

Big Apple Kickoff vs. Tipoff: A Twitter Analysis

Jordan Johnston*

*Media Arts & Entertainment
Elon University*

Abstract

This paper examined the different Twitter strategies used by each of two NFL and NBA teams. The study examined the New York Jets, New York Giants, New York Knicks, and the Brooklyn Nets to analyze the tweets these organizations posted starting one week prior to the opening regular season games—and during those games. Tweets were classified into one of six categories: engagement, information, team statistics, advertisements, player involvement, and promotion and advertisements. Results showed clear differences in Twitter strategies between the teams: The NBA teams posted about twice as many tweets as the NFL teams. The study also found that the two NBA teams implemented "best practices" in using tweets.

I. Introduction

Within the past few years, social media has become one of the leading tools used by organizations around the world to reach selected audiences. In particular, Twitter use has spread like wildfire from use by individuals, often for social purposes, to use by the largest corporations in the world to meet more strategic communicative goals. This includes sports organizations, including professional teams. Twitter provides such sports organizations with a new, accessible channel to release information and to engage consumers, also known as fans (Price, Farrington, & Hall, 2013). Using a new media form requires many considerations about appropriate methods, though, and sports organizations have endured various Twitter controversies that have occasionally overshadowed the positive influences of the social media form. More to the point, teams are no different than other organizations in discovering how to use Twitter to advance goals to serve and grow a fan base.

Recognizing that not all teams or even professional sports are the same, this paper investigated the similarities and differences in the creation of a Twitter presence between teams in two professional sports: football and basketball. The analysis focused on two teams in the National Football League, the New York Giants and New York Jets; and another two in the National Basketball League, the New York Knicks and Brooklyn Nets. These four are all based in or around New York City, a huge media hub. Given that the area holds the target audiences for all of these teams, it allows for a reasonable examination of the social media strategies for each of these teams and for a contrast between two leagues. A goal of the paper is to determine which strategies appear to be more successful in engaging followers and building fan support networks.

Twitter defines itself as “a real-time information network that connects you to the latest stories, ideas,

* **Keywords:** social media, NBA, NFL, content analysis, Twitter
Email: Jjohnston7@elon.edu

opinions and news about what you find interesting” (Twitter 2013). Each user can create posts, more commonly known as “tweets.” These are any combination of 140 characters that are published for the purpose of interacting with other Twitter users (Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger 2012). Users can gain other Twitter followers. When they do indeed become so-called followers of specific Twitter accounts, users are choosing to allow tweets from them to appear on their Twitter homepage. All of the Twitter accounts examined here are the organizations’ official Twitter pages, not fraudulent or fan-produced accounts.

II. Literature Review

Twitter’s recent popularity has risen because it can have an equal effect in a large variety of categories of uses and users (Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns 2013). This, in turn, has led to a boom in social media research to study not only content but audience behavior. For example researchers can observe how Twitter is changing the event scene by watching members interact during a live event, called “live tweeting” (Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns 2013). Sports particularly offer opportunities for Twitter use, including live tweeting, because events serve as sources of entertainment, incorporating competition and human drama. Sporting events thus allow Twitter members to keep in touch—to interact—as well as express their feelings and opinions pertaining to action instantaneously (Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns 2013).

Since sports are one of the most popular forms of entertainment, a notable number of research studies have recently sought to understand the process reaching fans via social media beyond Twitter. Some studies have explored sports marketing strategies and extended them to social media (Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker 2012). A study by Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker (2012) focused on the different variables that affect professional sports teams in the four largest professional leagues. Through surveys of college students, the authors recorded and indexed data by four different variables: *authenticity*, *discloser*, *engagement*, and *information* (Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker 2012). The study supported the researchers’ prediction that people were more likely to follow a more successful organization through social media. Noting the lack of available peer-reviewed research on Facebook use, the authors “tested the supposition that Facebook attributes can catalyze fan engagement with an online Facebook community” (229). Ultimately, they concluded that it was not enough to have a Facebook page, but the organization must be active in the social media community and create a social media plan to fully engage followers.

Abeza, O’Reilly, and Reid (2013) conducted eight case studies that observed the social media strategies implemented by each sporting organization as they hosted events. The purpose of their studies was to find the uses, opportunities, and challenges that are presented by using social media accounts. After viewing the social media profiles and interviewing those in charge of the sites, they tested opportunities and challenges of social media (Abeza, O’Reilly, and Reid 2013).

A study that identified motivations and constraints of Twitter use was conducted by Witkemper, Lim, and Waldburger (2012). This study is directly applied to specific athletes and sports organizations. The authors examined the motivations of sampled users according to subcategories: *entertainment*, *information*, *pass time*, and *fanship* (Witkemper, Lim, and Waldburger 2012). They wrote, “This examination suggests that sport organizations’ marketing efforts can impact their relationship with college students by increasing the motivations found in the study” (p. 179). The study suggests that sports organizations should cater to the four motivations listed above in their production of social media messages to gain more followers through specific strategies, such as providing insider information about a club or offering links to in-depth stories on athletes (Witkemper, Lim, and Waldburger, 2012). The authors suggest that organizations can use social media as a way to pick up ideas and news from their fans. This study hopes to develop similar suggestions that the teams in New York could implement, and that also coincide with the motivational cues from Witkemper, Lim, and Waldburger (2012).

In his master’s thesis, Wysocki created a list of the best practices that sports teams—the NBA in particular—should use to maximize their social media success (2012). He compiled this list after performing interviews with nine social media professionals who worked in the NBA. The best practices include giving quality content, incorporating social media offline, “gamify” social media efforts, personalize fans on social media, collect fan data, fansource/crowdsourc, and use fans to amplify the NBA team’s message (Wysocki 2012). The author also suggests that teams allocate more money to hiring social media staff to regulate the flow of information in and out of the organization as well as keep up with several different social media platforms.

Additionally, teams should spread their social media strategies not only onto the site but on posters, tickets, television airings, and other print materials (Wysocki 2012).

The review of these previous studies established a foundation to learn more about professional sports teams' social media use. This paper addressed the following research questions.

RQ1: What types of social media/Twitter strategies do the four samples sports organizations use to engage with their fan bases?

RQ2: To what extent do the strategies differ between the NFL and NBA teams?

RQ3: What new or revised strategies should these teams consider implementing?

III. Methods

Sample

To properly compare tweets from different organizations, the data were collected during the same time period. Also the timing of promotions was considered essential to study the teams' traditional marketing communications plans (Williams and Chinn, 2010). Since the NBA began its lengthy basketball season not long after the NFL season was initiated, it was possible to study Twitter activity during the crucial starts to both seasons in the fall of 2013. This yielded the chance to notice similarities and differences in Twitter techniques among the four teams. The author examined the Twitter pages for the New York Giants, New York Jets, New York Knicks, and the Brooklyn Nets one week prior to their home opening game of the season as well as the tweets issued live during the teams' first games. By examining two teams in each league, he was able to make very limited generalizations but at the least seek some evidence of patterns in the leagues' strategies that Pronschinske et al. (2012) found. The author chose the first week prior to the season opener under the assumption that if an organization were to implement a new social media strategy for a sports season, this key time period would be selected and would thus be a salient time for analysis.

Procedure

The first step in the protocol for carrying out the analysis was to find the official Twitter page of all four teams. These pages are indicated with a blue check mark to notify followers that the page has been approved by Twitter to be authentic. Both the Jets and Giants started their season on September 8, 2013, and both the Knicks and Nets began their season on October 30, 2013. These were less than two months apart. The author located the tweets exactly a week prior to both of these dates and the tweets during the first game. Each tweet counted as a unit of coding. He adopted several of the categories created by Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker (2012), which included *engagement* determined by the following six attributes: (1) listing of team events, (2) discussion board, (3) wall used for dialogue between the organization and fans, (4) creation of other applications (e.g., ticket and merchandise sales portals), (5) presence of an official email, and (6) other relevant contact information. Information dissemination (*Information*) was determined by the following four attributes: (1) news links from the organization, (2) notes from the organization, (3) photographs posted by the organization, and (4) videos uploaded by the organization. The author also created four categories: 1) *game statistics* determined by (a) updates of progress during the game (b) league standings supplied by the organization (3) player additions and releases; 2) *advertisement* determined by tweet mentioning another company outside the organization; 3) *player involvement* determined by (a) retweets of team players, (b) photos of players, (c) quotes by players or coaches or (d) behind the scenes photos of practice and locker 4)rooms; and *promotional and advertisement* determined by mention of another company with endorsement of upcoming game. Each tweet was analyzed and placed in these categories.

IV. Findings

The analysis of tweets from the New York Jets, New York Giants, New York Knicks, and the Brooklyn Nets confirmed that there are strategies and information that each team implements. Each team issued many

tweets under the *Team Statistics*, as shown in *Figure 1*. This is the category of tweets that were most similar among the four organizations. These posts included injury reports, starting lineups, and players that were released during the offseason. Each team provided updates periodically during the game as well as a final score Gupdate. A link was provided for the post-game wrap-up that was written by the organization's staff. Direct quotations by coaches and players were often tweeted by these organizations regarding the position of

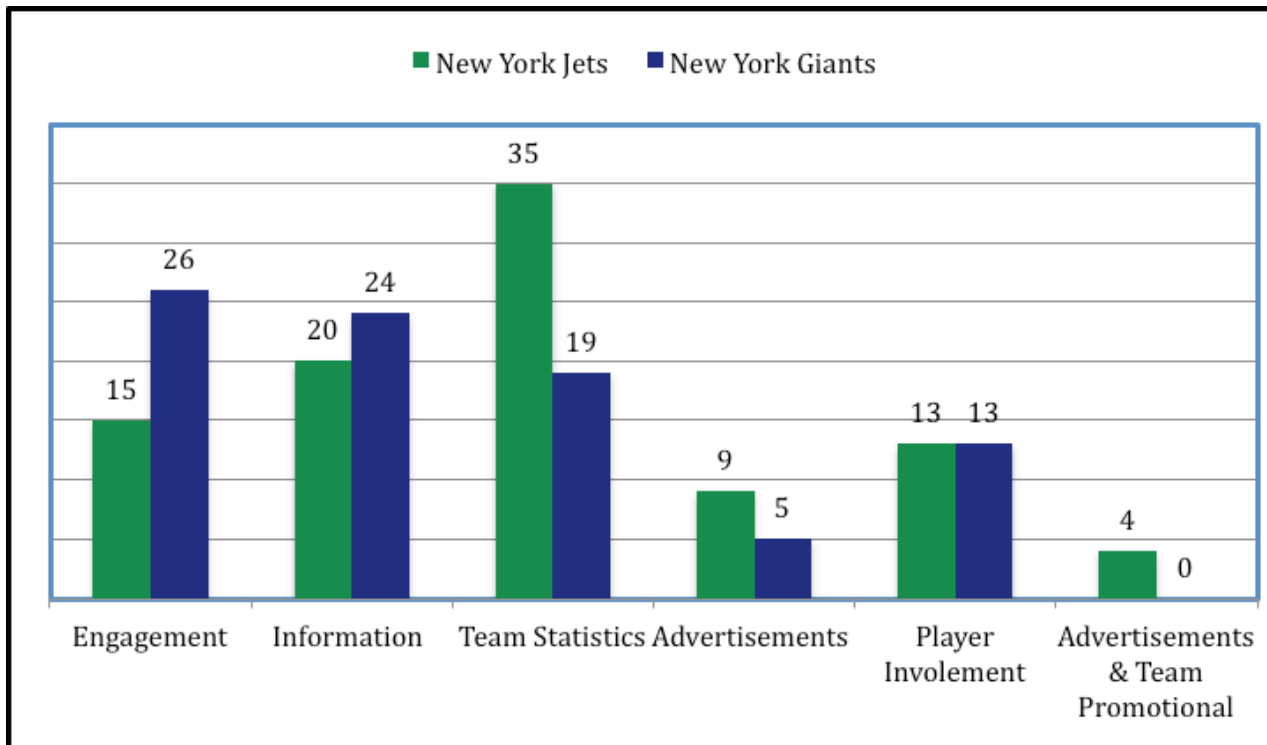


Figure 1. NFL Analysis: Number of tweets by team and category

the team and their personal thoughts.

The author observed two different types of tweet advertising: retweets of sponsors and original tweets that mentioned sponsors. Every team promoted the stadium where its competition takes place. Also, some tweets were sponsored by different companies. Teams also shared official merchandise of their organization. The most tweeted about items were player jerseys. The New York Knicks incorporated their new jerseys into a kickoff social media plan called #KnicksInOrange.

The majority of the Giants' engagement tweets were used to promote their Big Blue Kickoff Live show that happened every day of the week leading up to opening night. Fans could ask questions using the #Giantschat or call questions for the hosts. The Giants also had more *information* tweets than the Jets. Of the 24 information tweets, 19 of those included links to the official news blog of the Giants organization. The links included stories written by the Giants staff and insiders. There were also photo galleries and videos from team practice. Another feature the Giants provided was photos within the team locker room. Lockers of standout players such as Eli Manning were pictured in efforts to prepare the fans for the game. It is obvious that the locker room tweets are supplied by the equipment managers based on the language used. For example, the members of the equipment team were mentioned in the tweets of the equipment set up. This was the majority of the *player involvement* tweets.

The Jets incorporated more definite social media strategies in preparation for the season opener. The underlying theme was #JetsKickoff. Any tweet that promoted the start of the season was accompanied by a graphic that advertised the #JetsKickoff rally that took place Friday, September 6, 2013. The idea was to "Paint the town Green" in an effort to get as many Jet fans as possible at these popular places in New York (see *Figure 2*). During the actual rally fan photos were tweeted.

Along with #JetsKickoff was a countdown until the kickoff itself (see *Figure 3*). These tweets usually

included an edited graphic of a player with the number of days left. However, these tweets were sponsored tweets. Companies, like Jack Black, are looking for ways to publicize their brand in an alternative way. Social media is a quick way to reach thousands of people. Established organizations, like the Jets or sports teams in general, already have an audience they are reaching. Purchasing an advertisement via Twitter is an easy way to lead viewers directly to their Twitter page with the @mention.

Another strategy used was asking “Jetparody” questions. These would be special graphics asking fans questions about Jets games from the past, and fans could respond via Twitter. The Jets *team statistics* category was compiled mostly of injury reports as well as player releases and acquisitions (see *Figure 4*). Only 8 of the 35 tweets in this category were score updates. A photo of the official injury list was also posted by what fans were to assume was a coach.

The two NFL teams had very similar information on their Twitter pages for their fans; however, it was the style of delivery that separated the two teams. The Jets used more graphics and pictures to draw in an audience, whereas the Giants stuck to simple text. Both teams incorporated a particular # to their preseason campaign. The Jets had more advertisement tweets, specifically sponsored tweets, than the Giants.



Figure 2. Jets Paint our Town Green Campaign

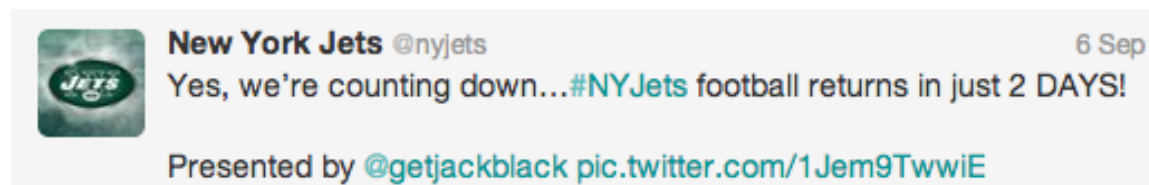


Figure 3. Example of Jets Promotional and Advertisement Tweet

The Brooklyn Nets experienced a transformation in the offseason, including a new coach and a highly publicized signing of three former Boston Celtics. However, the organization did not highlight the change, but concentrated on what was to be expected of the team and how the team was shaping up. A great deal of retweets were issued by NBA analysts and New York writers who mentioned the Nets. This brought positive attention to the Nets from outside their clubhouse. The Nets were clearly looking for outside sources to show people that the team is expected to have a successful season. While NBA on TNT panel had its preseason rundown, the Nets were tweeting direct quotes from the hosts on their predictions for the Nets as well as how players would do.

One aspect of the Nets Twitter page that stood out over the Knicks as well as the NFL teams was the in-game tweets. The Nets produced 42 tweets in the opening tip-off game alone. The tweets were not only numerical, but they provided context to what was happening in the game from observations of players to detailed descriptions of plays that occurred. The Nets also tweeted statistics and plays performed by both teams. Whenever a player is mentioned, they directly mention him in the tweet as seen in *Figure 5*.

Another characteristic of the game updates given by the Nets Twitter page is the use of #NETSo-nYES. YES Network is the official network of the New York Yankees and the Nets. YES Network tweets regarding broadcast times were retweeted by the team as well.

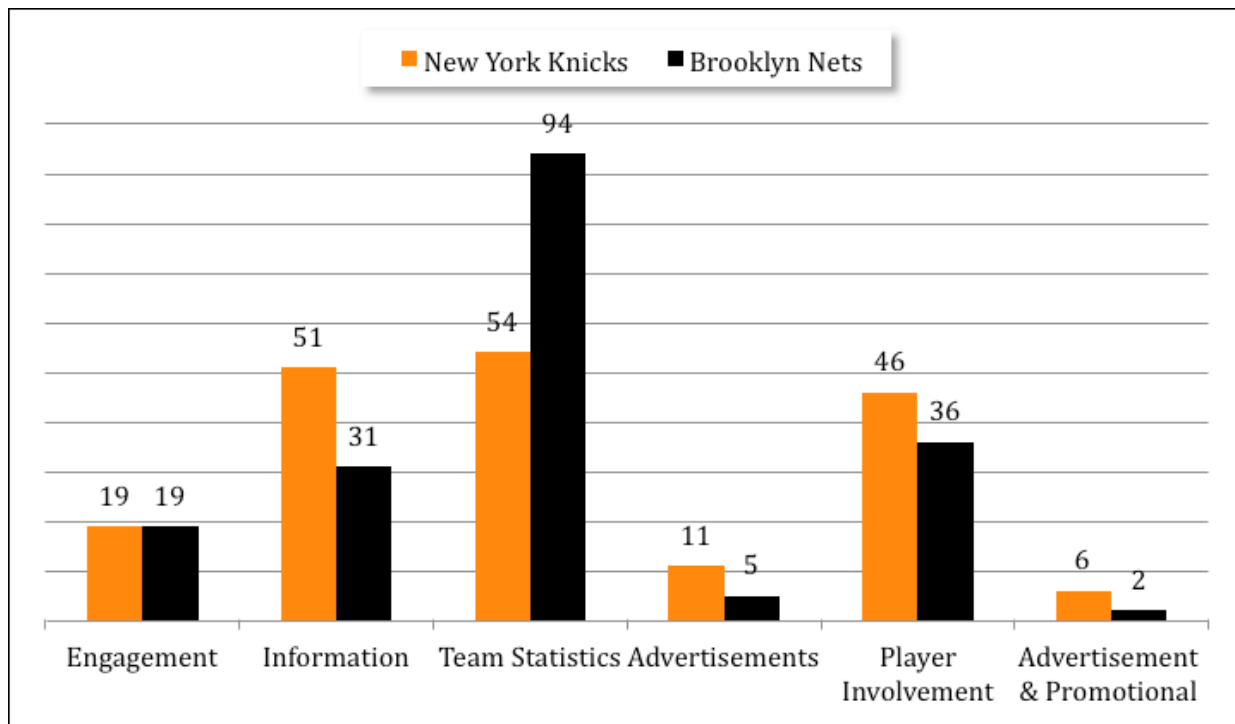


Figure 4. NBA Analysis: Number of tweets by team and category

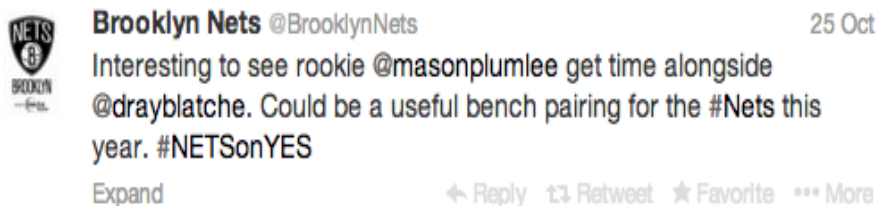


Figure 5. Example of Promotional Tweet

The Nets made it a priority to give fans behind the scenes access to the team. One way they did this is by showing the Nets players getting involved with the community the week before the first tip-off. By using #BrooklynNetsAssist, fans could track the whereabouts of Nets players during several different events. Also, numerous photos and notes from practice were tweeted. The Nets organization gave the fans an exclusive discount at the merchandise store as an incentive to follow the team on Twitter and visit the merchandise store. Photo galleries from community service and practice were also posted on the team’s website.

The New York Knicks had very similar content as the Nets; however, there were some differences. The biggest difference between the two is that the Knick Public Relations has its own Twitter account. This account is more focused on life surrounding the Knicks and not what was going on inside the organization. The official Twitter page of the Knicks devoted a large portion of tweets to *player involvement*. Instagram videos of players answering a question were posted every day along with photos from practice. More behind-the-scenes coverage included photos from within the team’s huddle before the game and the locker room. A large percentage of the *player involvement* tweets were from the Knicks community service. Children of all ages were joined by the Knicks players to play arcade games and have fun inside Madison Square Garden. All photos from the event included a player and a several kids.

The Knicks used their players by having them do several meet-and-greets with fans during this week. These events took place at Footlocker, a sponsor and retailer of the Knicks, and at the official merchandise store located inside Madison Square Garden, the arena of the Knicks. This is directly related with the Knicks preseason campaign #KnicksinOrange as pictured in Figure 6.

The Knicks made the new jerseys a lead # on their page the entire offseason. They featured the first

official photoshoot in the jerseys, player commentary on the jerseys, and photos of new fans purchasing the jerseys.

The in-game tweets produced by the Knicks were detailed accounts of scoring plays by Knicks players. One feature unique to the Knicks was the Twitter page that directly mentioned different celebrities that entered Madison Square Garden. It would be easy to see celebrities enter the court because of the close quarters of a basketball court. Plus this promotes the idea that the Knicks are the “celebrities team.”



Figure 6. Example of #KnickinOrange Campaign

V. Conclusion

According to this analysis of the New York teams, the two NBA teams used Twitter more than the two NFL teams. However, their social media strategies were not different from each other. One category would dominate the other, but there was compensation in other places. The Jets with 96 total tweets had only a few more than the Giants' 87, whereas the two NBA teams had exactly the same number of tweets during the week of research observation, 187.

There could be several reasons that the NBA had double the number of tweets the NFL did. As America's most popular sport, the NFL has a passionate fan base that has been around for a long time (Vogan, 274). The NFL has a very tight grasp on the league as a whole.

“The league has worked to construct its significance by obsessively controlling and aggressively circulating its image through a multiplatform array of marketing strategies and brand extensions . . .” (Vogan, 274)

With this type of control, it is difficult and unnecessary for NFL teams to promote the sport itself, since it receives so much attention already. That makes the main job of the teams themselves cater to their loyal fan base. This explains why there is an emphasis on information regarding the team as well as getting fans engaged with their team.

The findings of this research can be added to prior sport communication research because of its emphasis on the rise in social media. One issue the NBA in particular was having with social media was a lack of an overarching social media plan (Wysocki 2012).

Even though each team did use kickoff hashtags, there were no obvious patterns of when kickoff items were posted, aside from the fact that they were done so on most days. The teams did not send out promotional posts every day. The analysis conducted in this research found that the NBA teams implemented what Wysocki (2012) regarded as best practices in using tweets: in-arena presence, connecting with fans outside the arena, social media campaigns, and most importantly quality content.

Since the NBA is not the most popular sport in the country, the teams have to have a greater social media presence to attract spectators to their team. In New York, there is now the battle between the Knicks in the city and the Nets in the boroughs. The two teams separate themselves with different strategies that emphasize the players they keep. Also, the NBA has established the league as a hip professional sport. This is partially because of the players playing in the league. A majority of the players sport lavish clothes and jewelry complemented by black ink tattoos. The entire league as a whole directly affects the social media strategies by the teams. If the NFL adopted some of the strategies the NBA implemented during their season, the league could gain a new demographic of fans.

Future research could extend the duration of the analysis longer than one week. Future scholars may apply the best practices Wysocki constructed to the NFL to see the comparison between the two leagues. Another study could explore different leagues using the same coding system that this study used. Lastly, re-

search regarding fan demographics could explain the reasons the NBA is more active on social media, which was not answered by this study.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to extend a special thanks to Professor Glenn Scott at Elon University for his guidance, inspiration and advice, all of which the article could not be published.

Bibliography

- Abeza, G., O'Reilly, N., & Reid, I. (2013). Relationship marketing and social media in sport. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 6, 120-142.
- Highfield, T., Harrington, S., & Bruns, A. (2013). Twitter as a technology for audiencing and fandom. *Information, Communication & Society*, 16:3, 315-339.
- Price, J., Farrington, N., & Hall, L. (2013). Changing the game? The impact of Twitter on relationships between football clubs, supporters and the sports media. *Soccer & Society*, 14:4, 446-461.
- Pronschinske M., Groza M. D., & Walker M. (2012). Attracting Facebook 'fans': The importance of authenticity and engagement as a social networking strategy for professional sports teams. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 21, 221-231.
- Vogan, T. (2013). NFL Films and the art of selling football, *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture*, 11, 274-288.
- Williams, J., & Chinn, S. (2010). Meeting relationship-marketing goals through social media: A conceptual model for sport marketers. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 3, 422-437.
- Witkemper C., Lim C. H., & Waldburger A. (2012). Social media and sports marketing: Examining the motivations and constraints of Twitter users. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 21, 170-183.
- Wysocki, M (2012). The role of social media in sports communication: An analysis of NBA teams strategy. *Capstone presentation presented to School of Communicaton, American University, April 30.*
-