CASE STUDY

Identity in Twitter's Hashtag Culture: A Sport-Media-Consumption Case Study

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This case study, using social-identity theory as a framework, examines how sport consumers and producers used different identifiers to engage in conversation during the final games of the 2012 College World Series of baseball. Five major hashtags were noted for each baseball team as primary identifiers; users fit in 3 main groups and subgroups. The analysis of tweets revealed 5 major themes around which the conversations primarily revolved. The study has implications for social-identity theory and team identification, as well as broader implications for audience fragmentation and notions of the community of sport.

Keywords: social-identity theory, sport communication, sport fans

> *The fall of watercooler TV has been playing out for years. When that happens, you can try to make better TV. Or you can find a better watercooler.*
>
> —Poiewozik, 2010, p. 1

Sport events rarely occur without interaction and conversation of some kind. In the short existence of social media, there has been an immediate impact as sport consumers have taken to message boards, blogs, chat rooms, and other online forums to discuss and debate everything from coaching hirings and firings, blown calls by officials, and the significant plays in various games. With social media, sport consumers do not have to wait to discuss the hot topics; access to other consumers is instant and immediate. Twitter, the popular microblogging platform, is one such medium that allows sport consumers to connect in instant conversation and interact over the course of sporting events, in times of breaking sporting news, and throughout the course of a sport's season.

One characteristic that is intricately tied to sport consumers is their identity. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social-identity theory asserts that individuals classify themselves and others into various categories to make sense of the social world and their place in it. Behaviors motivated by in-group and out-group bias (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) are often seen in sports fans, tying closely into team identification. Wann and Grieve (2005) note that fans around the globe identify with teams,

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show favoritism toward fans of that team (in group), and marginalize fans of the opposing team (out group). As for how these identities are formed, Hall (1996) notes that one way they are constructed is within discourse.

This case study considers sports consumers' use of Twitter during a major sporting event—the 2012 College World Series of baseball. To date, most examinations of Twitter have focused on athletes' use of Twitter (see Pegoraro, 2010; Sanderson, 2008, 2009); this study will take into account the actions of consumers. Rather than fans gathering around an actual watercooler the day after the event, this study contends that Twitter becomes a virtual watercooler per se for sport consumers to engage in a virtual conversation with other consumers and producers to satisfy different motivations for consumption and identity. Using the basis of social-identity theory, this study examines how sport consumers and producers used different identifiers to engage in a virtual conversation during a live sporting event.

Literature Review

Sport Consumption

Wenner's (1989) transactional model of mediated sports stipulated a static, one-way model of communication where the audience was a passive consumer, motivated by factors such as entertainment, learning, companionship, and group affiliation (Wann, 1995; Wann & Wilson, 1999; Wenner & Gantz, 1998). At the time of that model, the avenues for consumption were limited; fans went to live sporting events, watched a limited selection of sporting events on television, or watched sports highlights on news shows. Similar to audience fragmentation, fast-forward 20-plus years and the avenues for consumption have exploded. In addition to a wider variety and range of sports offered, there are also more options with which to consume these sports. Consumers laughed when the movie *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* (Cornfeld & Thurber, 2004) introduced ESPN8—The Ocho! Already with three television stations, a magazine, and a high-profile Web site, ESPN began expanding its portfolio that same year. ESPN Deportes, offering Spanish-language programming in the United States, launched in 2004. ESPNU, with a focus on college sports, was added to cable packages in 2005. ESPN3.com launched in 2005, providing streaming sports online. More specialized offerings like ESPN Plus—a group of stations offering regional programming—were launched beginning in 2008, and ESPNW, focusing on all women's sports, was launched in 2010.

Billings (2010) points out that a sports fan can now be completely attuned to what is happening in the world of sports without ever watching an actual game or event. There are also more ways to consume an event. More niche options are available as viewing choices, allowing for greater audience-viewing fragmentation. Two people can watch the same event on two different mediums; one can watch a football game on television through ESPN, and one can watch the same game streaming through a smartphone or tablet via ESPN3.com.

In further defining consumption, Crawford (2004), highlights the commodified sports fan and notes, "Consumption can involve 'person–person' relationships, where individuals may observe and 'consume' the actions and performances of others, such as in watching a sporting event" (p. 4). He further points out that not all fan activity directly involves acts of consumption—much of what makes a fan

comes from identity, memories, thoughts, and social interactions, which all will influence his or her eventual consumption. Since Wenner's (1989) model, consumption has changed and grown because of technological advances. As Schultz and Sheffer (2008) point out, the communication model is now a two-way model that enables consumers to be active participants in the communication process. Thanks to online tools such as blogs, Facebook, and Twitter, sports fans do not just consume media—they become content providers, as well. Fans can go to a game and "live tweet" scores, photos, videos, and updates from the stands. They can interact with other fans, with media, and even with athletes—although most likely after the game is over. The current communication model changes the definition of what it means to be a consumer.

Motivations for Consumption

Sports fans have different motivations for consumption of sports media. Scholarly literature has identified motivations such as aesthetics, catharsis, drama, entertainment, escape, social interaction, and vicarious achievement (see Sloan, 1989; Zillmann, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1989; Zillmann & Paulus, 1993).

Raney (2010) divided consumption motivations into three main categories: emotional, cognitive, and behavioral. Emotional (affective) motivations—which would house entertainment theories—include motivations such as entertainment. Cognitive motivations include learning and information gathering. Behavioral, or social, motivations would encompass behaviors like releasing emotions, companionship, group affiliation, family, and economics. This study lies with Raney's behavioral motivations—specifically, group affiliation and companionship.

Melnick (1993) defined companionship as a sports encounter that provides strangers with legitimate and interesting opportunities to interact. These interactions carry a certain set of assumptions, among them a certain level of knowledge about the sport, shared behaviors, motivations, commitments to and enthusiasms about the game, and certain understood boundaries about when conversations could occur. Based on these assumptions, Melnick (1993) asserted that an environment was created that not only was conducive to conversation but also created a unique setting for public discourse based on the implicit terms of the social arrangement that allows for friendly disagreements. Therefore, sports fans will seek out this certain type of companionship based on the set of understood norms and rules because it allows them to engage in conversation and debate and allowed disagreement. A sports encounter becomes a unique conversation based on these norms where those same norms and assumptions would not translate to another social setting without repercussions.

Theoretical Framework: Team Identification and Social-Identity Theory

The second behavioral motivation provides the theoretical basis for this study. For several decades, sports researchers have been captivated by the effects of sport-team identification on individuals' social identity. Due to the size and popularity of the sports industry, both college and professional, sports fans can identify with a number of sports ranging from football to hockey, baseball, and soccer, as well as many others. Researchers have discovered a number of behavioral and cognitive effects of team

identification and social identity (Trail, Fink, & Anderson, 2000; Wann & Grieve, 2005). Because many large cities have professional sports teams, such as National Football League, Major League Baseball, and National Basketball Association teams, fans largely identify with teams on a geographic basis. National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletics also often have a fan base that is contingent on location but is more often centered on specific colleges and universities. Team identification is displayed with team apparel, attendance at sporting events throughout the season, and media consumption; more recently, the use of Internet Web sites and social-media outlets to display team identification has skyrocketed (Phua, 2008).

Tajfel (1978) defines social identity as the portion of an individual's self-perception that arises from membership in a particular group or groups, as well as the emotional significance and value attached to the membership, thus dealing primarily with group memberships. Social-identity theory suggests that individuals have both a social identity, which refers to demographics, organizational, and other such group memberships, and a personal identity that is composed of interests, talents, and abilities (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009; Turner, 1982). Furthermore, social-identity theory explains that when an individual can identify with a group or organization, he or she experiences "a oneness with a belongingness to the organization(s) of which he or she is a member" (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 104).

Social-identity theory suggests that individuals are motivated by in-group and out-group bias, which are established by members of various social groups (Brown, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). More specifically, people tend to have more favorable attitudes toward and judge as superior members of their own group, while categorizing out groups and out-group members as inferior. In-group members make these social comparisons to increase their own self-esteem (Fink et al., 2009). Social identity, particularly in-group and out-group bias, is very much seen in sports-fan behavior. Millions of sports fans across the globe highly identify with particular teams, showing favoritism toward others fans of their team while marginalizing fans of the opposing team (Wann & Grieve, 2005). Wann, Melnick, Russell, and Pease (2001) suggest that fans see their team as an extension of themselves. Because they are not members of the team and are not directly connected to competitions, viewers' link with specific sports teams is only through team identification.

Phua (2008) points out that the application of social-identity theory to team identification suggests that an individual's moods and self-esteem are linked to the success or failure of their team throughout a given season. Wann et al. (2001) define team identification as the psychological connection an individual feels to an athlete or team. Fans who display a high level of team identification are more likely to display group-based self-esteem than fans with low team identification. They also frequently rate other in-group members (fans of the same team) more favorably than out-group members (fans of other teams; Wann & Branscombe, 1993).

Highly identified fans are also more likely to sustain their identification with their team during both winning and losing seasons (Cohen & Garcia, 2005). Similarly, fans that have lower levels of team identification tend to distance themselves from their team after losing seasons. Researchers also found that highly identified fans attribute team successes to internal factors such as team skill, performance of specific athletes, and coaching, while they ascribe losses to external factors like inclement weather, referee bias, and even cheating by the opposing team (End, 2001; Phua, 2008; Wann et al., 2002).

Wakefield and Wann (2006) examined the relationship between team identification and fan aggression. They found that fans who are more highly identified with a particular sports team are more likely to display antisocial behavior at sporting events. For example, fans who display high team identification were found to be more likely to verbally abuse officials, call into sports radio shows to discuss criticisms, and engage in verbal confrontations with opposing fans.

Twitter

Twitter is a free, asynchronous microblogging service that can be powered through the company's Web site, third-party Web-based platforms, or a smartphone or any phone capable of producing Short Message Service (SMS) text messages. Accessibility is part of the popularity of Twitter, which has more than 140 million active users (Wasserman, 2012). The service boasts more than 340 million individual tweets each day ("Twitter Turns Six," 2012). Pew reported that 15% of online adults use Twitter, with 8% using it daily, noting that the proportion of daily use has doubled in a year and quadrupled since 2010 (Smith & Brenner, 2012). Global SMS traffic is likewise still growing and projected to reach 9.4 trillion texts by 2016, demonstrating a 19% annual curvilinear increase year by year (Informa Telecoms & Media, 2012).

In the sports world, Twitter's growth extends to athletes. Soccer's Ricardo Izecson dos Santos Leite, more famously known as Kaka, began 2012 as the most popular athlete on Twitter with more than 8 million followers (Gaines, 2012). Twitter is also a venue to talk about sport. Kassing and Sanderson (2010) found that Twitter served to increase immediacy between athletes and fans to augment the fan experience. That same utility applies to other users outside of direct athlete participation, essentially creating a real-time virtual watercooler effect. People can be affected by the athletic contests they witness, likely leading to further consumption (Kassing et al., 2004).

People use Twitter to share information (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007). In the live sports context of Twitter there are expressions of strong emotions. The expectation of the upcoming game, excitement of the first pitch, the potential of being a witness to history, and the more visceral joy of triumph and the pain of loss are all shared on Twitter. These highly emotional exchanges are not unusual in social media or limited to sport. As Sanderson and Cheong (2010) discussed in an analysis of Twitter use after singer Michael Jackson's death, the social-media platform has become a forum for the traditional phases of grief and community building, fostering public expressions.

Twitter use, like all conversations, helps fulfill emotional, cognitive, and behavioral motivations for consumption. The transactional model of communication is not new. The conversation happens along a feedback loop among participants who both transmit and receive information, ultimately influencing one another (Gould, 1993). From a behavioral and social perspective, particularly companionship and group affiliation, Twitter also creates new relationships and conversations within these relationships not otherwise possible between individuals (Haythornthwaite, 2005). Different possible relationship dynamics include media and fans, media and athletes, athletes and fans, fans and fans, and athletes and athletes.

The platform also allows users to provide information about themselves while connecting to others (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), demonstrating the now customary

model of athletes speaking directly with fans. Circumventing the filter that a club's public relations department and the mainstream media provide, as Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, and Greenwell (2010) suggested, creates a personalized and unfiltered level of interaction between athletes and fans. Twitter has allowed a new interactive environment for athletes and fans that is no longer controlled by media gatekeepers, changing the face of sports media (Hutchins, 2011). Frequently, these interactions occur under an identifying hashtag.

The Hashtag as Identification

Users come together in a virtual conversation about a sports event in an association of peer-group interaction and a sense of social presence (Tu, 2002). This bears itself out in Twitter in both the self-selection of followers and the use of hashtags as both indices and identifiers. Defined by Kwak, Lee, Park, and Moon (2010), the hashtag is used by Twitter users "to create and follow a thread of discussion by prefixing a word with a '#' character" (p. 2). Using hashtags gives insight into the meaning of the individual post or some larger context as it relates to a larger topic. Efron (2010) noted three benefits particularly related to hashtags, identifying them as useful for following tags on an ongoing basis, result display, which groups returns into clusters and query expansion, to provide leverage during relevance feedback. Huang, Thornton, and Efthimiadis (2010) identified tagging as a method for filtering and promotion.

Yang et al. (2012) argued that hashtags serve as both bookmark and community membership, connecting a virtual community of users. In this way, users can discern both who is talking and what they are talking about. That content figures prominently in gaining a community's acceptance (Tsur & Rappoport, 2012).

Selecting and Analyzing Tweets

To examine how a community of sport consumers engages on Twitter during a sporting event, we analyzed tweets during the final two-game series of the 2012 College World Series of Baseball. Data collection began at the start of the game—the point at which each College World Series game took to air on ESPN—and ended 5 minutes after the conclusion of each game. The finals consisted of a best-of-three series between the Arizona Wildcats and the South Carolina Gamecocks. South Carolina came into the series as the two-time defending national champions, while Arizona's last national championship had been in 1986. In this series, Arizona won the championship in two games, defeating the Gamecocks in Game 1 with a score of 5–1 and clinching the series in Game 2 with a score of 4–1.

During Game 1, under the hashtag #CWS, approximately 7,247 tweets were recorded. During Game 2, under the hashtag of #CWS, approximately 2,425 tweets were recorded; making the total number of tweets recorded under the #CWS hashtag between the two games approximately 9,672.

We identified one main hashtag—#CWS—as a starting point for data collection. As the road to the College World Series had officially started with regional play, with 30+ games per day in the early regional rounds beginning in early June 2012, the #CWS hashtag was one that had been established as an identifier for the College World Series.

We first asked what unique hashtags would develop within the specific communities of consumers that would serve as identifiers over the course of the games. Through the final two games of the series, we were able to identify five main hashtags for both Arizona and South Carolina that were used most often in the conversations. Table 1 shows a full breakdown of the top five hashtags for each team and number of times they were used in each game. It is important to note that this is not clean math, and the number of these hashtag occurrences will not and is not intended to add up to the total number of tweets for the entire College World Series. In addition, there were other and alternate hashtags found to be in use in the conversation, though their numbers were much less than the ones identified here. These hashtags were the most prominent five of each team as they occurred across the two games.

Although there are numbers we cite with how many times a hashtag was used, to identify exactly how many people were tweeting about the game is a task that we felt was not possible. Not everyone who tweeted about the game may have been using a hashtag to identify their tweet, which means those tweets would not have shown up in the Twitter stream being analyzed. In addition, users may have been using hashtags, but not the popular #CWS hashtag, to identify their tweets, which means those tweets would have also fallen out of the collected sample.

What we felt was more important was to identify the different types of people, that is, consumers, who were involved in the conversation under the #CWS hashtag. To have a conversation, there must be more than one person or group involved, so understanding the different participants was imperative.

The first group of people identified was classified as media. Media could be broken up into several subcategories. The first group was traditional-media outlets and comprised official news organizations. The second type of media was fan-based

Table 1   Top Hashtags Used by Consumers in Games 1 and 2 of the 2012 College World Series Final

Team	Hashtag	Number of Uses		
		Game 1	Game 2	Totals
University of Arizona	#Arizona	1,046	1,527	2,573
	#BearDown	811	1,293	2,104
	#ArizonaWildcats	498	861	1,359
	#Wildcats	302	417	719
	#UofA	252	434	686
University of South Carolina	#Gamecocks	1,257	2,130	3,387
	#FearTheFish	1,040	1,406	2,446
	#3peat	741	1,087	1,828
	#gococks	668	931	1,599
	#gamecockbaseball	552	800	1,352

media online, which would primarily encompass bloggers. The final group of media includes university-produced media, or the various outlets the universities and athletic departments use to promote themselves. A second major group identified in this analysis was official organizations—for example, the NCAA, the NCAA College World Series, and the College World Series. The third primary group identified was fans. These were people who by their Twitter profile did not have any affiliation with media or any other official organization. Most of the fans tweeting were self-identified as either Arizona or South Carolina fans, but there were a fair amount of fans who identified themselves as fans of schools that were not in the tournament. Some of those fans used hashtags to declare temporary allegiance to either Arizona or South Carolina for the final two games of the series.

Since what was being analyzed was an actual game, we did not expect that there would be tweets from the players during the game. There were, however, tweets from other athletes during the game; for example, U.S. softball gold medalist and University of Arizona alumna Jennie Finch had multiple tweets during both games that cheered on the Wildcats—and used many of the popular hashtags of the Arizona fans. All tweets that were analyzed were from the different consumers of the game. By breaking down the consumers into these groups, we could distinguish on a more specific level who was speaking in the virtual conversation.

Although other studies have identified categories of tweets (e.g., Clavio, 2008; Seo & Green, 2008), we felt that for this study, trying to classify each tweet into the previously determined categories would be ineffective, based on the limited focus of the tweets being analyzed. Thus, through the use of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) we focused on emerging themes rather than trying to specifically categorize tweets. Through grounded theory, data are analyzed using a "detailed line-by-line analysis to generate initial categories (with their properties and dimensions) and to suggest relationships among categories" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 57). The initial emergent categories were considered ways in which consumers identified with other consumers in an online environment to carry on a virtual conversation during a mediated sporting event. As grounded theory suggests, the initial categories were refined and clarified as new tweets and data emerged, until there were no further additions that added significantly to the existing themes.

Through the grounded-theory approach, we examined all tweets and hashtags from the consumers for emergent themes with two main questions in mind: How did consumers use hashtags on Twitter during the College World Series? What purposes did those uses serve?

Emergent Themes

Over the course of the 2 days of data collection, we examined the hashtags and tweets to see what prominent themes emerged. The first question we sought to answer was what unique hashtags would develop among the fan bases. The overarching question this study sought to address was how consumers used those hashtags on Twitter during the College World Series. What the findings show is that multiple discourses occurred throughout the span of the games—some continuous, some disjointed, and some extremely fragmented. However, the hashtags served as a gathering place of sorts for consumers to virtually congregate, and several prominent themes of real-time conversation developed.

Hashtags

The first question the study asked sought to identify the unique identifiers to the specific event, as well as to the individual fan bases following the event. As noted in the literature review, the hashtag can be used as an index, an identifier, a filter, and a promoter; more important, it can connect a virtual community of users (Yang, Sun, Zhang, & Mei, 2012). Most major sporting events have garnered their own hashtags: #Superbowl2012, #WorldSeries2011, #Daytona, and #Masters2012, for example. The College World Series was no exception; the hashtag #CWS was adopted early on as the official hashtag of the College World Series and used consistently as far back as the conference championship games.

What was of more interest to this study was what unique hashtags would develop in the specific communities of consumers that would serve as identifiers over the course of the games. Five hashtags for each team were easily identified. Although there were hashtags beyond those five, the five identified were the most prevalent; the numbers dropped down dramatically for the sixth most-used hashtags. Most of the identifiers were preexisting constructions within the frameworks of those communities. Every one of the prominent ones was an iconic identifier or an action-acted version of that icon. They were school names, school-name variants, mottos, or de facto mascots. Even the original identifier is an acronym (UofA). None of them are so new and original that they cannot be rallied around, are not already known by consumers or fans engaged on Twitter, and, most important, are not already accepted in use.

For Arizona, "Bear Down" is the official motto of the university and inspiration behind the school's unofficial fight song. The expression stems from John "Button" Salmon, a 1920s starting quarterback and catcher who died after a car crash. *Bear down* was the last thing he told his teammates. This legend is very similar to the "Win one for the Gipper" tale made famous by Ronald Regan in the 1940 film *Knute Rockne: All American*. Not just in baseball, but in all Arizona sports, fans have urged teams and athletes to bear down. The encouraging cheer became the second-most-prominent hashtag used for the Arizona fan base.

The South Carolina fan base had two unique hashtags they used to self-identify in the conversation. The first one, #FearTheFish, stems from the unofficial mascot of this particular South Carolina team. The player LB Danzler had a fish, Reptar, that was thought to be something of a good-luck charm for the squad. Followers of college baseball know the sport is full of superstitions (e.g., rally caps). Incidentally, #Reptar was another regularly occurring hashtag during the series, although the number of times it was used was much less frequent than the numbers for the top five hashtags. It was also used as a jeer by Arizona fans, which will be discussed later.

The second unique hashtag use by the South Carolina fan base was #3peat, referencing South Carolina's attempt to win their third national championship title in a row. Using this hashtag was an easy way for the fan base to self-identify, while also engaging in a form of cheering.

Calling the Game

The most prominent theme that emerged was one that essentially kept a running commentary on what was happening during the game. An individual could use Twitter in this sense to "watch" the individual games without ever turning on the

television. Tweets here included scorekeeping, statistics, and play commentary. Tweets about scores and statistics were very basic and simple. Reporting the score, "@ESPN: #Arizona leads #SouthCarolina 1–0 heading into the T4 #CWS," or reporting a statistic of interest, "@NCAACWS: Michael Roth is pitching in his 8th career #CWS start, most of any player," served to be the more neutral "play calling" element of the conversation.

Play commentary differed in nature, tending to be more opinionated and colorful. Play commentary provided more details than just statistics. It was important to note who the person tweeting was, as bias became a factor to be considered. When the commentary was from the media or an organization, the tweets were generally neutral, providing just a basic commentary or description of what happened. Early in the first game of this College World Series, for example, Arizona performed a key double play to stop a South Carolina rally. Sports journalists' commentary (@ESPN_Omaha) on the play looked like this: "Matthews makes the 1st out at 3rd trying to test Refsnyder's arm. Instead of 2 on and 0 out, #Carolina with a man on 1st and 1 out." The tone of the commentary became more congratulatory or discouraging based on the allegiance of the fan. An Arizona fan (@UofAPoint-GuardU) wrote of that same play, "Note to SC, don't test our outfielders. Refsnyder guns the runner at 3rd. #CWS." Tweets that came from the South Carolina fan base with respect to this play were a little harsher with their language, as fans reacted to their player being called out. This conversation can also go two ways, as Josh Askvig (@joshaskvig), an Arizona fan in North Dakota, tweeted to ESPN, "Hey @SportsCenter that Refsnyder throw in the #CWS game is a #topplay."

Although media outlets themselves did not often tweet opinions, they used the retweet culture of Twitter (sharing the comments of a user in their stream with others) to share fan reactions of the play. The @WildcatSports account, hosted by the student journalists at the University of Arizona, retweeted a comment by one fan: "What a throw by Robert Refsnyder, throws out the base runner at 3rd base. Big moment in the game." @ESPN_Omaha retweeted a comment by a fan that said, "If you are watching the #CWS right now somethings wrong w U," which not only promotes their coverage of the game but also helps validate it. At the end of the series, @ESPN_Omaha also retweeted several comments from the Arizona baseball feed, including several photos of the team celebrating their victory, which allowed for additional coverage they may not have had access to on their own.

Cheering and Encouragement

The theme of cheering and encouragement was where the most tweets were found. This group was primarily composed of fans but had other athletes mixed in, as well. These tweets included messages of encouragement and cheering on the team, mixed in with interactions with other fans. They were able to admire plays as important keys in the game, thereby creating a fan-to-fan dynamic on Twitter that might otherwise have been restricted based on geographic or other factors. Examples of cheering and encouragement included Jennie Finch tweeting " #BearDown Arizona! Cheering on our Cats! @ArizonaBaseball & @CoachAndyLopez #Omaha is #Wildcat Country! #CWS." Rob Mayeda (@robmayeda), meanwhile, wrote to Arizona outfielder Refsnyder about his on-the-field play—"Thank you for being clutch again"—using popular team hashtags as part of his message "#ArizonaWild-cats #BearDown #CWS #UofA."

Celebration

A theme of celebration was also identified. These tweets occurred in several different instances: when a good play happened, when a team scored a run, when a team took the lead, when a team won a game, and when an honor was given to a team, coach, or player. These tweets came from both fans and other athletes. They included celebratory exultations such as an exchange was begun by Gary Ballinger, a University of Arizona employee, who under his personal @gballingerjr account simply tweeted "CONGRATULATIONS @UofA #arizona #cows #champs #beardown." This was picked up and retweeted, along with an additional "Woo-hoo!!!!" by Heather Shea Gasser, who maintains her @heathergasser account from Idaho. Baseball players from other teams that were not playing, such as University of Oregon's @NickWagner11 and Fresno State's @dutty_4, wrote to or about members of the Arizona baseball team: "10 for 21 .476 2HR and 5rbi @robrefsnyder MVP of the #CWS#champs #PAC12Basebal #Arizona so proud of you buddy!!!!"

Twitter allows for new relationships and interactions to form because of its two-way and interactionary nature. This interaction between athletes becomes a new interaction of interest, one not previously visible to the public. Under this theme, members of baseball teams not playing in the College World Series final sent tweets of congratulations to specific members of the Arizona baseball team. Such tweets would fall under "fanship," one of the lesser categories observed in Hambrick et al.'s (2010) examination of professional athletes. More complex messages were apparent, as well. A supporter of Arizona's rival school, Arizona State, wrote "Congrats from a Sundevils fan. Good job!!" in retweeting a championship message from the official account of the University of Arizona. That user, tweeting under the pseudonym @bucheldogg, does not follow the Arizona account but made use of the hashtags the Arizona account listed—#UofA, #ArizonaWildcats, #BearDown and, #CWS—to join that particular conversation.

Jeers

The final theme identified was one of jeers. Much like real-life interactions, jeers and taunts were a part of the online Twitter conversation during the two final games of the College World Series. Most of the jeers came from fans. The most popular jeer came from the Arizona fan base and was mockery on South Carolina's call to "Fear the Fish," which was also one of their more popular hashtags. As mentioned previously in the evaluation of the most popular hashtags, one fan base was able to co-opt this popular hashtag and turn it into their own jeer. Both in the stadium and on Twitter, co-opted versions of the "Fear the Fish" expression were used derisively by Arizona fans. Thus, one fan base was able to take the self-identifier of the other fan base and twist it around to become its own new self-identifier. #FearTheFish identified the South Carolina faithful; #FlushTheFish became a call of Arizona supporters.

Though the jeers primarily came from fans, one athlete from Arizona made his presence known. Rob Refsnyder would go on to be named the CWS Most Outstanding Player and then generate a stir soon after the game on Twitter when he wrote he "will never live in South Carolina because they can't accept Asians playing baseball." Born in South Korea and adopted by American parents, Refsnyder commented on his Twitter account almost immediately after one game, writing "haha man people are racist, wish you could have heard the things people were yelling

at me tonight and the messages i've received! #forgive." He would soon delete the comments and apologize to the South Carolina team and head coach, also on Twitter.

Refsnyder's comments bring up an additional interaction of interest, one that occurs between athletes and fans. Previous literature has noted that Twitter does enhance a fan's experience with sport by increasing immediacy between athletes and fans (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Even though Refsnyder's tweets were written after the baseball series was completed, it demonstrates the now customary model of athletes speaking directly with fans, circumventing the filter of a club's public relations department and the mainstream media, providing, as Hambrick et al. (2010) suggested, a personalized and unfiltered level of interaction between athletes and fans. Refsnyder's two tweets, separate or in the context of his entire Twitter stream, might also, as Hambrick et al. suggested, provide fans insight into the athlete himself, far beyond the color of his jersey or quality of his play.

Twitter, Team Identification, and Social-Identity Theory

The rise of Twitter as a communication tool for sport consumers has been rapid. Previous scholarship has examined how athletes use Twitter to communicate with fans (e.g., Kassing & Sanderson, 2009; Sanderson, 2008, 2009). This study was an attempt to examine how sport consumers use Twitter to engage different sport consumers and producers in a virtual conversation over the course of a live sporting event. As previously mentioned, sport consumers have different motivations for consumption, and, in this instance, the motivations for consumption fall under behavioral (social) motivations. Specifically, the motivations here would be companionship and group affiliation; to achieve both of those, an interaction must take place, and here that interaction becomes the conversation on Twitter. What this study shows is that an "old" conversation, per se, has been moved to a new medium. There was nothing new about the subject matter of the conversation itself. Fans still cheered and jeered, the score was still updated, and people still commented on plays. The difference here was how the conversation took place, and with whom it took place; the medium allowed the conversation to continue over geographical boundaries and beyond users' typical social circles through its immediacy and interactivity and was even extended through the opportunities of interaction.

The behaviors and themes that emerged from this study fall in line with the tenets and concepts of social-identity theory and team identification. The themes that emerged from the analysis were not new behaviors for sport fans. However, the behaviors displayed through the themes can be linked to previous examinations of team identification. As noted by Wann and Grieve (2005), marginalizing fans of an opposing team while showing favoritism toward fans of one's own team is a way millions of sports fans across the globe highly identify with particular teams, and it came through in the themes of cheering and jeering in this examination. Phua (2008) noted that the use of Web sites and social-media outlets to display team identification has skyrocketed.

Wakefield and Wann (2006) found that more highly identified fans are more likely to display antisocial behavior at sporting events, verbally abuse officials, verbally confront opposing fans, and call in to sports radio shows to discuss criticisms.

Although there were not any blatant instances of Twitter sparring apparent in this study, there were instances of criticism of the opposing fans, of the umpires, and even of the players and coaches themselves. It is not out of the realm of possibility to begin to conclude that some antisocial behavior is making its way onto Twitter. Again taking the case of Refsnyder, his calling the South Carolina fans racist is a criticism of the opposing fans, by a player of one of the participating teams. A highly identified Arizona fan could have easily picked up that tweet and shared it with others, continuing the criticism of South Carolina fans.

This highly identified behavior making its way to Twitter specifically has multiple implications. Sutton, McDonald, Milne, and Cimperman (1997) indicated that a key to increasing fan identification was increasing player accessibility. Athletes on Twitter might be perceived as more accessible to fans, giving fans a look at a side of athletes they have not ever seen before as they choose to share photos and anecdotes of their personal lives. There are implications for sport organizations, again with issues of accessibility to both the athletes themselves and the team, but also with the demand for information. Highly identified fans want the latest information about teams, players, schedules, injuries, press conferences, and how a team handles the distribution of that information may have an influence in how fans respond, behaviorally, to that team. If their demands for information are not met, will they continue to be supportive and loyal? Or will a lack of information and updates cause them to be frustrated, voice that frustration, or, worse, discontinue their financial support of that organization? All these concerns can be faced by organizations tasked with sports marketing and public relations. Highly identified fans spend money. Thus, the question becomes how to keep them continuously engaged in a positive manner to retain their loyal support to the organization.

In the case of the College World Series, a limited number of consumers actually got to see the game live. More consumers got to watch it on television, listen to it on the radio, or stream it on the Internet. However, social media have opened up a new door for consumers. No longer do sport consumers just watch the game; it is these highly identified consumers and fans who are also tweeting about the game, using hashtags to not only add commentary to their tweets but also promote their commentary to others seeking like-minded consumers. Some consumers inside the stadium were also using Twitter to connect with others in various locations.

With respect to social-identity theory, hashtags can be seen as a way for fans to identify with teams—a virtual wearing of a team jersey. As Wann et al. (2001) suggest, fans see teams as an extension of themselves. By branding a tweet with a specific hashtag, a fan can use that not only as an identifier for themselves but also as a way to recognize and show favoritism toward other fans of the same team. Past research has also linked social-identity theory to team identification by tying mood and self-esteem to team performance (Phua, 2008). Having the hashtags to easily identify a community of fans makes it easy to find a group with which to virtually celebrate an excellent play, complain about an official's call, or commiserate about a horrible loss. The hashtags can also serve as an easy identifier for fans of opposing teams and can pave the way for virtual sparring matches, or "tweet wars," between fans. As Wakefield and Wann (2006) found, highly identified fans were more likely to engage in verbal confrontations with opposing fans. On a network like Twitter, where there is often an extra layer of anonymity or "security," fans may feel more bold and aggressive and be more apt to lash out at the out group. This behavior is

not just limited to fans and in this respect may have further implications for team identification with the notion of athletes' involvement on Twitter. Beyond Refsnyder's comments noted in this study, no other athletes from the College World Series finals were found to have engaged in verbal attacks on Twitter. There have been feuds, however, between athletes on Twitter (Helman, 2012). In June 2012, Louisiana State University cornerback Tyrann Mathieu took a shot at University of Alabama quarterback A.J. McCarron on Twitter, and the two engaged in a back-and-forth attack that made national news. In 2011, then high school senior and Auburn University quarterback recruit Zeke Pike got in trouble for making negative comments about the University of Alabama (Scarbinsky, 2011), which ultimately resulted in attacks on Pike from fans, leading Pike to delete his Twitter account.

This also demonstrates that there are secondary levels of identification at play under the theoretical framework of social-identity theory and team identification. Twitter users using a primary level of identification, such as #CWS, to indicate they are watching a particular sporting event, show they are a part of the broader conversation; by using a secondary level of identification of a team name or a team motto, they invite other Twitter users to include them in the in group of that fan base.

Beyond the theoretical applications, the ideas in this study represent broader implications. The aim of this study was to examine how sport consumers used different identifiers to engage in a virtual conversation during a live sporting event. The notion of fragmentation and its impact on the sporting community is one that has been considered by scholars. Gantz (2010) notes that the sport audience's attention is pulled by local, regional, national, and online sites. These types of options and choices led Billings (2010) to state, "Increased fragmentation is the future" (p. 184); not only will sport consumers become niche audiences, but the manner in which they consume sports will become more stratified, as well. Despite the increased fragmentation, Billings argues that mediated sporting events remain the main "watercooler" events in popular culture.

The findings of this study point toward a new type of watercooler, one that pulls together a fragmented audience. Through Twitter, and identifying hashtags, sport consumers were able to gather around a virtual watercooler, the primary hashtag of #CWS; self-identify and show favoritism to the in group of similar fans; recognize and marginalize the out group of opposing fans; and engage in a variety of behaviors. Above all, it allowed a group of individuals spread across the United States to come together in one place to find a common event to talk about, as well as finding at least temporal companionship. Even though the audience was fragmented in terms where they were consuming the game—some at the game, some watching at home with friends, some watching at home alone, some streaming it on their phone as they traveled, some listening to the radio, and some simply tracking the game through social media—what was found in Twitter was a community built just for this one sporting event.

This idea could translate to any other major or minor sporting event. As long as there is an identifying hashtag with which to brand or identify the event, a community of consumers can come together to hash out the game over a virtual watercooler. From the Olympics to the World Cup to the Masters, sport consumers will likely still turn to Twitter to cheer on their favorite team, criticize a player for letting them down on the night's fantasy performance, or connect with a community of fans where they know they will always be welcome.

Questions can be raised from both the consumer side and the sport marketing or professional side. First, from the fan side, the most obvious question is how the hashtags truly affect their use on Twitter. Hashtags have become a huge part of the Twitter culture, and while we as researchers do know that sport consumers are using hashtags, what we do not know is their true motivations behind this use. In addition, it is also unknown how a fan determines which hashtags they ultimately use. We would argue that sport consumers are faster in their adoption of a hashtag than are official athletic departments or teams at this point in time. #FearTheFish was one of the top five hashtags for the South Carolina baseball team, and it was uniquely created by fans of the team. Similarly, the Arizona fans adopted a mockery of that hashtag during the College World Series. How and why a hashtag catches on is a question that is raised by this study.

From the perspective of professional sport organizations and sports marketers, the questions raised from this study center around how to harness the results. While many may try to jump in and figure out how to be proactive in this environment, the ultimate question may be if it is better for a sport professional to be proactive or reactive when examining these fan interactions. In an interactive environment with highly indentified fans, it may seem obvious that one should be as proactive as possible with getting information out as quickly as possible and operating as an interactive element. However, it must be asked if a professional can force interactivity. Events can try to designate their own specific hashtags, but are consumers truly looking for them? Even if consumers know what an official hashtag is, is there any guarantee they will use it? If a breaking sports story occurs, sports organizations and professional communications should realize that consumers on Twitter are most likely not going to be asking, "What is the official hashtag for this story?" Instead, they are going to start conversing on Twitter and adopt hashtags as they see them. In that instance, the question of whether to be proactive or reactive in letting the conversation develop becomes pivotal.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As with any study, this examination faced limitations. The most significant one was in the data collection. On both nights of data collection, the Twitter search query function malfunctioned. During the games, the Twitter site stopped collecting tweets and put up an error message stating "Oops! Something went wrong! We're working on fixing it as soon as possible. Please try your request again." Due to this, it is possible that some tweets were lost and not accounted for. From the researcher's end, neither computer was receiving tweets. It is uncertain if this was a universal Twitter problem or a local cable or Internet connection. It is also uncertain whether, when the Web site began functioning, the Twitter stream picked up from where it went down or tweets were lost in cyberspace. One limitation of doing live data collection, especially with a Web site like Twitter, is the potential for technical glitches to arise. In addition, not all tweets that were sent out about the College World Series were included in this analysis due to several factors: people not using the #CWS hashtag, people using a different hashtag (i.e., #collegeworldseries), or users who set their accounts to private whose tweets would not show up in the main Twitter stream. Finally, the data collected for this study were very limited in scope; we chose to focus only on the final games of the College World Series.

There are several different directions in which future research can focus. From the consumer perspective, an examination on how and why users select and adopt the hashtags they do may help give greater insight into the hashtag culture on Twitter and may help both researchers and professionals understand the identification aspect of the hashtag. Future studies on fan identification can further explore how social media and interactivity can heighten the relationship between fans and athletes and organizations. In addition, studies employing social-identity theory can examine how previous "real-life" behaviors may be translating to these online social environments.

In conclusion, Twitter in this situation clearly raises theoretical questions in social-identity theory and team identification, as well as broader questions with respect to implications for audience fragmentation. This study shows that the effects have the potential to reach beyond sport consumers to athletes, sport organizations, and media outlets. How each of these entities chooses to react to the still-unfolding demands cf each other leaves the field of sport communication wide open for future inquiry and research.

Case-Study Questions

- Think of other sporting events. How might the flow (continual action or slow-paced athletics) of those contests affect how the audience uses Twitter?
- In this case study we found instances of media outlets retweeting casual viewers. In what instances do you think it is appropriate for media outlets to retweet casual or emotional analysis by fans?
- What considerations should be taken into account when determining what is an appropriate or inappropriate use of Twitter with respect to amateur college athletes?
- How is fans' relationship to the game in particular—or to the team, program, or university in general—improved by using Twitter in real-time interactions? Does the experience become more personal?
- Twitter is a popular communication tool, but is it the most appropriate venue? Are other social-media outlets better suited to such use?
- Are users participating in hashtag use as a deliberate self-selection toward in-group/out-group bias or for other identification purposes such as scorn, mockery, or sarcasm?
- How vital do you think hashtags are to the real-time sports experience on Twitter? How do you think they affect a user's experience?
- How co the experiences of in-group/out-group perspectives vary on a mediated platform?
- Do secondary hashtags provide a better user experience—in identification or overall enjoyment—than primary hashtags?
- How does hashtag use promote crossover into other conversations, or do hashtags clearly delineate the homogeny of in groups and out groups?
- What value do users place on others' hashtags, both primary (#CWS) and secondary (#Gamecocks, #Wildcats, etc.)? What value do users place on tertiary hashtags (such as brief statements with implied meanings, e.g., #nastypitch, #MVP, #unbelievable, #littleleague, #bigtime, #dumb)?

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