

# Twitter use by student athletes can be a hit—or a misstep

December 17 2012

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With a single social-media misstep, student-athletes could lose athletic eligibility or a scholarship. But that's not stopping them from using Twitter – sometimes even during games, when they may see harsh criticism of their performances from fans, according to a study by Baylor University and Clemson University researchers.

While many college athletic teams prohibit student-athletes from using social media during games, some breach the rules to get a "real-time" commentary on how they are doing during the [game](#), said Blair Browning, Ph.D., an assistant professor of communication in Baylor University's College of Arts & Sciences and lead author of the study.

The study, published in the *International Journal of Sport Communication*, was based on interviews with 20 student-athletes in an NCAA Division I university.

Student-athletes said that they used [Twitter](#) to keep in contact with family and friends, communicate with their followers and access information about the games and their athletic performances.

The study, co-authored by Jimmy Sanderson, Ph.D., an assistant professor of communication studies at Clemson University, is called "The Positives and Negatives of Twitter: Exploring How Student-Athletes Use Twitter and Respond to Critical Tweets."

Twitter is ingrained into student-athletes' daily routine, with one athlete

saying that "I mean, the kickers and snappers and me are kind of in the corner of the locker room . . . so I'll get on Twitter and I'm like, 'Great first half' . . . "

Other athletes said they wait until after games to use Twitter. In any case, comments often are critical or even abusive about the student-athlete both performance-wise and personally.

"It is tweet-worthy when fans show support because the alternative is obviously the norm," the researchers wrote.

While athletes know that criticism comes with the turf, Twitter critics are especially brutal because "brazen confidence stems from the protection users have behind the phone or computer screen," researchers noted. Even when the critics messages are blocked by an athlete, some followers "somehow find another name and get on and do it again," one athlete said.

Student-athletes' responses can be risky to their university athletic career if they respond in kind to abuse. Some choose to shrug off or delete insults—or even using them constructively as challenges to improve.

Others are finding an effective way to cope is through "sub-tweeting"—referring to a detractor as "OOMF" ("one of my followers") and responding to a remark indirectly rather than using the critic's Twitter ID to spar online.

Some players see Twitter as a chance to brand themselves. But at the university level, they're also operating under the brand of the institution themselves, so "there are tensions," Browning said.

Student-athletes also are subject to stricter monitoring and penalties than professional athletes for a social-media blunder. While professionals

may be fined or censured, they maintain their ability to play. But student-athletes stand to lose athletic eligibility or scholarships.

"Student-athletes are in a precarious position because they are amateurs, are managing educational pursuits while holding essentially a full-time job with their athletics demands," the researchers wrote.

While a coach may welcome the idea that "20,000 eyeballs" are following an athlete, "at the same time, they'll probably wake up in a cold sweat" about a tweet misstep, Browning said.

Despite how student-athletes handle the messages, critical tweets "are at their core an identity hit," the authors wrote.

One athlete said he felt "low-balled, disrespected . . . It was horrible, and you know, my family was sick on top of that so there was nothing I could do."

Sanderson said that educational institutions should embrace training in social media for student-athletes, including helping them manage critical tweets.

"Ironically, schools spend a lot of time on the surveillance of athletes (on [social media](#)) rather than spending time on the front end training," Browning said. "It comes down to ambiguous statements like, 'Don't tweet anything inappropriate.'"

"But what's inappropriate to a 50-year-old may be vastly different from what an 18- to 22-year-old thinks is inappropriate."

**More information:** The study has been cited as a Distinguished Paper and will be presented at the Summit on Communication and Sport Feb. 22-24 in Austin.

Provided by Baylor University

Citation: Twitter use by student athletes can be a hit—or a misstep (2012, December 17)  
retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2012-12-twitter-student-athletes-hitor-misstep.html>

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