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Sport communication research: A social network analysis

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ABSTRACT

Sport communication research has experienced exponential growth since the 1980s. As one of the four primary sport management functions, sport communication has formed a synergistic relationship with sport management. Researchers have documented this relationship and the continued role of communication within sport. The current study explored the evolution of sport communication research through social network analysis (SNA). This methodological approach offers a visual display of research collaborations and helps identify areas for growth—among researchers, academic institutions, and topics—in an effort to expand research productivity and diffusion. From January 1980 to June 2015, 1255 sport communication researchers shared 2537 collaborations and authored 1283 publications. Their studies most frequently examined topics such as gender, mass media, and sport consumption. The number of researchers, publications, collaborations, and researchers per publication increased over time. A select group of researchers hailed from a smaller number of universities and emerged as key contributors to the field. The findings underscore the importance of prominent researchers, academic institutions, and collaborations in the production of sport communication research. The study also outlines the benefits of using SNA to investigate a field's development and growth opportunities.

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1. Introduction

Sport communication research has grown exponentially since the 1980s. This expansion has included the introduction of new sport communication textbooks, journals, associations, and conferences, and these outlets have given researchers an opportunity to disseminate ideas and advance the field (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Nadeau, 2014). Sport communication is defined as “a process by which people in sport, in a sport setting, or through a sport endeavour, share symbols as they create meaning through interaction” (Pedersen, Miloch, & Laucella, 2007, p. 196). Communication within sport has evolved to share a synergistic relationship with sport management. The Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA, 2016) lists sport communication as one of the four primary functions of sport management in conjunction with sport operations, sport marketing, and sport finance and economics. Pedersen (2013) asserted sport communication will continue to have a tremendous influence on sport—with the industry as a whole as well as its individual components of people, places, and events. He further argued, “sport cannot exist without communication” (p. 57).

Indeed, textbook authors and researchers have highlighted this persistent connection between sport communication and sport management. The sport management textbook *Contemporary Sport Management* outlined sport communication's

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standing within the broader field of sport management in various contexts at the interpersonal, group, and organisational levels (Stoldt, Dittmore, & Pedersen, 2014). The sport communication textbook *Strategic Sport Communication* also discussed this relationship with the varying forms of sport communication used in sport management: personal and organisational communication, mass media, and communication services and support (Pedersen et al., 2007).

From a research perspective, Pedersen (2013) forecasted related research would continue to emerge as scholars examine the ongoing interplay between sport communication and sport management. Sport management journals have featured this research, which addresses both theoretical and practical implications related to the utilisation of sport communication within sport management (Abeza, O'Reilly, Seguin, & Nzindukiyimana, 2015; Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015; Fink, 2015). This research has included examinations of mass media and social media in the sport industry as well as media portrayals of gender, race and ethnicity, and nationality in sporting events. The current study builds upon the extant work and explores this extensive research activity in greater detail.

As a field advances, researchers may investigate and document its development and evolution (Moody, 2004). Sport studies have included content analyses of publications from a field's flagship journal or other representative journals in order to identify salient works, trends, and potential gaps for exploration (Abeza et al., 2015; Filo et al., 2015; Fink, 2015). Abeza and colleagues (2014) studied sport communication research activity in their review of research published in the *International Journal of Sport Communication*. Sport management journals also have included this research (Abeza et al., 2015; Filo et al., 2015). *Sport Management Review* featured Fink's (2015) research regarding media coverage of women's sports and female athletes. Her study concluded that while some progress has occurred with this coverage, more research should address and help to mitigate issues with hegemonic masculinity, negative stereotypes, and minimal media exposure for female athletes and women's sports.

In their research reviews published in the *Journal of Sport Management* and *Sport Management Review*, respectively, Abeza and colleagues (2015) and Filo and colleagues (2015) concentrated their focus on social media research within sport management. The two reviews concluded by emphasising the need to incorporate more theoretical frameworks and to include more research using diverse methodologies in order to advance social media research in sport management. With their focus on sport communication within sport management, the studies underscored the interaction between the two and the benefits of continued exploration.

Thus, the current study sought to extend the previous sport communication research and explore its growth in greater detail by examining the three sport communication journals—Communication & Sport, International Journal of Sport Communication, and Journal of Sports Media—in conjunction with sport management journals such as the International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing, Journal of Sport Management, and Sport Management Review and other academic outlets disseminating this research. This study used social network analysis to better understand the researchers and their scholarly activity and to document the field's development (Love & Andrew, 2012; Quatman & Chelladurai, 2008).

Social network analysis (SNA) provides tools to study social networks, which contain network members (individuals, groups, and/or organisations) and the relationships shared among them. The network members and their relationships coalesce to form a social network, where members can disseminate information, knowledge, and other resources (Scott, 2013; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Studies have used SNA to investigate research relationships and trends, as a field's scholars and their collaborative activities help to define the field and further its development (Crane, 1969; Crawford, 1971; Moody, 2004).

Only two studies have used this approach with sport research. Quatman and Chelladurai (2008) examined sport management studies and identified substantial productivity attributed to a small group of influential researchers. Similarly, Love and Andrew (2012) investigated the relationship between sport management and sport sociology research. They also documented significant growth as well as a smaller number of researchers who served to bridge the two areas. The current study sought to extend the existing literature and address this research gap by conducting a similar investigation focused on the sport communication field and by using SNA to outline the field's evolution and opportunities for future research.

2. An investigation of research collaborations

Studies have examined research collaborations to better understand how researchers produce scholarly work (Endersby, 1996; Moody, 2004). "Co-authorship is the most formal manifestation of intellectual collaboration in scientific research" (Acedo, Barroso, Casanueva, & Galán, 2006, p. 959), and studies have documented these collaborations in greater detail (Crane, 1969; Crawford, 1971; Moody, 2004). An array of research collaborations exist, including academic mentor relationships resulting in dissertations and theses as well as academic research partnerships to create conference presentations and textbooks (Crane, 1969; Crawford, 1971; Katz & Martin, 1997; Laband & Tollison, 2000). Most studies to date have concentrated on documenting journal article collaborations (Scott, 2013).

Seminal studies by Price (1965) and Merton (1968) laid the foundation for the current research on scholarly activity. Two primary propositions emerged from their work: (a) Price's (1965) "invisible colleges," where a smaller group of influential researchers benefit from collaborations outside of or in advance of the formal academic publication process, and (b) Merton's (1968) Matthew effect, or "the principle of cumulative advantage that operates in many systems of social stratification to produce the same result: the rich get richer at a rate that makes the poor become relatively poorer" (p. 62). This occurs when popular researchers accrue numerous publications and citations, leading to additional funding and collaborations.

Subsequent studies examining the evolution of research have provided support for these two propositions. Researchers have investigated collaborations found within the fields of management (Acedo et al., 2006); operations, marketing, and

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