perceptions of sponsor and fan expectations change based upon the type of sport? These and many other questions warrant investigation.

### **Conclusion**

This study evaluated the usage of Twitter by IndyCar drivers using semi-structured interviews, in order to evaluate how and why Twitter is a part of their overall communication and marketing efforts. As such, it provided a rare insider viewpoint into Twitter usage within the motorsport industry, and demonstrated how the drivers within IndyCar view Twitter's place in the marketing and communications mix. As social media continues to expand its influence in world culture and society, investigations such as this one will help to form greater understanding of how athletes, teams, and leagues can better use Twitter to interact and inform their stakeholders.

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## **Appendix A**

1. Are you the sole manager of your twitter feed, or are there others involved?
2. How did you learn about using Twitter, and have you had any training or instruction in the usage of your twitter account?
3. Do you have a plan in place for how you are going to use Twitter during the upcoming season, and if so can you explain it?
4. Do you use Twitter to promote a certain image to your followers?
5. Do you go out of your way to mention or engage other drivers in your tweets?
6. Do you interact directly with fans via Twitter, and if so, can you talk about the quality and quantity of those interactions?
7. What role do you think your activity on Twitter has on fans gaining interest in the series or in you as a driver?
8. What kinds of things do you feel that fans are the most interested in hearing from you via Twitter?
9. In your opinion, compared to other available media, how important a role does Twitter play in marketing yourself and your series to fans?
10. Do you sponsors encourage you to tweet out certain messages regarding their brand and yourself?