Theory and Social Media in Sport Studies

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A key feature of a robust academic discipline is that its homegrown theories and investing in theory contribute to building good research. In the field of sport and social media research, the rigorous utilization of theory is one of the areas where the field is still facing “disciplinary pain.” In fact, the unique features of social media provide researchers in the sport research community with a valuable opportunity for proposing, testing, applying, critiquing, comparing, integrating, and expanding theories. In this commentary, the authors, based on their own experience (as researchers, readers, and reviewers of social media in sport), contend that reference resources are lacking on this topic to help young (or existing) researchers locate appropriate theories for their research. Hence, this work identifies, documents, and discusses the theories used, advanced, and developed in social media research for sport studies. Furthermore, a compilation is brought together of different theories from various disciplines that researchers in this community may consider for their future work.

Keywords: robust academic discipline, homegrown theories, investing in theory, building scholarship, utilization of theory

Over the past 2 decades, the use of social media has expanded rapidly in the sport industry. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are an integral part of today’s sporting culture. The reach and scope of social media has particularly impacted various aspects of the sport industry and its different stakeholder groups, such as athletes, coaches, managers, teams, leagues, events, governing bodies, and fans. Today, the use of social media has gone beyond simple social communication, and in the sport industry, practitioners are using social media platforms to implement a variety of purposes such as such as live coverage, news updates, public relations, risk management, activism, promotions, sales, and relationship marketing (Abeza et al., 2021). In light of the expansion of social media and its multidimensional impact, researchers have become increasingly interested in studying the dynamic interrelationship between sport and social media.

Social media has been examined in a variety of sport settings and extensive research has been pursued to gain insights into social media’s impact on the sport industry and its implications for society at large. Such a research focus emerged in 2008 along with the first publication of articles in the International Journal of Sport Communication. Academics who have critically examined sport and social media research have called for the development of more sophisticated research questions, the application of innovative research methods, and the advancement of theories (Abeza et al., 2021). In this respect, while published research is growing significantly on the subject of social media and sport, a formal articulation on the utilization and development of theories is lacking in the literature.

Theory utilization and development are critical elements in the advancement of an academic discipline (Cunningham, 2013; Doherty, 2013). These elements help a scholarship body to legitimize itself, build an identity, and increase self-reliance (Abeza et al., 2018). Doherty (2013) argues that good theory is the foundation for strong research, teaching, and practice, and by extension, helps advance a field of study. In research, the use of theory helps researchers craft meaningful research questions, identify appropriate research procedures and methods for analysis, and frame suitable approaches to interpret findings. Theory also enables researchers to build and produce impactful applied and scholarly contributions from their work (Cunningham et al., 2018). Accordingly, the question of how theories are used (or not used) in research is important as researchers try to ascertain their role in understanding, explaining, and predicting, various topic areas, such as social media. Corley and Gioia (2011) stated that theory is “the currency of our scholarly realm” (p. 2) and upon which scholarly advancement rests. Thus, researchers will benefit by investing academic resources into developing and advancing theory (Doherty, 2013).

Importantly, an articulation of the use and development of theory in sport and social media research will help inform this research community on the most prominent theories found in the literature and highlight areas in need of future development and direction. To that end, this commentary identifies, documents, and discusses the theories used, advanced, and developed in social media research in sport studies. In doing so, the commentary serves as a resource for researchers as they attempt to locate appropriate theories for their research, and highlights areas that need attention from others who share a research interest in social media. This commentary is a basic review and introduction that aims to draw the scholarly community’s attention to the issue. Our own experiences as researchers, readers, and reviewers on the topic of social media in sport have also highlighted the lack of relevant reference resources on the topic.

Social Media Research in Sport Studies

The past two decades have welcomed a variety of social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Snapchat, TikTok) that have been adopted by various entities (e.g., athletes, teams, event organizers, fans) for different purposes (e.g., news updates, live coverage, sales). Over these two decades, social media companies have developed platforms features and presence (e.g., Facebook live in 2016; Live Audio Rooms in 2021; release of Facebook/Instagram Reels globally in 2022) and streamlined their business operations and revenue generation.

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engage in multi-way conversations on Internet applications studying the role of social media in sport. The 2017). For the purpose of this work, we use a general de
谈起维基平台在运动领域的应用。根据 Abeza

are remarkably powerful multipurpose tools. At this juncture, it is appropriate to introduce the definition of social media used in this commentary. Social media is defined as, “online resources open to the public (e.g., blogs, social networks, content communities, and discussion sites) that people use primarily to share content (e.g., text, photos, audio files, and videos) and engage in multi-way conversations on Internet applications (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube)” (Abeza et al., 2021).

With the rapid expansion of social media, researchers utilizing diverse methods and perspectives have developed an interest in studying the role of social media in sport. The field of sport studies is relatively broad and comprises a diverse set of disciplines such as sport law, sport economics, sport marketing, sport finance, sport sociology, sport governance, sport tourism, sport facilities and events management, sport communication, sport organizational behavior and theory, and sport for development (Abeza et al., 2015). As a medium that crosses and touches each of these subfields, social media has typically been studied through the lens of these subareas (Abeza et al., 2018). Past studies are diverse in terms of the research streams covered, the theoretical frameworks used, and the research methods employed.

In terms of the research streams employed, the social media research community has shown increasing interest in the use and place of social media in the sport industry. According to Abeza et al. (2015), early (2008–2014) studies have covered the nature of social media (use of and users of social media, and its adoption, e.g., how social media has been used by fans; Sanderson, 2013), defined constructs (dimensions of use and attributes of different platforms, e.g., motivations underpinning the desire of fans to communicate on Facebook; Stavros et al., 2014), as a marketing and communication tool, legal and ethical considerations (e.g., student-athletes social media use policy, potential legal issues related to social media use; Cornish & Larkin, 2014), industry applications (best practices, practical guidelines, and marketing agencies, e.g., social media marketing strategies of the Los Angeles Kings; Armstrong et al., 2016), and issues and impacts (e.g., on journalism practices, what citizen journalism meant for professional sport journalists; McEnnis, 2013).

The literature produced by early studies introduced the starting point for the continued development of the field, laid a substantial foundation for future advancements, and provided future research directions. The early work of Leonard (2009) identified the need for an emerging research field to progress from categorizing and understanding the use, characteristics, and adoption of social media, to examining its impacts and significance to the sport industry and the implications to society at large. This progression can be reinforced through the use of advanced methodologies, sophisticated research questions, and ardent utilization and development of theory. In order to articulate the use of theory and its development in social media and sport studies, this commentary will first discuss the place and value of theory in research.

Theory and Its Utilization

There is little agreement on a universal definition of theory (Ridder, 2017). For the purpose of this work, we use a general definition of theory, described as, “a statement of concepts and their interrelationships that show how and why a phenomenon occurs” (Corley & Gioia, 2011, p. 12). While this is a working definition, seminal articles written around the topic (e.g., Bacharach, 1989; Corley & Gioia, 2011; Kaplan, 1998; Weick, 1989, 1995; Whetten, 1989) identified three basic features of a theory. A theory:

(a) comprises elements (concepts and constructs) that serve to identify the key components of a phenomenon under investigation, (b) offers an explanation of the relationship between those elements, and (c) the temporal and contextual boundaries affect the generalizability of a theory (Ridder, 2017). For instance, Whetten (1989) noted, it is essential for a theory be able to effectively explain and describe a phenomenon (what, how, and why), and also represent contextual and temporal conditions as to where, when, and to whom relationships are relevant. Accordingly, theories serve as a roadmap for organizing ideas and knowledge (Neuman & Robson, 2009). A good theory draws order out of chaos (Griffin, 2012) and makes sense out of disturbing situations (Kaplan, 1998). It focuses on key variables and stays away from irrelevant data, explaining what is happening and why, and elaborates on both the process and results (Griffin, 2012).

Of course, scientific knowledge still emerges from different philosophical orientations or worldviews (which are “a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied”; Guba, 1990, p. 17). A researcher’s philosophical worldview assumptions or the question of “who am I?” (e.g., a positivist or constructivist) influences (implicitly or explicitly) utilization and development of a theory. For instance, one may concentrate on testing theories (e.g., a quantitative researcher), while another researcher may invest in developing theory using grounded theory (e.g., a qualitative researcher). As Griffin (2012) stated, theories are lenses, nets, and maps of reality, some of which depict subjective meanings inside our heads and others depict objective facts “out there.” Regardless of the implicit or explicit influence of a researcher’s philosophical assumptions on theory utilization and development, the purpose of a theory should not only be for scholar-to-scholar consumption but should also serve current and future real-world practice (Whetten, 1989). Doherty (2013) further remarked that theory should be the foundation of research as it guides research questions. It should also be the foundation of practice, as it aids in explanation, prediction, and control. Moreover, the foundation of teaching as it utilizes theory to advance students’ learning and understanding, and subsequent research and practice.

While theory development and theory testing are the most referenced use of a theory, there are other types of theory utilizations. In this regard, Bryant and Miron (2004) articulated 11 different types of theory utilization in research for the field of communication. These types are used: (a) as mere references, (b) as theoretical frameworks, (c) to compare two or more theories, (d) to critique a theory or theories, (e) to propose a theory, (f) to support a theory, (g) to test a new theory, (h) to integrate theories, (i) to expand a theory, (j) for new application, and (k) to praise a theory or theories. Cunningham (2013) and Doherty (2013) argued that proposing, testing, critiquing, and comparing theories is essential. Taking the uniqueness of sport and its dynamic interrelationship with social media, it is necessary to develop homegrown theories (i.e., in sport and social media research). As Chalip (2006), Fink (2013), and Slack (1998) emphasized that researchers need to find ways not only to use existing theories to study sport, but also to use sport to test and extend existing theories. By proposing a new theoretical position, a researcher needs to develop researchable Propositions, which facilitates thinking about concrete applications.

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of new thinking and increases the chance of the core arguments being tested by future research (Whetten, 1989).

In the process of developing a theory, a first step is to structurally present relationships among the concepts (ideas or notions). Doherty (2013) refers to this as one step toward building a theoretical framework or model. Bacharach (1989) and Whetten (1989) emphasized the primary difference between propositions (relationships among constructs) and hypotheses (relations among variables), stating that “... propositions involve concepts, whereas hypotheses require measures” (p. 491). Similarly, the new application of theory is a common practice to advance theory development. This can be undertaken in new settings and its applicability can be assessed under different conditions (Whetten, 1989). In doing so, Whetten noted, the application should not be about reaffirming its utility, but on improving it as a tool. In social media sport studies, a rigorous utilization of theory is one area in which the research is facing “disciplinary pain” (Abeza et al., 2015; Filo et al., 2015).

In their early work assessing the state of social media research in sport management research, Abeza et al. (2015) identified 26 theories and theoretical models used in 96 articles published between January 2008 (earliest found) and June 2014. The authors found that theories and theoretical models originated from a variety of disciplines such as sociology, marketing, psychology, information technology, mass media, and crisis communication. In a similar study, Filo et al. (2015) examined 70 social media in sport studies and reported that over half of the articles reviewed (52%) did not explicitly state the theory they used. The authors underscored that even among those that mentioned their theoretical or conceptual framework in the “Literature Review or Discussions” section, they failed to articulate the application and contribution of their theory in a detailed and meaningful manner. Filo et al. (2015) suggested that social media researchers in sport studies could advance theory by moving toward a more integrated application of theory where researchers articulate how their results and findings contribute to existing theory or development of a new theory.

Abeza et al. (2015) identified 26 theories and theoretical models used in social media research in sport studies between 2008 and 2014, 69.8% of the identified articles used their theories as a framework for their research, and 9.4% of the articles expanded the theories or models referenced (e.g., Stavros et al., 2014). The breakdown of other reported uses of theory are: 7.5% as mere references to the theories (e.g., Pronschinske et al., 2012), 3.8% as supporting theories (e.g., Brown et al., 2015), and 3.8% which have a new application (e.g., Frederick et al., 2015) to social media studies. The integration of theories also accounted for 3.8% (e.g., Frederick et al., 2012, integrated/combined uses and gratification and parasocial interaction [PSI] in their study), and discussion of a theory or praising it (e.g., Williams & Chinn, 2010: relationship marketing) accounted for 1.9%. The primary components of theory construction such as proposing a theory, testing a new theory, critiquing a theory, and comparing theories are absent in social media research in sport management.

While a systematic review of the recent literature (after the work of Abeza et al., 2015 and Filo et al., 2015) is highly recommended, the need to enhance the use of theory in the sport and social media research is strongly encouraged. This observation comes from the authors experience as researchers conducting studies on the topic, as readers of academic articles published on the subject, and as reviewers of many manuscripts on the subject. There is a need to compare, critique, integrate theories, test, and apply theories from other fields to the context of social media, and to begin developing new theories. To partly address this gap, the most prominent theories utilized so far are profiled below. Subsequently, a number of relevant theories from other disciplines are also presented.

The use of the theories listed below in the context of social media is meaningful in several ways. Most of the theories are developed in the context of traditional media formats, which are one-way (unidirectional, noninteractive, and nonpersonal) forms of mass communication that are not tailored to multidirectional communications. Meanwhile, the unique features of social media, such as networking, instant global reach, absence of gatekeeping, ease of collaboration, and multiway conversation provide researchers with a valuable opportunity to propose, test, apply, critique, compare, integrate, and expand theories.

A Profile of Theories in Social Media Research in Sport Studies

This section reviews 10 prominent theories (in terms of frequency of use and depth of application) used by researchers in the community to study the dynamic interrelationship between sport and social media. These theories are agenda-setting theory, communication privacy management theory, disposition theory, framing theory, PSI theory, relationship marketing theoretical framework, self-categorization theory, self-presentation, social identity theory, and uses and gratifications theory. Each theory is briefly discussed along with two examples: one early study and one more recent study.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) suggests that the media does not tell people what to think, but that they shape what audiences think about. In other words, the media have the power to define and shape the discussion of public events through frequent coverage of an event. In sport social media studies, agenda setting is used to explain how the content communicated through different platforms affects fans’ attitudes, and how different entities (athletes, teams, and events) use the platforms to advance their agenda. For example, in an early study, Zimmerman et al. (2011) used agenda setting theory to guide their examination of the North American professional soccer league’s Major League Soccer’s use of YouTube to disseminate messages to fans. While the authors observed agenda setting on a small scale, they emphasized the greater potential of YouTube to advance agendas on a larger scale. In a recent study, Woo et al. (2020) examined Twitter content of a conversation recorded in a TMZ video in which then National Football League player Ray Rice attacked his then fiancée. In their analysis of the users’ exchanges, the authors observed that users debated with and challenged one another, deviating from the main reported agenda.

Communication Privacy Management Theory

Communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 1991) deals with the decision-making process people go through to manage disclosure and privacy. It focuses on why and how people manage private disclosures. The theory posits that privacy and disclosure work together, and that privacy is the basis for self-understanding. According to the theory, as people share information, enforce regulations on that information, and navigate rules about the entrusted information with those they have shared it with, the intended outcomes impact their communicative preferences.
(Sanderson, 2011). In one of the earliest social media in sport studies, Sanderson (2011) used this theory to explore Division I athletic departments’ policies governing student-athletes’ social media use. Sanderson reported that the policies heavily emphasized content restrictions and external monitoring, and positioned social media as being burdened with negative consequences. In a recent study, Hayes et al. (2021) used this theory to examine the aspects of social media that Australian national sport organizations administrators perceive to be distracting to athletes, along with the support and management mechanisms used to address such concerns during major sport events. They found that sport administrators reported several aspects of social media that are perceived to distract athletes, including personal and performance criticism along with athletes’ fixation with their social media profiles.

Disposition Theory
This theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1972) posits that sport enjoyment is largely a function of the viewer’s disposition toward the competitors and the outcome of the contest. Specifically, the more the viewers like the winning team, the more enjoyment they experience, and the more that they dislike the losing team, the more enjoyable the sporting event. In sport communication studies, Zhou et al. (2013) used disposition theory to investigate whether complimentary or conflicting commentary, as well as game knowledge, and playing experience contributed to game enjoyment, perceived liking of the commentary, and perceived action in the game. In a recent social media study, Smith et al. (2019) surveyed sports fans to measure how Twitter potentially influenced their enjoyment of viewing live and mediated sporting events. Respondents primarily used Twitter to augment their consumption of sports, and heavy Twitter users reported higher enjoyment levels when using the social networking site while watching sports.

Framing Theory
Framing, sometimes referred to as second-level agenda setting, posits that not only does increased media coverage determine issue salience, but also the media—through the process of selecting particular themes, phrases, images, and sources to present a particular story—frame the salience of specific attributes attached to an issue and thus determine how the issue is perceived (Entman, 1993). Examples include Sanderson (2010), who in one of the earliest studies of framing and sport social media, investigated the framing of Tiger Woods’s marital infidelity by traditional press outlets and by fans’ postings on the athlete’s official Facebook page. Sanderson uncovered how press accounts framed Woods’s actions as a tragic flaw, but that the fans framed the infidelity as a private matter that demonstrated Woods’s human nature. In a recent study, Romney and Johnson (2019) used framing to guide their examination of Instagram images from the primary accounts of the four major American sports networks to understand the visual framing of female athletes on these sports networks’ Instagram accounts. The authors found that, similar to the mainstream media, the coverage of women’s athletics lags significantly behind coverage of men’s athletics.

PSI Theory
The PSI is a theory that explains how media audiences relate to and develop relationships with media persona. In their original conceptualization, Horton and Wohl (1956) argued that viewers develop bonds of intimacy over time as they continue to view media personalities. This intimacy resembles interpersonal social interaction but is different because it is one-sided and mediated. Kassing and Sanderson (2009) and Sanderson (2008) used PSI theory in early works on fan messaging and interaction via social media in sport settings. In a recent study, Sanderson et al. (2020) explored maladaptive PSI expressed toward Chicago Bears kicker Cody Parkey after he missed a potential game-winning field goal in the 2019 National Football League playoffs. The author’s study illustrated the nature of virtual abuse and maltreatment of athletes, which is increasing on social media. The authors specifically identified maladaptive PSI appearing as criticism, threats, anger, and support.

Relationship Marketing Theoretical Framework
The basic perspective of relationship marketing is based on the idea that a relationship between two parties creates additional value for those involved. That additional value exists on top of the value of products and/or services that are exchanged. For a relationship to develop (according to the Nordic school of thought), three components must work well together: communication, interaction, and value. Communication by creating and sharing knowledge between businesses and customers must then evolve into a value-enhancing interaction. In the interaction process, dialogue facilitates the co-creation of value with customers and ultimately the transfer of the value to the customers. Hence, the central purpose of relationship marketing is to establish, maintain, and enhance long-term mutually rewarding relationships between two parties. One of the early works in social media research in sport studies was by Williams and Chinn (2010), who discussed social media and relationship marketing in sport. In their conceptual paper, the authors articulated Grönroos’s (2004) framework and encouraged its application in the context of social media in sport. Following this call, Abeza conducted a number of studies on the topic. In a recently published work Abeza et al. (2020) investigated the use of social media as a relationship marketing tool by adopting a multidomain qualitative research approach (i.e., social media platform domain, organization domain, and consumer domain). Based on their findings, the authors extended Grönroos’s relationship–marketing framework in the context of social media in sport.

Self-Categorization Theory
Self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) explains the dual nature of individualism, when people at times view themselves as individuals and at other times believe they are part of a group. Ultimately, the authors claim, self-categorization theory can shape a person’s sense of self, cognitively allowing a person to form casual and formal associations with in-groups and out-groups based on demographics, personalities, and beliefs. In their 2018 sport-focused social media study, Burch, Billings, and Zimmerman adopted the theory to examine social media commentary surrounding the 2014 U.S. Men’s and 2015 U.S. Women’s World Cup Teams. The study found that U.S. teams were more likely to be described in terms of success and failure, while opposition teams were more likely to receive personal and physical attributions. Conversely, no differences were found between U.S. men’s and women’s teams with regard to characterizations of success and failure, but the women’s team was more likely to receive personal and physical characterizations.

Self-Presentation
Self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959) posits that individuals in their interpersonal interactions perform in a certain way to project a desirable image that reflects how they wish to be seen in the public eye, just as actors’ creation of a stage impression may differ from
their private persona. In theaters, for instance, actors change their role between, “front stage” and “backstage” performances. Being watched by their audience, actors at the “front stage” perform a role the audience expects of them in a particular situation. In their private life, “backstage,” actors show their authentic, private self. While Goffman introduced self-presentation in the context of face-to-face interactions, researchers have used it in the context of social media (e.g., Hull, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Xu & Armstrong, 2019). In the earliest studies, Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) explored gender differences in professional tennis players’ self-presentation on Twitter and reported that athlete image construction between female and male athletes was largely similar, highlighting the use of Twitter by athletes as a self-marketing tool. Similarly, Hull (2014), in a study that examined PGA Tour golfers’ Twitter use during the Masters tournament, found professional golfers using Twitter to give insight into their lives and, most importantly, to interact with fans. As Hull (2014) pointed out, social media users have greater control over their presentation of self and their public image than during a face-to-face communication. On social media, users have the opportunity to take their time and strategically manage their presentation of an idealized version of the self through carefully selected photos, well thought-out text messages, audio files, or videos. In a recent study, Xu and Armstrong (2019) explored the gendered differences between the self-representations of U.S. and Chinese athletes at the 2016 Rio Olympics. The authors’ findings suggested that Chinese male athletes were dominant in self-disclosure, whereas minimal differences (in self-disclosure) were observed between male and female U.S. athletes.

Social Identity Theory

Social-identity theory by Tajfel and Turner (2004) asserts that individuals classify themselves and others into various categories to make sense of the social world and their place in it. Social identity is 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 (Smith & Smith, 2012). Identity can be described as a set of socially distinguishing traits comprising personal characteristics and attributes (Fearon, 1999). The social aspect of identity is how individuals define themselves by those with whom they interact and affiliate, and while individuals may seek to define their perceived individual identities, they only gain validity if the identity attributes are recognized and confirmed by others (Buckingham, 2008). In today’s world, identities can be shaped by interactions between physical experiences (the “offline” world) and digital experiences (the “online” world). Social identity theory has been used in social media studies (e.g., Sanderson, 2013) to investigate the factors that serve as identifiers for individuals forming casual and formal associations with in-groups and out-groups based on demographics, personalities, and beliefs.

In an early study, Sanderson (2013) explored how University of Cincinnati football fans used Facebook to manage a social identity threat arising from head football coach Brian Kelly leaving the school to become head coach at the University of Notre Dame. The authors’ findings implied that social media enabled fans to perpetuate messages that elevate group distinctiveness, minimize in-group issues, and derogate out-group members. More recently, Weimar et al. (2021) guided by social identity theory and using 3 months of social media data before, during, and 3 months after the COVID-19 lockdown, investigated whether fan interest toward smaller leagues suffered from the presence of bigger leagues. The study reported that interest in a league which remained active increased during COVID but went back to almost where it was previously after the revitalization of worldwide professional football leagues.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and gratifications (of Katz et al., 1973) is a media consumption theory that posits users select media based on satisfying a need. Katz et al. state that the uses and gratifications approach “represents an attempt to explain something of the way in which individuals use communications, among other resources in their environment, to satisfy their needs and to achieve their goals” (p. 510). In the early days of social media, uses and gratification theory was one of the most utilized theory in the social media research (Abeza, et al., 2015), with a presence in 10 different published works from 2008 to 2014. In one of the earliest studies, Hambrick et al. (2010) explored professional athletes’ use of Twitter around the categories of interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content, promotion, and fanship. The authors reported that the majority (close to one-third) of the communication leaned toward interactivity and diversion. In a recent study, Billings et al. (2019) contrasted the uses sought and gratifications obtained between United States and China within four different social media platforms, namely Facebook and Twitter (in the United States) and WeChat and Weibo (in China). The authors learned that each of the platforms functioned in a starkly contrasting manner.

Additional Theories and Theoretical Frameworks

While the above theories and theoretical frameworks are among the most prominent in the field, one may argue that their use has not been rigorous and sufficiently diverse in social media research. Putting the argument aside, we find a number of other communication-related theories from different disciplines that researchers in our community may consider for their studies. A summary of some sample theories is presented below. As can be observed from the list, there are theories that can guide studies on social media message production (e.g., action assembly theory), message processing (e.g., inoculation theory), discourse and interaction (e.g., communication accommodation theory), relationships (e.g., theory of relational dialectics), and organizational communication (e.g., structuration theory). Some adoptable theories from the work of Griffin (2012) and Miller (2002) are presented below. For a list of other relevant theories that can be used in social media studies, readers are encouraged to consult these two useful web resources: First Look ([www.afrlist.com/theory-list](http://www.afrlist.com/theory-list)) and Communication Theory ([www.communicationtheory.org/list-of-theories/](http://www.communicationtheory.org/list-of-theories/)).

Action Assembly Theory (of John Greene) is a theory about message production. It aims to examine and describe the links between cognition and behavior—how an individual’s thoughts get transformed into action.

Constructivist Theory (of Fritz Heider) is a theory about message production. It deals with the ways in which social observers use information to arrive at causal explanations for occurrences. It examines what information is gathered and how it is combined to form a causal judgment.

Elaboration Likelihood Model (of Richard Petty and John Cacioppo) is a theory about message processing. It explains how, and under what circumstances, a message will affect the recipient. It posits that there are two routes in persuasion: central (high

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personal relevance of a message to a recipient) and peripheral (a message with little or no relevance to its recipient). The greater the relevance and the more interest the individual shows in the subject of the message, the higher the chances the recipient will elaborate on the message.

*Cultivation Theory* (of George Gerbner) is a theory about message processing. It deals with a process through which attitude change can be resisted in the face of counter-attitudinal communication intended to convert or shift existing attitudes. The goal is to persuade someone not to be persuaded by another. In other words, the intention is to influence others to avoid persuasion. It offers mechanisms by which communication is used to help people defend their beliefs.

*Attribution Theory* (of Fritz Heider) is a theory about message processing. It deals with how social observers use information to arrive at causal explanations about an occurrence. The theory discusses what information observers gather and how the information is combined to form a causal judgment.

*Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory* (of W. Barnett Pearce and Vernon Cronen) is a theory about discourse and interaction. It describes how people make sense of our world or create meaning in their communication. It posits that in conversations people co-construct their own social realities and are shaped by the worlds they create. The theory considers communication as a process that allows individual communicators to make and manage meaning and coordinate their actions.

*Communication Accommodation Theory* (of Howard Giles) is a theory about discourse and interaction. It states that people in intercultural encounters who see themselves as unique individuals will adjust their speech style and content to mesh with others whose approval they seek. People who want to reinforce strong group identification will interact with those outside the group in a way that accentuates their differences.

*Social Penetration Theory* (of Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor) is a theory about communication in developing relationships. It posits that relationships begin and deepen through self-disclosure. Interpersonal closeness proceeds in a gradual and orderly fashion from superficial to intimate levels of exchange as a function of anticipated present and future outcomes. Lasting intimacy requires continual and mutual vulnerability through breadth and depth of self-disclosure. Intimate self-disclosure allows others to penetrate a person’s public image and inner self.

*Social Exchange Theory* (of John Thibaut and Harold Kelley) is a theory about communication in ongoing relationships. It posits that all human relationships are formed by the use of a subjective cost-benefit analysis and the comparison of alternatives. People interact to maximize gains and minimize losses.

*Spiral of Silence Theory* (of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann) is a theory about media and society. It posits that a group’s readiness to express its opinions on controversial public issues is influenced by its unconscious perception of those opinions as being either popular in the public scene or not.

*Cultivation Theory* (of George Gerbner) is a theory about media and society. It proposes that our views of reality are cultivated by television, which serves to create basic sets of belief. Cultivation is the consequence of cumulative long-term exposure to messages repetitively rather than by exposure to a particular content. The theory focuses on the influence of our construction of belief by television viewership.

*Standpoint Theory* (of Sandra Harding and Julia T. Wood) is a theory about culture and communication. It deals with the various levels of people’s perceptions. It is concerned with the impact of one’s location in society on one’s ability to know. Different locations within the social hierarchy affect what is seen. The standpoints of marginalized people provide less false views of the world than do the privileged perspectives of the powerful.

*Diffusion of Innovation Theory* (of Everett Rogers) is a communication theory that helps to explain how new ideas, practices, or objects are communicated and adopted by members of a social system. Oelrichs (2020) applied the theory to study why social media was, or was not, adopted by journalists in Germany.

*Technology Acceptance Model* (of Fred Davis) is an information systems theory that models how users come to accept and use a technology. The model suggests that when users are presented with a new technology, several factors influence their decision about how and when they will use it, notably perceived usefulness, and ease-of-use. The Technology Acceptance Model has been continuously studied and expanded—the two major upgrades being Technology Acceptance Model 2 and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology. A Technology Acceptance Model 3 has also been proposed.

### Summary: Suggested Theoretical Directions

If social media as it applies to sport research is to progress and advance, its needs to advance its theory utilization. Currently, a rigorous utilization of theory is one of the areas where this field is facing “disciplinary pain.” Contemporary research in this field predominantly derives applications from theories and theoretical models originating in other disciplines such as sociology, marketing, psychology, information technology, mass media, and crisis communication. There is nothing wrong with this, however, within-field development, critique, and comparing of theories is lacking. These efforts alongside the application of theories from other areas of study and the integration of different theories in a social media setting need to be encouraged.

As Cunningham (2013) and Doherty (2013) argued, theory is a critical element in the advancement of an academic discipline and as social media and sport research advances, it will be essential to propose, test, critique, and compare theories. In fact, theory development can be one of the most challenging, but also intellectually stimulating ventures in academia (Abeza et al., 2014). Considering the unique qualities of sport and its dynamic interrelationship with social media, the development of homegrown theories is essential for advancing social media research in sport studies. Hence, researchers should be encouraged to compare, critique, and integrate theories in the context of social media. Furthermore, they should test and apply theories from other fields within the context of social media, and eventually develop new theories. As Chalip (2006), Fink (2013), and Slack (1998) stated, researchers need to use existing theories to study sport and also use sport as a testing ground to extend existing theory.

Such efforts to develop the field can be facilitated using the theories briefly discussed in this work (i.e., 10 prominent theories and suggested theoretical directions). Some examples from the literature have extended and applied theories in the context of social media in sport studies. These include the work of Sanderson (2008) who extended PSI theory by suggesting that the theory must account for and encompass negative relational behaviors. Study by Frederick et al. (2015) who applied agenda setting in a social media context by examining the presence of agenda-setting on Twitter during the 2012 London Olympics. Work by Abeza et al. (2020)
extended Grönroos’s relationship marketing process model through the lens of social media in the context of sport. The work of Clavio et al. (2012) extended the literature by examining the potential application of systems theory to a network of fans using Twitter as their medium of interaction.

The theories briefly discussed in this work were primarily developed in the context of traditional media, which are one-way (unidirectional, noninteractive, and nonpersonal) mass communication mediums that are not multidirectional in communication. Therefore, the unique features of social media provide researchers a conducive opportunity for proposing, testing, applying, critiquing, comparing, integrating, and expanding theories. These unique features include ease of networking and connectedness, instant global reach, absence of gatekeeping, and ease of collaboration and community building, and multidirection conversation and openness. Accordingly, there is great potential to develop homegrown theories that will build a foundation in this field that captures the distinctiveness of this area and shape future directions. Consequently, there is also a need to articulate the application and contribution of applied theory in a detailed and meaningful manner in research. It is important to go beyond a mere mention of a theoretical framework in a “Literature Review and Discussion” sections. Specifically, researchers must articulate how their findings contributed to the adopted theory.

In fact, there is no one best way of developing a theory. Cunningham (2013) identifies four approaches for the development of testable, valid, and topic relevant theories. These include: (a) having an interest in a particular topic and pressing research questions about that particular topic (e.g., presentation of oneself on social media vs. off-social media), (b) a desire to understand and explain large and complex issues (e.g., the impact of star-power in an online endorsement), (c) the uniqueness of sport and the need for sport-specific theories, and (d) being cognizant of Lewin’s statement that “there is nothing so practical as a good theory.” In sum, a good theory has practical, research, and teaching value. One good example in this regard will be the work of Eisenhardt (1989) that discussed the building of theories from case study research. Alongside, theory development, a rigorous utilization of theories is a key issue with which the scholarly community has to deal. A key feature of a good discipline is its homegrown theories. Hence, investing in theory is the way toward building a good research, and accordingly, it is important to advance our theory utilization.

References


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