Critiquing the Social Media Scholarship in Sport Studies: Looking Beyond Content and Adopting Critical Approaches

Jimmy Sanderson
Department of Kinesiology and Sport Management, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, USA

Social media and sport research has produced a significant corpus of academic literature. This work has enhanced our understanding of the influence of social media in various areas of the sport industry. This work, however, has often glamorized social media and its benefits, leading to a normalization about social media that obscures its negative effects and impacts in sport. This commentary reflects on how social media and sport research has evolved over time and calls for more consideration to be given to critical approaches to social media research that look beyond analysis of social media content. The commentary specifically addresses areas of inquiry around athlete welfare and social media, social media and young athletes, and social media professionals and their work environment. The commentary aims to encourage more critical perspectives related to social media that will enhance the inclusivity of the social media and sport literature.

Keywords: athlete welfare, youth sports, social media research, social media literature, social media and sport research

Social media technologies have steadily become a dominant force in sport over the past decade plus (Abeza & Sanderson, 2022; Naraine & Bakhsh, 2022). As social media platforms have evolved and become significant in multiple areas of the sport industry, there has been a corresponding growth in research examining social media and its influence in sport (Abeza et al., 2015; Filo et al., 2015). Whether it be in marketing, sales, public relations, sport media, athlete branding, or athlete welfare, a plethora of researchers from diverse fields have investigated social media and its impacts, resulting in a burgeoning literature centered in social media and sport. As such, it is beneficial to periodically evaluate research efforts to date and assess where things may go in the future (Abeza & Sanderson, 2022). Certainly, any individual researcher can pursue a topic of interest and craft work in a way that demonstrates value and adds to collective understanding. Thus, it can be a daunting, if not somewhat arrogant task to tell others what kinds of work they should be doing. Nevertheless, commentaries that critique scholarship can help with perhaps focusing efforts in areas that have been underdeveloped or can help spur research ideas and inquiry into areas that are at times ignored. Indeed, commentaries of this nature have been done before, including those directed at social media research in sport (Hardin & Billings, 2023; Wenner, 2014). The purpose of this commentary is to reflect on some of the trends I have seen over the past 15 years studying social media and sport, and to offer some directions for future work that involve looking beyond content, or which take noncontent based and critical approaches to social media and sport research.

Reflections on Social Media and Sport

Over 17 years have passed since I worked on my first social media and sport article with Jeffrey Kassing (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009). In those early days, social media was very nascent and limited to blogs and platforms such as MySpace, Facebook, and LinkedIn, which at that time, still had somewhat uncertain futures (I recall perceptions among sport organization leaders that social media was merely a “fad”). I remember being fascinated by the opportunities for athletes such as Floyd Landis to speak directly to fans via these “new” communication platforms. At that time, I would have never imagined what the social media landscape has become in 2023. The emergence and dominance of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, among others, have drastically influenced sport as well as society. The proliferation of these platforms has disrupted media organizations along with creating new work avenues for sport industry professionals in social media, graphic design, and video editing. Whereas in the early days of social media, some sport organizations may have had one person or a small team working on social media, for many larger sport organizations, social media is now a massive area of the operation (although some professionals would argue it is still understaffed). Most sport organizations actively maintain a presence on at least one social media platform, and many sport organizations have become media producers, using their social media channels to communicate news and information to their stakeholders.

Athletes have become significant adopters of social media platforms as well. Many athletes have commoditized their social media channels, with some such as LeBron James and Cristiano Ronaldo deriving massing revenues from sponsored posts. Recent developments in college athletics in the United States with Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) legislation has simultaneously opened avenues for intercollegiate athletes to monetize their social media platforms, a shift which has altered the landscape of intercollegiate athletics. For instance, consider Louisiana State University gymnast Olivia Dunne, whose NIL valuation is estimated to be $3.4 million USD (Gaydos, 2023). This development also has contributed to the rise in personal branding, a cottage industry that has arisen to help athletes maximize their marketability on social media. Athletes also employ social media to, among others, share more of their personal lives, engage in advocacy and activism, and stream video game playing. As athletes have become more visible on social media, it has created alternative pathways for fans and the
public to engage and interact with them, for better or worse. Consequently, there have been multiple athletes who have experienced hateful commentary, including death threats, actions which can exacerbate mental health.

Social media also has become a prime avenue for marketing and sponsorship in sport. Many sport organizations integrate sponsors into social media posts, and these channels provide unique ways to engage fans and facilitate interaction between organizations and their stakeholders. Many people spend considerable time accessing/scrolling social media, and this has enabled sport organizations to benefit from the data accumulation that social media companies collect, allowing them to target audience members precisely and strategically. While there are certainly some benefits with social media marketing, this trend has created some challenges for in-game promotions and activities. Specifically, during game stoppage, many fans pull out their phones and browse social media, ignoring these activities and reducing the engagement that often existed prior to smartphones and social media becoming ubiquitous.

The aforementioned areas are but a fraction of the ways that social media has become central in sport. These outcomes have all occurred in just under 20 years, a very short time period when we look collectively at the history of technology. What the next 5 or 10–15 years will bring with social media bears watching for sport stakeholders and researchers. Certainly, one can look at the effects of social media on sport and classify them as positive or beneficial. While I do not dispute such categorizations, I have, over the time I have studied social media, found myself going through a personal evolution from enthusiastic advocate to now, a very skeptical critic. I recognize that these views are my own, and do not desire to force them onto others. However, it seems that the social media and sport literature lacks a critical focus, a perspective that I feel is necessary. Indeed, it seems somewhat normalized in the literature that social media is positive and is something that “everyone” should be doing. As has been noted by other scholars (Billings, 2014; Hardin, 2014; Hardin & Billings, 2023), it seems that we are perhaps guilty of assuming that social media use is more widespread than it actually is, forgetting that there are plenty of people, including those in sport, who do not consume these platforms or who use them sparingly. Thus, while social media conversations around certain sport topics can be enlightening, I wonder if we are overemphasizing these conversations? Said differently, are there conversations around these topics happening outside of social media that are just as important to understand? Moreover, I wonder if we have become so enamored with social media that it perhaps blurs or blinds us to other things? Let me offer several examples here.

As I mentioned earlier, during many sporting events, people are often engaging with social media on their smartphones. What might the effects of that be? Are people really enjoying sporting events? Or, have they become just the latest place for people to document where they are at, in an effort to increase likes and social validation? Are we missing out on the enjoyment that sporting events offer because we have become so eager to share our commentary about being at those events, or seeing what everyone else is saying about them? I am certainly guilty of such behavior and am working on trying to be more present at sporting events as well as other leisure activities. As we ponder where to take things with social media research, perhaps it would be worthwhile to examine differences between those who attend sporting events without consuming social media and those who do. What kind of differences in enjoyment are observed?

A second example that reflects this sentiment pertains to self-presentation, a topic that has received considerable attention in the social media and sport literature. Much of this literature proclaims how social media liberates athletes to self-present in ways that are empowering. I do not dispute such claims. However, self-presentation has, for many athletes, become significant labor. That is, it is a lot of work to document both athletic and nonathletic activities, in an effort to drive followers and enhance revenue. Over the years, it seems that some athletes have become less authentic, and more “scripted” in an effort to reduce any follower loss. In doing so, are athletes really being “authentic”? Has social media empowered them to be “who they are?” Consider athletes who may suppress certain political positions or beliefs due to concerns about the negative pushback they will receive. Is self-presentation really that beneficial for such athletes? Perhaps future research on self-presentation can move away from content analyses and investigate the labor that is involved in this production. Some work has been done here (Rahikainen & Toffoletti, 2021; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021), but it appears that enhanced understanding of the processes that athletes use to engage in self-presentation, and the degree to which they feel they are being authentic would enhance our understanding more than repetitive, descriptive, content analyses.

As the previous examples illustrate, there is a lot to understand and learn about social media without ever looking at one post or piece of content. I do not wish to diminish such analyses, but rather suggest we need to be more inclusive in how we approach social media in sport research. I believe there is a lot that is being missed out on in an effort to capture tweets or posts around the latest sporting event or news story. Accordingly, in the following section, I outline some areas that researchers may wish to consider in an effort to diversify the social media and sport literature by looking beyond content, and, arguably, looking at social media from more critical perspectives.

### Critical Directions for Social Media and Sport Research

As has been well established, social media technologies have exerted considerable influence on a variety of sport stakeholders and have greatly shifted how we consume and understand sport. However, there are certain aspects of social media that I would argue have become problematic in sport, and which warrant attention from the research community. I will outline some of these briefly in this section.

#### Athlete Welfare and Social Media

Social media can have a multitude of effects on athletes. One pertinent area where this occurs is with athlete welfare. Whereas considerable research has examined this topic in physical contexts, only a handful of researchers have investigated this in digital and social media context (Kavanagh et al., 2019, 2022; MacPherson et al., 2022). The work of these scholars has been insightful in revealing the abuse that athletes encounter on social media. In my own experience, I have often heard that such behavior is merely something athletes “must live with.” That assumption alone is worthy of study and inquiry. For example, researchers could examine why that perception is normalized, and how fans and other sport consumers come to hold such positions. In addition, to what degree does that perception govern sport organization policy and education? Fortunately, over the past few years, we have seen more sport organizations such as the International Olympic
Committee and the U.S. Center for SafeSport become invested in this topic, yet many sport organizations are often reactive rather than proactive in this area. Researchers are encouraged to examine sport organization governance and analyze how they are addressing athlete welfare via social media and how education and programming can be improved to help athletes navigate abuse.

Along those lines, it is important to look at how child sexual abuse occurs via social media in sport contexts. Sanderson and Weathers (2020) conducted such an analysis, by looking at news articles where coaches had been arrested for sexual behavior toward minors enacted via Snapchat. Personally, this is the most disturbing and troubling research I have ever done. It was heart-breaking to read about children being sexually exploited and manipulated by adults in graphic and horrific ways via this social media platform. While interested readers can peruse that article, I will say that in the 3 years since that article was written, things have not improved. A casual internet search for “Coaches arrested for Snapchat,” or “Coaches arrested for TikTok” yields multiple pages of results. There is significant work to be done in this area. Researchers could work with youth sport organizations and other sport entities on policies and programming to help address these issues. I also feel that there is a need to better understand resistance to education and programming efforts. I recall speaking to a group of youth sport administrators about this topic a few years ago. One of my comments was that these individuals should encourage their coaches, perhaps even by policy, to avoid any private communication with a minor athlete on any social media platform. I was admittedly surprised at the resistance to this suggestion, and while I have never probed this further, it seems like a worthy avenue to investigate. While this is my own personal value, I believe that we have to do everything we can to protect young athletes from sexual predatory behavior, and understanding what is going on and working with relevant stakeholders to address it will be an important starting point.

Social Media and Young Athletes
As noted earlier, social media often involves considerable labor for athletes. While I understand that many of the more prolific athletes may outsource their social media brand management, I think there are important directions to consider, particularly for younger, amateur athletes. First, consider the NIL legislation that within the past 2–3 years has allowed intercollegiate athletes in the United States to earn revenue from endorsement deals, including those on social media. These developments have also prompted some states to earn revenue from endorsement deals, including those on social media. While interested readers can peruse that article, I believe that the 3 years since that article was written, things have not improved. A casual internet search for “Coaches arrested for Snapchat,” or “Coaches arrested for TikTok” yields multiple pages of results. There is significant work to be done in this area. Researchers could work with youth sport organizations and other sport entities on policies and programming to help address these issues. I also feel that there is a need to better understand resistance to education and programming efforts. I recall speaking to a group of youth sport administrators about this topic a few years ago. One of my comments was that these individuals should encourage their coaches, perhaps even by policy, to avoid any private communication with a minor athlete on any social media platform. I was admittedly surprised at the resistance to this suggestion, and while I have never probed this further, it seems like a worthy avenue to investigate. While this is my own personal value, I believe that we have to do everything we can to protect young athletes from sexual predatory behavior, and understanding what is going on and working with relevant stakeholders to address it will be an important starting point.

Social Media Professionals
As someone who regularly interacts with social media professionals in the sport industry, it is evident that there is considerable burnout in this profession. Social media is often a 24/7 requirement, and while some things have improved, often times social media personnel, particularly those in college athletics are overworked and often do not have the staff and resources they need. Furthermore, social media, as it has become more visual in nature, now requires a keen understanding of graphic design and computer software programs such as the Adobe suite. Given this situation, it is not surprising that there is consistent turnover in social media professionals, and many exit for other industries that offer more work–life balance. Building on work that has been done on sport organization employee burnout (Taylor et al., 2019), researchers could interview sport social media professionals to better understand the dynamics and culture in which they operate and identify barriers and solutions to help reduce turnover.

Additionally, from an educational perspective, how are sport management and sport communication/media programs preparing future social media and sport professionals? Do these departments possess the necessary expertise and infrastructure to help students learn relevant skills to be placed in social media? My own institution offers no programming in anything software or graphic design related. While I do not disclose this in an effort to be negative, I often wonder if our program is really designed to support students who want to work in social media? What kinds of changes can be made to curriculum and pedagogy to help more effectively prepare students for this career field?

Finally, I also wonder about the future of this profession due to advances that have been made and which are coming with Artificial Intelligence (AI). With the rise of technologies such as ChatGPT, will sport organizations eventually turn to AI to create social media content? Can AI design graphics and video that will enable sport organizations to cut personnel and save money? While the future here is difficult to predict, in my view, this scenario is not that unlikely. Consider the current writers strike occurring in Hollywood, with one of the issues being the use of AI to write scripts and
potentially reduce or replace writers altogether. Is it that far of a stretch to think that sport organizations would use AI to reduce the need for social media staff? If that is the case, what might happen to the creative aspects of social media? Will fans/audiences care? Such questions I believe will be important for researchers to answer, and I believe the critical perspectives are instrumental to such work. Personally, I am not sure that removing people in favor of machines is beneficial for society and for how we experience sport. While the human element may at times be frustrating, it is nonetheless beautiful and unique and adds significantly to our sporting experience.

Conclusion

Sport and social media has been and will continue to be an important area of inquiry for sport researchers. While much important work has been done, I believe it is important for us to question some of the assumptions and normalization around social media and its influence in sport, along with integrating more critical approaches and perspectives. In undertaking such efforts, I am advocating for more work that moves beyond analyzing content and, instead, looks at the effects and problems associated with social media. Additionally, it is crucial that researchers work with relevant stakeholder groups to identify solutions to these issues, understanding that social media may be a hindrance and something that should perhaps be reduced or avoided to promote things such as athlete welfare and well-being.

Social media and sport is an exciting area of research and has been for me for many years. I wish those doing work in this area the best as they carry out their research and seek to answer important questions about social media and the effects it is having on the sport industry.

References


