

Sport, Social Media, and Digital Technology

Sociological
Approaches

Edited by
Jimmy
Sanderson



Research in the
Sociology of Sport

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SPORT, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT VOLUME 15

**SPORT, SOCIAL MEDIA,
AND DIGITAL
TECHNOLOGY:
SOCIOLOGICAL
APPROACHES**

EDITED BY

JIMMY SANDERSON

Texas Tech University, USA



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Rory Magrath is the author of *Inclusive Masculinities in Contemporary Football: Men in the Beautiful Game* and co-author of *Out in Sport: The Experiences of Openly Gay and Lesbian Athletes in Competitive Sport*. He is currently Associate Professor of Sociology at Solent University, Southampton, UK. His research focuses on decreasing homophobia and the changing nature of contemporary masculinities, with a specific focus on elite soccer in the United Kingdom.

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Kim Toffoletti is Associate Professor of Sociology at Deakin University, Australia. Her research examines women's experiences of sport and leisure, with a focus on media representations, sports fandom and women's use of social media for sport and physical activity. She is the author of *Women sport fans* (Routledge, 2017).

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade plus, social media and digital technologies have become very influential in sport (Abeza, O'Reilly, Sanderson, & Frederick, 2021; Sanderson, 2011). Diverse sport stakeholders utilize social and digital tools for a variety of functions and purposes. For example, athletes engage social media to enhance their identity expression (Li, Scott, Naraine, & Ruihley, 2021), sport organizations employ social media for marketing and public relations initiatives (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Seguin, 2019; Frederick & Pegoraro, 2018; Naraine, 2019), and social media sites function as places for fans and other sport consumers to discuss sport issues and stories (Svenison & Hoeber, 2020; Waterhouse-Watson, 2019). Although social media platforms tend to occupy a significant portion of sport literature (Abeza et al., 2021), other forms of digital technology are exerting considerable influence in sport. For example, video games have become a popular activity for athletes (Sanderson, Browning, & DeHay, 2020), and the emergence of eSports is an impressive phenomenon that is reconfiguring how many sport stakeholders think about video games (Hallmann & Giel, 2018). Digital technologies also are becoming valuable tools for sport organizations to aggregate a variety of data on fans (Yang & Cole, 2020) along with fitness and exercise consumers (Couture, 2021). Additionally, digital technologies are impacting youth sport experiences, with some youth sport organizations, parents, and coaches utilizing technology to generate data that can be used to strategically reduce risk and optimize training (Sanderson & Baerg, 2020).

Much of the literature on social media and digital technology in sport has centered on managerial and marketing applications in sport (see Abeza et al., 2019; Naraine & Parent, 2017), including athlete branding and self-presentation (Doyle, Su, & Kunkel, 2020; Geurin & McNary, 2021). Whereas such research is certainly important and relevant to the global sport industry, social media and digital technologies offer a plethora of outcomes and consequences, some of which necessitate different approaches beyond managerial and marketing emphases. For instance, while social media platforms are common tools for athletes to use for self-presentation and branding, athletes' usage of these

platforms may reflect conformance or challenge to gender norms and may influence self-presentation practices of younger athletes (Thorpe, Toffoletti, & Bruce, 2017). Athletes' social media usage also prompts reflection about labor and how the work that athletes, particularly those in minority groups, are required to put in to establish and maintain their social media presence (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Moreover, the marketing and branding emphasis on social media suggests a need for closer introspection at messaging and portrayals of athletes, gender, nationality, sexuality, and ableism among others (Gonsalves & McGannon, 2020; Kilvington & Price, 2019). These platforms also open up avenues for athletes to be abused (Litchfield, Kavanagh, Osborne, & Jones, 2018; Sanderson & Weathers, 2020), and such behavior reflects a need for sport organizations to think about policy and support for athletes experiencing this behavior. Social media and digital technologies also bring attendant mental health concerns for athletes (Fraleay, Warner, Wilson, Jones, & Catalano, 2020; Hayes, Filo, Geurin, & Riot, 2020), along with raising apprehension about how sport organizations may be utilizing digital technology such as biometrics as a form of surveillance (Hutchins & Andrejevic, 2021; Jones, 2019).

As the previous examples illustrate, there are abundant effects and outcomes associated with social media and digital technology that suggest the need to look at sociological characteristics and structures. That is, understanding the holistic impact of social media and digital technology in sport requires consideration of (among others) race, gender, sexuality, nationalism, politics, socioeconomic status, mental health, surveillance, and labor. Accordingly, this volume aims to provide a resource for examining social media and digital technology in sport through a sociological lens. To do so, a global consortium of scholars have contributed essays examining various areas of social media and digital technology in sport, discussing how a sociological framework is crucial to furthering our understanding in this area, along with providing future research directions to traverse. I am most grateful for each of the author(s) and the work they have put into these chapters. It is hoped that this volume will stand as a valuable resource for sport media, communication, and sociological scholars as they pursue inquiry at the intersection of sport, social media, and digital technology. I also wish to thank Dr. Erin Ash at Clemson University and Dr. Ted Kian of Oklahoma State University for their peer review of the chapters in this volume. Their feedback was invaluable and considerably strengthened this work.

In Chapter 1, Dunja Antunovic discusses social media, digital technology, and sport media. Antunovic illustrates how female athletes have used social media to document substandard treatment (e.g., 2021 NCAA Women's Final Four). Antunovic documents how sport media's history is ground in hegemony and continues to function in that space, particularly as female athletes and women's sport leagues continually face challenges in getting equitable media coverage. Antunovic also outlines how social media and digital technologies can be important resources for marginalized athletes including for advocacy. She notes the importance of intersectional analysis approaching sport media research and advocates for more robust theoretical engagement and methodological approaches. In particular, Antunovic raises a particularly insightful commentary

by commenting that examinations should adopt more discursive approaches along with fluid methodological approaches that capture relationships between production, visibility, and consumption.

In Chapter 2, Kim Toffoletti, Nida Ahmad, and Holly Thorpe provide a robust discussion of how sociological approaches are helpful in understanding women's sport and physical culture. In their chapter, they chronicle self-representation, including marketing and branding, while integrating feminist critique and illustration the role of sociocultural conditions that female athletes face as they navigate social and digital media. They also cover how sportswomen utilize these technologies to engage in activism, along with unpacking critical discussions about issues such as body image and abuse. They also discuss the role of feminist theory and methodological approaches and offer important conversations about digital research ethics. Their chapter concludes with timely directions for future research including the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic and how sportswomen engaged digital platforms to continue training and competition.

In Chapter 3, Jamie Cleland and Connor MacDonald discuss masculinity in sport, a topic that has a longstanding history, but which now occupies a central feature in social media and digital technology platforms. They discuss how sport history has cultivated a normative, heterosexual identity among athletes, fans, and the media and note how social media and digital technology provide opportunities to engage in more active debates around masculinity. They specifically call attention to the use of language, observing that while social media and digital technologies offer space to challenge normalized views of masculinity, traditional masculinity characteristics still exert a significant influence on sport. Consequently, hate speech and other forms of hostile behavior permeate in online environments. They conclude by offering important directions for sociologically grounded perspectives to inform future research centered on masculinity and sport as expressed via social and digital technology platforms.

In Chapter 4, Daniel Kilvington, Jonathan Cable, Sophie Cowell, Glyn Mottershead, and Chris Webster provide an analysis of online fan responses to the implementation of the Rooney Rule in English professional football. Their analysis reveals that fans tended to advocate for or oppose these policies and suggests an undercurrent of hostility and resentment toward antiracist action and beliefs that sport is inherently meritocratic and fair. Their study further suggests that multiple misunderstandings exist around affirmative action in sport and becoming aware of these misunderstandings can strengthen policy and other efforts focused on antiracism. They also note that social media and digital technologies afford research with valuable data sources to analyze stakeholder perceptions toward such policies, which can further inform our understanding of reactions to movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM).

In Chapter 5, Kerry McGannon, Sydney Graper, and Jenny McMahon provide a case study of elite athlete mothers and their identities through big and small stories expressed on Instagram. Their findings reveal that elite athlete mothers negotiate intensive mothering and career as a big story, while holding the baby close and being a working mum/mumtrepreneur functioned as smaller

stories. McGannon and colleagues discuss how narrative inquiry provides value to enhance our understanding of contemporary motherhood meanings within sportswomen's personal and public digital stories. They also advocate for future research to move to other social and digital platforms such as YouTube that can help extend intertextual understandings of elite mother identities in sociocultural contexts.

In Chapter 6, Andrew Billings and Johnathan Anderson focus on nationalism and its influence in the production, consumption, and reception of sport via social media channels. They connect nationalism to sport sociology through robust discussions on theories of group identity such as social comparison theory, and BIRGing, CORFing, and GORFing, and also identify seminal studies in this area. They provide a nuanced discussion of the role of factors such as sport mega events (e.g., Olympics and World Cup). They also outline directions for future research that including connecting nationalism with identities such as gender, along with moving beyond sport mega events for analysis. They offer eSports as one such area where future research can make valuable inroads in our understanding of nationalism in sport expressed via digital and social media channels.

In Chapter 7, Keith Parry and Rory Magrath review the influence of social media and digital technology on sexuality in sport. In chronicling the history of homophobia in sport, they note a decline in homophobia, while observing that the most ubiquitous manifestation of homophobia occurs via social media. Their chapter connects literature on improved cultural attitudes toward sexuality with the prevalence of discrimination on social media. They also discuss that while some sport organizations are engaging in more anti-homophobia policies and practices, there remains a need to study the relationship between global sport, sexuality, and social media and digital technology. They contend that the extent to which online environments may contribute to decreasing homophobia lacks clarity and offer a number of fruitful suggestions for researchers to pursue.

In Chapter 8, Katie Brown and Sarah Brown discuss the influence of social media and digital technology in understanding political issues in sport. They discuss how nationalism has amplified divisions in sport and politics along with looking at how political ideology and social media can impact international sport markets. As one example, they chronicle the case of National Basketball Association (NBA) executive Daryl Morey who created an international firestorm for the league after tweeting support for protestors in Hong Kong. They further observe that athletes are in unique positions to engage fans and members of the public through their engagement of social media to discuss and advocate for political and social causes. As one example, they look at how players for the Atlanta Dream of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) used their influence in the State of Georgia's Senatorial elections. Their efforts are particularly noteworthy given that sitting Georgia Senator Kelly Loeffler was a co-owner of the team who had made disparaging remarks regarding the BLM movement.

In Chapter 9, Luke Jones, Tim Konoval, and John Toner provide a discussion of surveillance technology and their utilization in sport. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, their chapter illustrates the richness of utilizing sociocultural

approaches to understanding surveillance technologies for various sport stakeholder groups. In particular, their chapter addresses the growth of wearable technologies that are used to capture a plethora of data about athletes and note how these technologies both contribute to the unproblematized production of compliant athletic commodities in sport settings and how they hinder athletes' mental health and well-being. Their chapter vividly articulates how surveillance technologies are becoming normalized in society and provide one of the few sociocultural analyses of this technology. Accordingly, their chapter is an important resource for both scholars and practitioners who are interested in the managing the surveillance impacts of technology.

In Chapter 10, Emma Kavanagh, Chelsea Litchfield, and Jaquelyn Osborne address issues of athlete abuse on social and digital media to illustrate how athletes become victims of online hate. They discuss how digital technologies have become a vital component in sport consumption, yet which also pose risks to athletes and other sport stakeholders. They chronicle how sociological frameworks are beneficial in analyzing this topic and also observe the challenges related to managing online abusive behavior, given challenges related to perceptions of freedom of speech and lack of safety and regulation in virtual spaces. Given the prevalence of sport stakeholders such as athletes present in virtual spaces, opportunities abound for future work in this area, particularly to investigate abuse related to athletes' memberships in marginalized groups.

In Chapter 11, Andrew Baerg explores the role of digital technology in the data quantification of sport. Baerg argues for a sociological approach to analyzing this topic as a contrast to assumed epistemological and political power frameworks that privilege numbers in sport engagement. More specifically, Baerg notes that sociological approaches can help to raise important questions about the implications of data quantification for culture and society and notes how social and cultural contexts are influential in understanding numbers and shape how data are understood. Given the shifts to data-driven decision-making in sport, Baerg's chapter provides a timely analysis that can help inform future study about data quantification and the trust and authority given to numbers.

Finally, in Chapter 12, Michelle Hayes addresses the role of mental health for athletes given their heavy consumption of social and digital media. Hayes particularly notes how intersectionality contributes to mental health as athletes can be stigmatized and abused online for their real or perceived membership in certain groups. Hayes also raises an important critique with contemporary research in this area, as such work tends to focus on content-based analytic approaches. Hayes advocates for more diverse approaches to enhance understanding of social and digital media's impact on athletes both in the short-term and long-term. Hayes contends that these efforts will help strengthen understanding of athletes' mental health experiences which can be used to inform practice and safeguarding of athletes.

Social media and digital technologies are continually evolving. Consequently, it will be imperative for scholars working at the intersection of sport and social/digital media to utilize sociological approaches to enhance our understanding of the effects of these technologies and the implications their usage has for how we

understand sport. While this volume covers a diverse number of areas, admittedly, it represents only a fraction of ways that social media and digital technology are influencing sport. Developments in gaming, cryptocurrency, facial recognition, and the emergence of social media platforms like Tik Tok all carry with them significant implications for both sport and society. It is hoped that this volume will provide a valuable resource for scholars as they traverse social and digital topics in sport, as the literature will need to evolve along with the applications of these technologies. Additionally, and perhaps most significantly, this volume helps to illustrate how sociological approaches help us to critically think about issues occurring at the intersection of sport and social/digital media. Such frameworks undoubtedly will be important to raise questions and challenge assumptions about these technologies.

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