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## From the Driver's Seat: Fan Expectations of IndyCar Drivers' Twitter Usage

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## **Introduction**

The growth of the popular social networking site Twitter over the past decade has been remarkable. The amount of United States internet users using Twitter has more than doubled since November of 2010 (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). When Twitter filed for its initial public offering in October of 2013, the company reported having 215 million active users who publish more than half-a-billion tweets per day (Kim, 2013).

Currently, it is estimated that Twitter has around 320 million active monthly users (Kerby, 2016). Just as importantly, Twitter is now a part of the promotion and marketing mix for many different companies, especially within the sport industry (Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012).

Research into Twitter in a sports-centric context has largely focused on content producers and those who publish tweets. Previous research into content producers has included examinations of individual athletes (Browning & Sanderson,

2012; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012), sports teams (Price, Farrington, & Hall, 2013), and sport organizations (Campos, Anagnostopoulos, & Chadwick, 2013; Gibbs, O'Reilly, & Brunette, 2014). While there has been some growth in the research of Twitter usage by professional athletes in individual sports, research into Twitter audiences of those same sports is limited. Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) established the importance of studying the followers of professional athletes by pointing out the wide-spread acceptance of Twitter among athletes. There is a need for additional investigations in this area because the majority of previous Twitter research has not presented Twitter users an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings about how they want to see athletes utilize Twitter. In addition, previous research on why people follow individual athletes on Twitter (Clavio & Kian, 2010) states that a great deal of the "as-yet unidentified elements of Twitter use needs to be uncovered" (p.495).

The IndyCar Racing Series is an open-wheel racing league in North America. As the top-level open-wheel racing series in North America, it features 16 races per year, including the world-famous Indianapolis 500. Despite this, there is limited media attention paid to many IndyCar drivers (Oreovicz, 2014). This may suggest a reason why IndyCar has encouraged its drivers to utilize social media avenues such as Twitter (IndyCar, 2017, Pappone, 2017). IndyCar has widely embraced Twitter and encouraged its athletes to utilize the new technology (Incandela, 2011; Pappone, 2017; Patton, 2012). In recent years, IndyCar drivers have been active on Twitter and other forms of social media by engaging in activities such as interacting with fans, sharing information, integrating their sponsors, and trying to make fans feel more connected to drivers (Pappone, 2017). Many IndyCar drivers even display their Twitter handles on their driver uniforms (Knell, 2013).

In an effort to expand our collective knowledge of why people follow professional athletes on Twitter, athletes from IndyCar were chosen for examination in the current study. IndyCar drivers were used because of the sports' focus on social media and its opportunity for growth via the emerging media channel of Twitter. In addition, IndyCar agreed to assist this research effort by sharing a survey for IndyCar fans on their official Twitter account. A few IndyCar drivers also agreed to share the survey on their personal accounts.

Implications from this research include advancing researchers' understanding of users' motivations for following athlete accounts on Twitter, as well as the expectations audiences have for those athletes. The results of the current study will add to the growing body of research on Twitter followers of professional athletes. In an effort to advance the work in this area, the categories which emerge from the analysis will be compared to previous uses and gratifications research on Twitter (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Clavio & Walsh, 2014; Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010) and research on how IndyCar drivers prefer to use Twitter (Clavio et al., 2013). Practical implications of the research include the ability for IndyCar drivers to understand what their followers want to see from them on Twitter. Understanding the desires of one's Twitter audience is the first key to crafting an effective message for them (Thompson, Martin, Gee, & Eagleman, 2014). As IndyCar continues to grow an online audience for its sport and its drivers, these results will help the racing circuit understand the expectations of its Twitter audience. The presence of most of the major drivers on Twitter demonstrates the drivers' dedication to utilizing Twitter as an important form of communication. These results will help those drivers and the IndyCar Series better provide the content their audience desires, while also providing a practical and theoretical basis for

further inquiry by both scholars and practitioners in sport communication.

## **Review of Literature**

### *Uses and Gratifications*

The uses and gratifications framework is of central importance in this study because it assists in the understanding of media consumption from the audience's perspective. Because this study is rooted in information taken from Twitter users about the traits they want to see IndyCar drivers display on Twitter, the uses and gratifications approach helps to place these questions inside that framework. Uses and gratifications (U&G) is grounded in the idea of an active audience whose consumption of media is goal-driven (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). U&G research stipulates that audiences choose which media to consume based on their psychological needs (Katz et al., 1974). For example, those seeking deep intellectual stimulation may consume a non-fiction book while those seeking to escape may watch an action film (Ruggerio, 2000). The U&G approach has been a common tool in evaluating the motives of media consumers (Wimmer & Dominick, 1983), and has been a common framework for examining the motives of audiences of digital media over the past 15 years (Guerin-Eagleman, 2015; Sundar & Limperos 2013). Since the U&G framework is centered on an examination of the audience, rather than the content producer, audience surveys are often used to elicit audience feedback on the gratifications they are attempting to fulfill through their media consumption patterns (e.g., Clavio & Kian, 2010). The application of the U&G framework for examining new media technologies such as social media is one that has gained momentum in recent years (Sundar & Limperos 2013).

Chen (2011) was one of the first to apply the U&G approach to the study of how individuals used Twitter. Chen found that increased Twitter usage led to a higher fulfillment of an individual's

desire to connect with other people. Chen also found that the specific use of the @reply function was important for gratifying the desire to connect. Phua, Jin, and Kim (2017) investigated social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter) users' social relationships by applying uses and gratification and social capital theory. The researchers found that Twitter users utilize Twitter as an online communication tool to bridge social capital while Instagram users build bonding social capital by using Snapchat. Krause, North, and Heritage (2014) examined Facebook users' motivations to listen to music via Facebook. It was found that the users sought communication, entertainment, and habitual diversion gratifications when they listen to music through Facebook. A cross-cultural study by Sheldon et al. (2017) found that Croatians use Instagram for more social-interaction gratification than Americans while Americans consume for more self-promoting and documenting gratifications. Also, Americans benefit from utilizing hashtags to manage their documenting purpose. Another cultural study by Al-Jabri, Sohail, and Ndubisi (2015) applied U&G to examine Twitter users in Saudi Arabia. The scholars found that social interaction, freedom of expression and enjoyment were the factors that affected social media behavior. Spinda and Puckette (2017) explored Snapchat users' motivations for following sports. The results showed that four motivations were identified including ease and convenience, vicarious experience, unique points of view and behind the scenes. With these motives, the users would achieve need-based gratification, affordance-based gratification, and modality-based gratifications by using social networking sites.

Other researchers have used the U&G approach to examine social media usage among college students (e.g. Clavio & Walsh, 2014; Vrocharidou & Efhymiou, 2012; Wang, Tchernev, & Solloway, 2012) and to explore

social-networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter (Punyanunt-Carter, De La Cruz, & Wrench, 2017; Sheldon et al., 2017). These various studies help establish uses and gratifications as a solid framework through which to explore people's usage of emerging media technologies such as Twitter.

### *IndyCar*

Research on IndyCar and social media by Clavio, Walsh, and Vooris (2013) focused on driver's utilization of Twitter. These researchers conducted interviews with IndyCar drivers and the driver's responses were analyzed for common themes. Drivers indicated that their plans for using Twitter during the upcoming racing season revolved around the themes of authentic information, interactivity, promotion, and cross-platform integration. Drivers also revealed that they hoped to use their Twitter accounts to promote an image of authenticity and personal branding. The drivers themselves understood these two ideas to be occasionally similar but often in contrast to each other. The drivers discussed what the researchers referred to as promoted surveillance or the desire of the drivers to give their Twitter followers a backstage look at their life as a driver. Driver's indicated that this backstage look included going out of their way to interact with other drivers on Twitter because they understood that followers would be able to observe the conversations. Drivers also remarked that they considered interaction an important aspect of Twitter and made an effort to reply to fans in an attempt to appear friendly. Lastly, the interviews revealed that drivers believed fans were interested in hearing insider information and personal commentary via Twitter updates. Insider information occurred when the drivers reported on events at the track, while personal commentary fell into the realm of drivers' thoughts about their lives away from the track.

### *Twitter Research and Sports*

Whereas audiences once relied mostly on mass media channels such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines to bring them access to their favorite athletic competitors, Twitter has now filled a large portion of that role for those who choose to use social media (Sanderson, 2010). While websites and blogs were one step that allowed athletes to connect directly with fans, Twitter allows for an even stronger direct connection, because Twitter messages are delivered directly to a user via Twitter's interface (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Over the last few years, steady progress has been made in the scholarly investigation of Twitter audiences. Despite this progress, there is much to be learned about Twitter audiences within a sport-specific context. The majority of research has focused on three areas: content producers such as professional and college teams (e.g. Wang, & Zhou, 2015), the athletes themselves (e.g. Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Geurin-Eagleman, 2015; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010), and the sport journalists (e.g., Nölleke, Grimmer, & Horkey, 2016) who cover those entities.

One of the first examples of Twitter and sport research was the examination of Twitter activity during cycling's 2009 Giro D'Italia (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). This research examined the tweets published by 13 English-speaking cyclists from the three days before the start of the race, until one day after its conclusion. Kassing and Sanderson used grounded theory to examine the cyclists' tweets for commonly occurring themes. The qualitative coding showed the following common themes in the cyclists' tweets: sharing commentary and opinions, fostering interactivity, and cultivating insider perspectives. Clavio and Kian (2010) used a survey methodology to examine the demographics and gratifications of a retired LPGA golfer's Twitter followers. Results indicated a strong desire among the athlete's Twitter audience to follow her because of her perceived golf expertise. In addition, enjoyment

of reading the golfer's tweets and the ability to get exclusive information about her scored highly in the audience survey. Clavio and Kian concluded that the elements of the athlete's Twitter feed which were most appealing to her followers were the ones related to the athlete's persona and to information specifically about her.

Hambrick et al. (2010) examined professional athletes' Twitter usage by utilizing a content analysis to examine tweets. Their sample of 510 athletes also included six from auto-racing. Hambrick et al.'s content analysis found six categories of tweets: interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content, promotional, and fanship. The interactivity category had the highest volume of tweets (34%), with diversion coming in second (28%). Additional analysis showed that the athletes with the highest number of followers and the highest number of published tweets had a greater frequency of tweets coded as interactive. Pegoraro (2010) also used the content analytic method to examine professional athletes' utilization of Twitter. Pegoraro analyzed the tweets of the five most-followed athletes in a number of professional sports and found the following content categories: [tweets] relating to personal life, relating to business life, relating to another sport or athlete, relating to their sport, responding to fans, responding to other athletes, and relating to pop culture. Of particular interest is Pegoraro's evaluation of 22 tweets from motorsports athletes. The motorsport athletes' tweets were classified as personal life (72.73%), responding to fans (22.52%), and business life (13.64%).

Guerin-Eagleman (2015) also utilized the U&G framework to study how master's gymnasts used online communities for support and participation. The qualitative research identified two important themes that attempted to explain why the participants used online communities: information gathering and interaction. Other recent research that utilized the U&G framework includes work by Eddy, Reams, and Dittmore

(2016) who looked at how UFC fans use online message boards and similar U&G-grounded research from Haugh and Watkins (2016) that focused on the motivations of fans to use particular social media platforms to follow their favorite teams. Of interest in the Haugh & Watkins (2016) study, is that information gathering was an important motivation for using various social media platforms.

In an examination of athlete self-presentation on Twitter, Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) found that Twitter followers were most interested in getting inside information from the athletes they follow on Twitter. This research focused on professional golfers because of their wide-acceptance of Twitter and the diverse demographics of the sports' audience. Part of Lebel and Danylchuk's research also asked Twitter users to rate the importance of humor and multimedia content in athlete tweets on a five-point Likert scale. Humor was found to have a mean importance of 3.1 and the inclusion of multimedia content in Twitter posts had a mean of 2.9. Lebel and Danylchuk also allowed their survey respondents to provide recommendations for how athletes should present themselves on Twitter. Three themes emerged from these responses: personality, respect, and quality.

Overall, there has been a great deal of scholarly interest in Twitter usage and consumption over the past few years. Some of these studies have used content and thematic analysis methods to examine tweets (e.g., Emmons & Butler, 2013; Gibbs et al., 2014; Hambrick et al., 2010; Wang & Zhou, 2015) while others have examined marketing on Twitter and user motivations (e.g., Boehmer, 2016; Witkemper et al., 2012). The present study examines IndyCar fans on Twitter through a survey methodology with an open-ended question. The goal of this research was to provide one of the first looks at the expectations that Twitter audiences possess about how athletes should present themselves on social media.

The present study attempts to fill the void of studies in social media research by examining the Twitter audiences of professional race car drivers and researching the audience's expected gratifications sought from their experience. In an effort to examine such audiences, the following research question was proposed: What kind of Twitter activity do the followers of IndyCar drivers want to see from drivers?

## **Method**

In order to explore the expectations of the Twitter followers of IndyCar drivers, the data collection process for this study involved the dissemination of a survey to IndyCar fans on Twitter. IndyCar's official Twitter account tweeted a link to the survey on several occasions. The survey link was also posted by a number of IndyCar drivers on their official Twitter accounts.

Rather than utilize a motivation scale derived from previous research, the survey question in this study was open-ended. An open-ended question was chosen in an effort to determine the expected gratifications from following IndyCar drivers on Twitter. Clavio and Walsh (2014), in their discussion of the social media usage of college sport fans suggested such an approach, "From a scholarly standpoint, it may be possible to utilize these findings to craft new UG studies of sport-focused social media, this time focusing on the gratifications sought [emphasis added], rather than the uses as representations of latent gratification" (p. 17). An open-ended question was used because as Kaye (2010) points out "The importance of open-ended questions in developing motivational items for a new medium or technology has been well documented" (p.197). Kaye also points out that open-ended questions are important because they help to determine reasons for usage that are unique to a new medium.

The open-ended question, "Please list the aspects or traits of IndyCar drivers that you like

to see in their Twitter accounts," resulted in responses from 401 individuals during the final months of 2013. Some respondents listed multiple traits, while some listed only one or two. In total there were 752 aspects or traits, listed by the 401 individuals who responded. Demographic data on the sample was also collected.

Merriam (2009) writes of qualitative data analysis that researchers should start by being, "as expansive as you want in identifying any segment of data that might be useful." (p.178) and "that assigning codes to pieces of data is the way you begin to construct categories" (p. 177). This is referred to as open coding. In line with this method, two researchers read through all 404 responses and recorded relevant comments and notes that emerged from a close reading of the responses. Once this process was complete, the two coders independently went back through their coding and grouped their codes into larger categories. Merriam says of categories that they, "are conceptual elements that cover or span many individual examples (or bits or units of the data you previously identified) of the category" (p.181). These categories are to have emerged directly from the repetitive reading of the data set (Merriam, 2009). Once the two coders determined categories from the data set, they met to discuss their findings. During this discussion, the two coders found strong similarity between their categories. The categories were refined in order to reduce the number of categories and to align the results with Merriam's suggestion to create categories which succinctly communicate findings. In line with Merriam's advice on category construction, the researchers involved in this analysis consider the derived categories to be responsive to the research, exhaustive, and mutually exclusive.



**Results**

The survey instrument asked respondents for their gender, race, household income, and education. Of those who responded to the gender question, 29.2% identified as female and 70.1% identified as male. The remaining 0.7% of the sample did not indicate a gender. Respondents reported their race or ethnic background as Caucasian (90.0%), Hispanic/Latino (4.0%), Asian or Asian-American (1.5%), Black or African-American (0.7%), and Native American (0.3%). The remaining 1.5% of the sample did not self-report a racial or ethnic background. In regards to yearly household income, 30.7% of the sample reported a yearly household income of more than \$100,000. Another 19.5% reported a yearly household income of between \$75,000 and \$99,999. In terms of education, 61.9% of the respondents reported having at least a bachelor's degree. The average age of the respondents was 40.2 years.

Regarding the question about what traits followers were interested in seeing displayed on Twitter by IndyCar drivers, the coding of the 401 survey respondents and their 752 responses resulted in five distinct themes. Table 1 presents an overview of the five themes. These thematic categories -- personality, relevant racing information, honest authenticity, interaction, and the regular person -- are explored below in the order of how frequently they were mentioned by participants. Each theme is demonstrated with relevant examples drawn from the data set. Responses from survey respondents are quoted using numbers in parentheses as descriptors to separate the 401 respondents. Quotes are taken exactly as they appeared from the survey responses and the respondents' spelling, grammar, and sentence structure are unaltered.

*Personality*

Driver personality is an important aspect that respondents want to see in a driver's Twitter feed.

Table 1

*Thematic Categories*

Category	Description
Personality	Humor about the series, the sport, and themselves  Ability to express their feelings about success and failure
Relevant racing information	News that is not available elsewhere  Information about a driver and a race as it is happening  Behind the scenes information about the driver via tweets, pictures, and videos
Honest authenticity	Driver does actual tweeting or distinguishes when others are tweeting from the account  Tweets are real opinions, not filtered for mass appeal
Interaction	Interaction with fans via responding to fans on Twitter  Interaction between drivers on Twitter  Seeking opportunity to engage with fans via online chats, Q and A, and/or announcements of public appearances
The regular person	Insight into the personal lives of drivers which helps to humanize them  Sharing of pictures or video of personal activities

This expression of personality can take many forms, but fans are clear in their desire to get a glimpse of the unique personality traits of the man or woman beneath the fire suit and helmet. They want to see their “true personality come thru” (Respondent 382) and “No matter what the driver tweets about or how they use twitter, I want to see their personality come through” (Respondent 187). Fans seem to understand that Twitter is a good avenue for athletes to communicate their feelings. For instance, “Twitter gives a more personal feel to the sport” (Respondent 388), “using Twitter as a representation of themselves as drivers and people” (Respondent 392), and “seeing their real personality” (Respondent 325).

Humor was the most prominent personality traits that followers wanted to see from drivers. This can be “a good sense of humor” (Respondent 114) or “funny stories about themselves or competitors” (Respondent 23). Humor can be “self-deprecating” (Respondent 177) or “the driver’s having fun with each other” (Respondent 198). Fans appear to enjoy seeing drivers show their sense of humor because “drivers are funny and the ones that can show that via twitter are among my favorites” (Respondent 184). Seeing a driver’s sense of humor on Twitter also allows the driver’s followers to see the driver’s “playfulness” (Respondent 261).

Fans are also interested in seeing drivers’ emotions come through in their tweets. They want to see “fire – if they’re upset or happy” (Respondent 34) and drivers who are free to “speak their minds” (Respondent 33). Other emotions that fans want to see from drivers include, “expressing their passion about IndyCar” (Respondent 80), “compassion” (Respondent 66), “true frustrations” (Respondent 344), and “enthusiasm about what they do” (Respondent 78). These emotions can come in the form of “after race emotions” (Respondent 39), “comments of excitement before a race” (Respondent 30), or “love of the sport and its

history” (Respondent 114). “I love to see how feisty the drivers are!” (Respondent 202) is another good example of the kind of raw emotion fans are interested in drivers showing via Twitter. The following response sums up the personality theme: “It’s enjoyable to see emotion from drivers. Comedy is good. But honestly as a fan I feel there needs to be more fuel to the fire. NASCAR and their drivers run under the banner, ‘have at it boys’ and I believe this motto allows drivers to express themselves in a way which shows emotion, anger to be exact, which is a major aspect to attracting the casual fan.” (Respondent 230).

Just over half of the 401 respondents, 202, listed a response which appeared in this theme. The average age of respondents who mentioned the personality theme was 39.8 years. These respondents were 68.8% male and 31.2% female. Of these 202 respondents, 51% had at least a bachelor’s degree, compared to 61.9% for the entire sample. Respondents’ ethnic background and average yearly income were closely aligned with the sample as a whole.

#### *Relevant Racing Information*

An important element of relevant racing information is that fans expressed a desire to see media content created by drivers which inform them about IndyCar. Media content can be “pictures of things that they and their team are doing” (Respondent 21), “pictures and videos about what the teams and drivers do during race weekend” (Respondent 203), “behind the scenes photo or video” (Respondent 216), or “multimedia regarding race weekends/events” (Respondent 321). This theme presents how respondents expect certain information from drivers’ tweets. IndyCar fans follow drivers to get information regarding drivers, teams, races, and behind-the-scenes stories. The respondents did not want to see the news they already knew and thus, study participants had advice for drivers such as “don’t tweet stupid boring crap that I

already know” (Respondent 2) and instead “provide the fans with things they don’t already know” (Respondent 53). Respondents indicated that they seek more about the races via responses such as “talking about the race they just finished” (Respondent 15), “info during races” (208), “general information about the series” (Respondent 210), “information regarding practice, qualification, etc.” (Respondent 211), “write ups (whither it is practice, qualifying or the race I enjoy summaries of all” (Respondent 320), and “stats and quick updates during race qualifying and race” (Respondent 346). Fans are also looking for breaking news and they expressed this with suggestions such as, “comment on series news” (Respondent 45), “race weekend updates” (Respondent 47), and “learning about breaking news from the driver” (Respondent 325).

Inside information and behind-the-scenes information was also a common code within this category and reflect respondents’ desire to get information from driver’s that they are not getting elsewhere. For instance “inside info from the series and their reactions to series news” (Respondent 60), “insider knowledge” (Respondent 142), and “behind the scenes engagement on race weekends” (Respondent 48). Moreover, the fans want to get “information about their cars” (Respondent 12), “technical insight” (Respondent 180), and “technical knowledge” (Respondent 353). Respondents also requested information from drivers about “career updates” (Respondent 47), “information about the health of the series” (Respondent 51), “information about their team and its members” (Respondent 207), “sponsor news” (Respondent 343), and “what’s going on in their racing world” (Respondent 401).

Relevant racing news appeared in the responses of 154 of the 401 survey respondents. At an average age of 41 years, these respondents were similar to the entire sample. The demographic breakdown was 68.8% male and

29.9% female. Ethnic background, income and education level for respondents who indicated this theme closely matched the overall sample.

#### *Honest Authenticity*

Twitter users desired to see IndyCar drivers behave in an honest and authentic manner. This theme of honesty authenticity possessed multiple levels. The basic level constituted the desire of respondents to know that a driver is actually tweeting from their account. For instance “drivers speak as themselves not a PR machine” (Respondent 17), “I like to know it’s them tweeting, and not their PR person” (Respondent 27), “Drivers that have accounts and then tweet once a month, might as well not be on it at all, but at least it’s not some PR hack pretending to be them” (Respondent 229), “No ghostwriters” (Respondent 236), and “personal tweets instead of PR tweets” (Respondent 390).

Fans understood that a driver may not be the only one using the driver’s Twitter account, but when someone else does use it, respondents indicated a desire to know who is doing the tweeting. This desire was demonstrated by statements such as “Driver personally tweets, or gives handle of those tweeting on his/her behalf during race” (Respondent 74) and “If the driver is not tweeting from an account, it would be nice to see the tweet labeled with –pr (sic) or some etching similar” (Respondent 203). Responses that mentioned a desire to be told when someone other than the driver is tweeting from the driver’s account also indicated an understanding that the person tweeting from a driver’s account during a race is obviously not the driver. Of note, however, was the desire of some respondents to be told via Twitter who is tweeting for the driver during a race.

The desire for honest authenticity went deeper than knowing that a driver is actually tweeting from their account. Respondents expressed a desire to have the driver be honest and forthright in their opinions. For example,

followers want to see “honesty, no-smoke blowing (Respondent 74), “honest opinions (uncensored corporate-speak!) about their race” (Respondent 120), “real opinions- not contrived/tailored messages” (Respondent 173), and “raw, unfiltered opinions” (Respondent 316). Respondents also framed the concept of honesty as “realness” (Respondent 70), being “unfiltered” (Respondent 182), “being themselves” (Respondent 195), and “speaking from the heart” (Respondent 384).

This desire for “realness” and “unfiltered” access extends to the ability of drivers to be able to “express discontent” (Respondent 350) and express their “honest opinion on racing topics” (Respondent 400). Respondents were clear that drivers should be free to say what they want without fear of criticism or punishment from their team or IndyCar. For example, “I just say that I would NOT like to see a driver getting a penalty or anything else due to a tweet” (Respondent 193). These responses demonstrated similar feelings: “commentary on their crews performance – hopefully honest and timely rather than self-censor” (Respondent 250), “express when they disagree with idiotic race control decisions and strongly disagree when they are fined for it” (Respondent 340), and “willingness to express opinions on improving the Indy Car series” (Respondent 356).

This theme was represented by 164 out of the 401 respondents. The average age of the respondents in this theme was 40.3 years. Males accounted for 73.8% of these responses, while females represented 26.2%. Ethnic background, income, and education level for the respondents who indicated this theme aligned with the overall sample.

### *Interaction*

Respondents frequently listed interaction as one of the traits they wanted to see drivers display on Twitter. Respondents expressed a desire see interaction manifest itself in a number

of different aspects. The first was to have interaction between drivers and fans. This can take place via “communication with fans” (Respondent 64), “conversations with fans” (Respondent 99), and “engagement with fans” (Respondent 323). This desire for interactivity extends beyond that of a one-on-one conversation between fan and driver. It can also involve a desire for the driver to be, “engaged in more conversations with the fans, maybe a live chat talk with IndyCar fans, and a more active forum” (Respondent 23), and for there to be “interaction with other drivers and journalists” (Respondent 339). In addition, one respondent described interaction as “interacting with fans to create global IndyCar community of fans, drivers, owners, and sponsors” (Respondent 392). Also of interest is that survey respondents requested to see more interaction between IndyCar drivers through their Twitter accounts. For instance, “interaction between drivers” (Respondent 16), “interaction with their teammates that show how their team works together” (Respondent 103), and “relationships with each other” (Respondent 183). This desire may come from a wish to get a look behind the scenes of the relationships the drivers have with each other. This is demonstrated by remarks such as, “I like to see them interact with each other (joking with each other... see Hinch and Marco joking during tire tests)” (Respondent 199), “interaction and joking amongst drivers” (Respondent 354), and “interactions between drivers (especially the teasing between drivers)” (Respondent 395).

Respondents were also interested in large levels of interaction. This comes across in statements such as, “interactive Q&A sessions” (Respondent 73), “I like to see them interact with fans (Q&A, just chatting)” (Respondent 199), and “intelligent interaction with people (I don’t feel if necessary to tweet back every fan and retweet everyone that asks, but it is necessary to engage with people when fitting)” (Respondent 390). Respondents also wanted drivers to keep in touch

during the off-season “off-season interaction with fans” (Respondent 224) and after the race “interactions with other drivers especially after the race” (Respondent 249).

One hundred twenty-eight of the respondents in the sample indicated a response which appeared in the interaction theme. The average age of these respondents was 37.1 years, which is three years younger than the average age of the entire sample. Respondents who indicated this theme were 73% male and 27% female. The average yearly income level of these respondents was slightly less than the sample as a whole. Only 42.2% of them made more than \$75,000 per year, as opposed to 50.2% of the full sample. Ethnic background and education level of these respondents aligned closely with demographics of the entire sample.

#### *The Regular Person*

The thematic category of the regular person encompasses traits and characteristics of a driver that occur away from the track. Fans were interested in seeing what drivers do in their “daily lives” (Respondent 23) or “what they are doing away from the track” (Respondent 246). These responses appear to demonstrate an expectation of fans that they will be granted access to drivers’ personal lives. This expectation helps fans see the drivers as individuals or as more than an athlete. This is expressed through sentiments such as “it’s nice to see them do things mundane, ordinary. IMO, makes them more ‘human’ and easy to relate to as PEOPLE and not just as ‘celebrities.’” (Respondent 7). Respondents appeared to like personal information because “this helps us fans understand who the driver is outside the car” (Respondent 184) and it “helps me feel connected to them” (Respondent 192). According to survey respondents this access to drivers’ everyday lives “make them more real to us” (Respondent 23), “humanizes them [and] proves they are mere mortals like the rest of us” (Respondent 28).

According to respondents, personal access into a drivers’ life can take a number of forms. Access includes “personal things like family or vacation, other things they are doing (race, hobbies, etc.)” (Respondent 87), “giving fans the chance to see who their driver really is irl (sic) i.e. tweets about hobbies or small things like favorite food, music, clothes, perfumes whatever to make you feel like you have a connection to your driver” (Respondent 112), and “real life stuff, kids, pets non racing activities” (Respondent 318).

Respondents also want to see drivers share visual content about what they are doing off the track. This can come in the form of pictures about “personnel activities such as formal dinners and events” (Respondent 190), “funny pictures or videos of their non-race life” (Respondent 207), or “pictures of things they like to do when not on the track” (Respondent 302). The pictures that drivers post appear to be enjoyed by fans because “it shows they are real people too” (Respondent 27). Pictures which include elements of a driver’s family and personal life are also a fan favorite, as noted by one participant’s comment, “Love to see the family/personal pictures – I feel more connected to the driver” (Respondent 233).

Of the 401 respondents, 103 expressed a desire to see elements of the driver’s non-racing life displayed on their Twitter account. The average age of a respondent who expressed a desire to see these elements was 42.1 years, which is slightly older than the sample as a whole. Of the 103 respondents who indicated this theme, 61.2% were male and 38.8% were female, while 94.2% were Caucasian and 66% reported having at least a bachelor’s degree.

#### **Discussion**

These results will now be put in the context of previous research on sports and Twitter. In addition, this section will compare the findings in the current research to findings in previous U&G

research. Additionally, the results have a direct connection to the work of Clavio et al. (2013) who interviewed drivers about their use of Twitter. Chen (2011) employed U&G as a framework and found that frequent Twitter users were attempting to satisfy a desire to connect with others. This desire to connect with others takes on new dynamics when it comes to connecting with a celebrity athlete such as an IndyCar driver. The ability to gratify the desire to connect with others in the case of connecting with a driver is dependent on the athlete's reciprocity. It is therefore not surprising that the followers of IndyCar drivers strongly desire interactivity in what is likely an attempt to gratify the desire to connect with those drivers. With celebrity athletes on Twitter, the desire of people to interact with them may also be an attempt to satisfy their need to affiliate with the sport's largest stars.

Many of the categories found in the current study possess similarities to what drivers revealed they plan to do with their Twitter accounts (Clavio et al., 2013). For example, interviews with IndyCar drivers revealed that they understood the importance of interacting with followers on Twitter. The driver's Twitter followers studied in this manuscript seem to agree with this assessment. It is a positive development to see that the wishes of the drivers and their fans align when it comes to the need to interact with each other on Twitter. These similarities demonstrate that what the driver's think fans want them to do on Twitter is actually what fans appear to desire. The messenger is sending the right message.

Interaction is considered an important element of social networking (Bonds-Raacke & Raacke, 2010). Hambrick et al.'s (2010) content study on athletes' usage of Twitter found that interactivity was the most common type of tweet. That finding matches with this study's finding that fans express a strong desire to have athletes—in this case IndyCar drivers—interact with them. Hambrick et al. also makes mention

that one of the avenues of interaction they saw was the interaction between athletes and between athletes and coaches. Hambrick et al.'s discovery match with the current study's finding that an important element of interaction that fans are interested in is seeing the interaction between drivers. Pegoraro (2010) also found interactivity as a major component of an athlete's Twitter feed by discovering that over 49% of athletes' tweets had to do with interacting with fans, nonfans, spouses, family members, and sports journalists. The results by Kassing and Sanderson (2010) also revealed a high degree of interaction among the tweets of bicyclists. The results from these studies and the current study demonstrates that the current research on Twitter reveals that many fans want to see interaction from athletes and that many athletes are engaging in this interaction. In other words, there is a synergy between follower's expectations and athlete's actions. If this synergy continues it may be necessary to study what these athlete/fan interactions look like. Are they perfunctory or are their complex relationships springing up between fans and athletes?

Pegoraro's (2010) and Hambrick et al.'s (2010) second most popular category of athlete tweets were called diversion and personal life, respectively. Classified by Hambrick and colleagues as "non-sports related information provided by professional athletes" (p. 460), this diversion category shares many of the same characteristics with the present study's finding of follower's desires to see aspects of driver's regular lives on Twitter. Pegoraro's case study on athlete tweets found that over 26% of athletes' tweets revolved around their personal lives. In addition, Pegoraro's investigation revealed that over 72% of tweets from motor sport athletes fell into the personal life category. Pegoraro's and Hambrick et al.'s findings on the prevalence of athletes' tweeting about their daily lives is relevant when combined with the current study's findings that fans of IndyCar express a clear

desire to read those tweets. Aspects of driver's personal lives are something fans expect to see, which aligns with the finding in Clavio et al. (2013) that sharing personal information is something drivers expect they have to do on social media. As in the case of both drivers and fans viewing interaction as a vital part of the Twitter experience, it is encouraging to see such synergy between drivers' perceptions of fans' desires and the fans' actual, self-reported expectations.

IndyCar drivers have revealed that they believe inside information is something that fans are interested in seeing from them on Twitter (Clavio et al., 2013). A large number of Twitter users get information from following athletes, teams, leagues, and mainstream media (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010; Tonkin, Pfeiffer, & Tourte, 2012). Another of Hambrick et al.'s (2010) categories - information sharing – presents many similarities with fans' desire to see relevant racing information. While the information sharing category in Hambrick et al., as well as other investigations, does not add the qualifier of "relevant" to their usage of an information sharing category, the present study's findings suggest that fans are sincerely interested in a certain kind of information sharing. Information that can be gathered from traditional news sources, may not be as appealing to fans as something they consider to be inside or behind-the-scenes information. As one respondent put it, fans desire to see drivers "providing the fans with things they don't already know" (Respondent 53).

The findings within the theme of relevant racing information enhance the results from Clavio et al. (2013) and Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) because it puts drivers in the position to understand what kind of inside information they should be sharing on Twitter. Tweets that talk about elements of racing that are not normally shown on television or discussed in the popular press appear to have more appeal to fans than

information sharing that mirrors news found in other media channels. This claim is given support by Clavio and Kian (2010) who reported that the Twitter followers of a professional athlete regarded the ability to get information from the athlete which they could not get elsewhere as an important motivation for why they followed her on Twitter. The importance of relevant inside information also aligns with more recent findings published by Lebel and Danylchuk who found that Twitter followers of professional athletes "place a premium upon uniqueness" (p.30). As such, a practical implication from these findings is that Indycar drivers should continue to both interact with their followers and provide them with exclusive racing information on Twitter.

Respondents in the current study made it clear that they enjoy it when drivers create their own media content. This feature most prominently includes content such as pictures and videos, and the use of popular sites which share this content (i.e., Instagram for pictures and YouTube videos). While many respondents simply listed "pictures" and/or "videos" as something they would like to see from drivers, other responses went into more depth about the kind of specific audio/visual content they would like to see. These responses cut across the different categories this study found as aspects fans want to see from the athlete on Twitter. Hambrick et al. (2010) used the category of content to categorize athletes' tweets, rather than as a separate variable. Based on the responses of the present sample and their desire to see media that cuts across all aspects of life, it may be necessary to redefine what "content" on social media means. For example, media content on Twitter can be used to show many different aspects of an athlete's life, their personality, their professional endeavors, or relevant inside information. As such, media content should be viewed as a separate variable, rather than a category in any future content analysis involving athlete tweets.

Results from Clavio et al. (2013) found that IndyCar drivers considered authentic information as an important element of how they ran their Twitter account. The drivers made it clear in their interviews for Clavio et al. that they desire to come across as authentic in the image they promote to their Twitter followers. The responses received in the present study revealed that the respondent's foremost desire is to know that the person tweeting from a driver's account is actually the driver and that the driver's tweets should be honest, real, unfiltered, and intimate. Fan responses indicated a high suspicion of there being an untrustworthy intermediary on Twitter, most often in the person of a public relations specialist. It is unclear the source of such suspicion, but it may be a reflection of the desire for a new level of intimacy between fans and the drivers that social media avenues such as Twitter can offer. As a result of these discoveries, Indycar drivers and other athletes on Twitter need to continue to make clear who is tweeting from their account if it is not them.

The trait of personality is one that has specific applicability to previous research. Clavio and Kian's (2010) findings suggested that fans have a strong desire to follow an athlete because they enjoyed reading her tweets and because she was entertaining. Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) also found that Twitter followers wanted to see athletes "produce authentic content that revealed aspects of their character" (p.27) and that personality was an important aspect which followers want to see from athletes. Personality, character, and entertainment can be difficult terms to precisely define when it comes to consuming content published on Twitter. Results from the present study help to bring clarity to this aspect of previous research because respondents actually suggested specific traits of an athlete's personality that fans get enjoyment from reading. At the forefront was humor, a character trait that Lebel and Danylchuk also found was of importance to Twitter followers of professional

golfers. There were also strong remarks about seeing drivers when they are angry, full of passion and excitement, and when they are having fun. It may be difficult to specifically define these elements of one's personality, but survey respondents made it clear that these personality traits were an important element of a driver's Twitter feed. The discovery of the personality traits – humor, passion, anger, etc. – help demonstrate to Indycar drivers and other athlete's on Twitter that it is okay to let their personality show on their Twitter feed. Fans want to see an athlete's personality entertain them through the use of jokes or to express their feelings about a race. As such these results should encourage IndyCar drivers and other athletes to use Twitter to let people see the different parts of their personality.

The demographics of the respondents who wanted to see the five traits were, for the most part, similar to each other and to the sample as a whole. The noteworthy differences occurred in the personality category, where those who sought this trait had a lower level of education than the entire sample and in honest authenticity, where males were more heavily represented than females in this sub-sample. Another noteworthy difference occurred in interaction, where the average age of these respondents was three years less than the sample as a whole. This may indicate that younger social media users, who have grown up with the technology, possess a higher expectation that others use the technology. The final difference between the categories in terms of demographics was that females were more heavily represented in the regular person category than in the sample as a whole. It appears that female racing fans are particularly interested in the off-track aspects of Indycar driver's lives.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**



This study is not without its limitations. Though some findings were found to be similar to the opinions of followers of athletes from other professional sports (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014), these findings are limited to self-identified IndyCar fans on Twitter and may not be applicable to Twitter followers of athletes in other sports. Future research can combat this limitation by conducting similar surveys of the fans of athletes from other professional leagues, qualitatively coding those responses, and comparing them to the current study's findings of the expectations of fans of IndyCar drivers. In addition to the aforementioned limitation and suggestion for future research, the risk of confirmation bias also exists in this study. Because the survey responses came from people possibly already following IndyCar drivers on Twitter who may be exhibiting these characteristics, the survey respondents may simply be reiterating what they are already seeing rather than an independent idea.

The current study is limited because the sample was predominantly Caucasian and nearly three-fourths male. It is also limited because it used an open-ended question to elicit responses. Future research could combine a self-report measure with quantitative data available on Twitter. By measuring the number of retweets and favorites given to tweets, future researchers may be able to explore audience reactions to athlete tweets. The label "favorite" calls out to be used as a measure of gratification when reading a tweet. Retweets serve as a kind of social amplification, because when a Twitter user retweets another user's tweet that person is sending the message out to all the person's followers. While not every retweet may be an endorsement of the original content in the tweet, it may be worth examining which types of athlete tweets receive the most retweets. Furthermore, future research could involve an in-depth textual analysis of the drivers' tweets. Future research may also use quantitative measures to explore the

prevalence of these qualitatively derived categories. It would be interesting to discover how prevalent these thematic categories are in drivers' Twitter feeds. While strong synergy was found between fan desires of driver behavior on Twitter and what drivers thought fans wanted to see (Clavio et al., 2013), only an examination of drivers' tweets can confirm if this synergy is a reality.

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