

# “My feckin heart!!”: differences in cross-platform sports fan conversation

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## Abstract

*Due to its rapid growth as a site of sports fan conversation, the recent scholarly focus on the Twitter microblog platform as both a research method and an object of study has sparked considerable debate. Partly in response to this debate, this paper seeks to highlight the importance of cross-platform research design in order to generate insight into the identity of online fans and the meaning of their conversations. The site of investigation is the 2014 Spring Tour of the Qantas Wallabies, the national rugby union team of Australia. This tour was an indicator of national team performance in the lead-up to the 2015 Rugby Union World Cup and was anticipated to generate significant levels of online conversation between rugby union fans – but not from the wider national audiences usually attracted by a World Cup fixture. Rugby union is distinctive in that many of its fans are located within comparatively high-income earning brackets and can be anticipated to engage in simultaneous TV viewing of a fixture whilst interacting with other fans via smart devices and social media – so-called second-screen behaviour. Two research questions are posed: (1) does fan conversation differ by platform; and (2) is there a discernible difference between fan conversation on formal hashtags vs. informal conversation (Twitter only)? In response to these questions, the Ireland vs. Australia match on 21 November 2014 was chosen for in-depth analysis by this study as it returned the largest sample of Twitter data during the 2014 Spring Tour. Findings indicate (1) a marked difference between fan conversation on Twitter (unidirectional) and Facebook (debate-oriented); and (2) that Irish fans tweeted more about their team outside of the formal game hashtag than Australian fans – demonstrating that informal conversation on Twitter produced an identifiable theme related to fandom for one team over another.*

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## Introduction

Arguably the top-down basis of traditional sports broadcasting precludes – or largely ignores – the possibilities for networked fan conversation during and between fixtures. Yet the importance of such conversation has been evident for decades through the use of successive electronic platforms such as fan bulletin boards, chat rooms, web pages, social networking sites (SNS) and microblogs. Hull and Lewis chart a migration of existing fans from broadcast to social media and ascribe the popularity of Twitter as a fan medium to multiple factors including brevity, mobile accessibility and sense of community; but they

do not consider Twitter conversation to be a replacement for a traditional TV sports report (2014). In line with this finding, “second-screen behaviour” describes how fans simultaneously follow a game on broadcast TV whilst conversing with other online fans, viewing statistics or otherwise via a second smart device (Yorke & Greenwood 2014). The second-screen environment can further facilitate “a shared enthusiasm” between fans who can “express mutual sentiments and commitments” (Bagozzi & Dholakia 2006, p. 45) about the game and participating teams. Therefore the study of fan communication around and during fixtures is important to understanding the sentiments of the fanbase and the predominant themes that arise out of these conversations.

As sports fans seek out opportunities to communicate directly with other fans across the world and also with favourite teams and/or players (Tapp & Clowes 2002) it should come as little surprise that the elite end of the sports industry has embraced the opportunities that the digital environment provides to communicate with stakeholders (Evans & Smith 2004). The ability to facilitate many-to-many real-time interaction distinguishes social media from other forms of communication and allows sport organisations to both enhance the fan experience and add value to sport consumption (Williams & Chinn 2010). Use of social media is abundant in Australia with 88% of 15-17 year olds and 86% of 18-24 years old using social media (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2011). Such is the popularity of sports consumption in Australia, it is understood that social media engagement can be an important boost to organisational profitability (author/s withheld, in press). For example, increases in season ticket sales, game attendances, television viewership and merchandising were ascribed to improvements in the social media campaign of an Australian Football League team (Hopkins 2013).

## Approach

Recent scholarly debate on the growth of Twitter as an object of analysis reveals a range of attitudes. Pegoraro welcomes both the disruptive impact of Twitter on sports conversation as well as the new theoretical perspectives that will emerge from this disruption (2014) whereas Hutchins warns against the prevalence of research designs based on Twitter analysis (2014). Nevertheless social media are established as a strategic tool within some high-level organisations: a survey of Twitter content related to English Premier League football clubs found that 94% of clubs have an official Twitter feed with which to interact directly with fans (i.e. bypassing traditional channels) and to promote other club publications (Price, Farrington & Hall 2013). In contrast a web survey of US college students who were football and basketball season ticket holders (n=1036) found that within the context of college sports, ticket-buying students do not necessarily exhibit high levels of sports social media fandom; this despite 98% of respondents having a Facebook account and 68% having a Twitter account. The highest reported motivation for accessing a team Facebook page was informational – to check upcoming events – rather than for fan conversation (Clavio & Walsh 2014). Studies such as these give rise to a range of challenges for multiple stakeholders: professional sports communicators seek to influence or guide online fan conversation; commercial directors seek to monetise social networking; traditional broadcasters seek to combat audience drain to social media; and social media scholars seek to understand online fan identities and conversation meanings within a rapidly changing ecology of content and platforms. For example Gibbs et al. (2014) propose that the wide possible variance in the profiles of sports social media

fans requires teams to study their own Twitter followers in order to understand the unique and evolving content and interaction patterns of any given fanbase. In response, this study captures and analyses fan conversation from Twitter and Facebook during a recent international rugby union fixture between the Irish and the Australian national teams in order to understand differences in cross-platform sports fan conversation. Whilst there are many attractions to a single-medium study, the evolution of second-screen behaviour – and with it the potential for a fan to simultaneously receive a traditional sports broadcast whilst sending and receiving online social broadcasts – points clearly to the increasing multi-platform complexity of the fan’s communicative ecology. Furthermore different platforms support different conversations, which in turn impact both the nature of the conversation and the identity of its participants. For example Facebook conversation has been likened to a gathering in which most people know each other and hold discussion around shared experiences, whereas Twitter conversation might be likened to a party where few people know each other and an important purpose of conversation is to establish personal identity (Thornton 2009). Preference for Facebook or Twitter has been related tentatively to users’ personality: “those who are generally more gregarious and sociable will look to use Facebook more often, whilst less sociable individuals who are seeking cognitive stimulation will look to use Twitter” (Hughes et al. 2012, p. 567). The use of different platforms for different brand strategies is well-established by practitioners (Friedman 2011) and academics (Smith, AN, Fischer & Chen 2012). With reference to fan communication, it is suggested that Twitter is predominantly used for real-time engagement during sporting matches whereas Facebook enabled sport organisations to enrich the fan experience with additional content (Hopkins 2013).

## Research design

The context of this study is the 2014 Spring Tour by the Qantas Wallabies, the national rugby union team of Australia. Rugby union provides several advantages to the sports social media researcher. In terms of reach the professional game has expanded from 16 teams contesting the first World Cup in 1987 to 20 teams in the 2015 event from Africa, Asia, Australasia, Europe, North and South America. This geographic representation is wider than the 2015 Cricket World Cup and the 2013 Rugby League World Cup, both featuring 14 teams. Indeed the introduction of the Rugby Union World Cup played a significant role in reconfiguring the game from its amateur foundation into a professional, global sport (Hutchins 1998). In socioeconomic terms, a SMG/YouGov report into union (2013) found that fans from 12 of the 14 countries surveyed were located within high-income earning brackets. This factor is relevant to any study related to second-screen behaviours, as a certain level of discretionary income and digital literacy is required to use a smart device with fast network access as a leisure pursuit.

The 2014 Qantas Wallabies Spring Tour was an indicator of national team performance in the lead-up to the 2015 Rugby Union World Cup and was anticipated to generate significant levels of social media fandom by rugby union fans – but not from the wider national audiences usually attracted by World Cup fixtures only. During the 2014 Spring Tour, each game had an official hashtag that fans could use to engage with other fans on both Twitter and Facebook. The Wallabies organisation posted information about each game with pictures, videos and behind-the-scenes coverage to engage its social media followers, which total more than 459,000 on Facebook and over 134,000 on Twitter. In order to

understand differences in platforms in sports fan conversation, this study posed two research questions: (1) does fan conversation differ by platform; and (2) is there a discernible difference between fan conversation on formal hashtags vs. informal conversation (Twitter only)? In response to these questions, data were collected from the Wallabies matches with the Barbarians, Wales, France, Ireland and England in November 2014 resulting in five separate data collection periods. The Ireland vs. Australia match on 21 November was chosen for in-depth analysis in this study as it returned the largest sample of Twitter data following collection by two tools:

1. Hashtag data for the official game hashtag #IREvAUS were collected with the tool Hashtracking on the day of the match, resulting in a sample of 17,061 tweets from 9,420 unique contributors.
2. The Multiple User-Defined Search Terms on Twitter (MUSTT) tool allows users to create a list of up to 100 search terms utilised to search Twitter and collect all tweets containing these terms. MUSTT enables tweet extraction from open, public pages – constituting freely available public data – using search terms similar to the process of seeking newspaper articles from an online database (Naraine & Dixon 2013). For the Ireland vs. Australia match, a series of search terms that focused on the Wallabies team and included players' and coaches' names resulted in the collection of 22,626 tweets on the day of the match.

In addition to Twitter, Facebook data were collected from the official Wallabies fan page using the NCapture add-on to the NVIVO package, returning 2,503 comments from the Wallabies' page. The Wallabies page was the only Facebook page collected for the study as the focus was on how Australian fans utilised these two platforms during an international rugby match.

The conversation analysis tool Leximancer was used for in-depth analysis of the captured Twitter and Facebook data. Leximancer conducts conceptual/thematic and relational/ semantic analysis of written words and/or visual text (Bals, Campbell & Pitt 2012) and allows for the qualitative analysis of large datasets – therefore the entire dataset for each collection was included in this analysis. The Leximancer mapping subsystem works in two stages: (a) conceptual extraction or the determination of dominant themes, followed by (b) relational extraction which involves the mapping of relationships of the themes against each other (Smith, AE & Humphreys 2006). An advantage of the automatic concept list generation is increased statistical reliability and reproducibility, since the list is generated from the input text itself, whereas manual lists require checks for coding reliability and validity (Angus, Rintel & Wiles 2013). Additionally the ability to analyse very large datasets in totality – instead of using a subsample with human coders – allows researchers to consider complete samples and draw more concrete conclusions from these datasets. Lastly, elusive or rare relationships may be more likely to emerge using automated concept list generation (Angus, Rintel & Wiles 2013). Leximancer has been used previously to analyse opinion polling and political commentary (McKenna 2007) and to assess tourism event images and determine how public representation of events change over time (Scott, N & Smith 2005). In the online realm, researchers have used Leximancer for analysis of the website content of state tourism authorities, as this content relates to online brand strategy (Kattiyapornpong & Nel 2009). Campbell et al. investigated consumer conversations around online advertisements and mapped those conversations

to provide a typology of consumer-generated ad conversations (2011). Most recently Billings et al. (2014) utilised Leximancer to determine differences in tweet content from a nationalistic perspective during the 2014 FIFA World Cup (soccer).

A particular strength of this research design is that all tweets using one of the searched keywords were captured by the MUSTT tool, rather than just tweets using a hashtag. Furthermore all data were captured and analysed using MUSTT and Leximancer, rather than a sample of downloaded tweets. The disadvantage of the sampling method is that important themes and/or tweets can be omitted from capture and analysis.

## Results, interpretation

The use of the hashtag identifier –the ‘#’ prefix used to associate a comment with a subject e.g. #gosocceroos or #iamcanadian – is particularly important to sports fan conversation. Many leagues, teams and athletes have been quick to adopt event-specific official hashtags to direct fan conversation – although a study of the Major League Baseball World Series found that the official hashtag was predominantly used by lay fans to express their fandom, rather than by team members, media professionals, celebrities or other related brands (Blaszka et al. 2012). The use of the hashtag also serves to create a readily identifiable digital archive for a topic (Ovadia 2009) which is a boon to academic researchers.

With relation to the Ireland vs. Australia match, the data collected on the official hashtag #IREvAUS identified the main three themes: Ireland vs. Australia, Game and Win. The Ireland vs. Australia theme involved tweets that focused either on the team or the match-up between the two nations (i.e. #IREvAUS Michael Cheika defends decision to play Kurtley Beale off the bench against Ireland this weekend [link] via @smh and A great clash awaits when Australia take on Ireland. Can Australia bounce back from last weeks loss? #IREvAUS). The second theme – Game – involved tweets pertaining to the game in general (i.e. Good god!!! We got a great game on our hands here! #IREvAUS and What a game this is!!! #IREvAUS #rugby). The third predominant theme centred on the concept of Win with tweets that discussed who was going to win (i.e. I’m going for a 3 point Ireland win. #IREvAUS #AutumnInternationals) and then celebrating the eventual win by Ireland in the match (i.e. Another great win ....Ireland for the World Cup :- ) #IREvAUS #Irishrugby and My feckin heart!! That win was absolutely deserved!). There were also several peripheral themes that dealt more directly with game-related conversation (i.e. match, half, try).

The predominant themes identified in tweets captured by the MUSTT tool were Ireland vs. Australia, Irish Rugby and Game. Similar to the official hashtag data, the predominant theme of Ireland vs. Australia involved discussion around one team or both as they faced off (i.e. 17mins into the match and it's Ireland 17 v 0 Australia. On schedule for 80-0 then! and #Ireland demonstrate why they are the @6nations Champions as they beat #Australia @QantasWallabies 26-23\n\n#IREvAUS [Link]). The second theme Irish Rugby was focused solely on the Irish team and its performance in the match (i.e. @TV3Rugby2015: What an incredible performance from @IrishRugby! What an exciting 2015 we have ahead for us! and @IrishRugby well done guys well earned win !!! #IREvAUS). The third predominant theme dealt with

comments related to the Game in general – much as the similar theme in the hashtag data had done – (i.e. Anyone explain why Henry Speight played on the left wing for first 20mins against Ireland and right for the rest of the game? @FOX RugbyLive and Have to admire the way the Irish play. Whole-hearted commitment and spirit). There were also several peripheral themes (try, time, match, kick) that dealt with specific rugby union comments, but these themes did not dominate the conversation. It was also found that many users did use the event-specific official hashtag on Twitter to converse about the game and with others during the test, which supports similar findings from a study of the Major League Baseball World Series (Blaszka et al. 2012). Moreover the MUSTT data found that many people who may have used the official hashtag on Twitter may have stopped using it over time, since the amount of letters in a long hashtag consumes a large percentage of the 140 characters permitted by a tweet.

The three top themes identified within the Facebook data were Game, Wallabies and Team. While the first theme – Game – appears similar to what was discovered within the Twitter data, the content is more focused on the analysis of the game from the Wallabies fan perspective. Comments such as “Phipps made some mistakes and also single handedly made up for those. Rest of his game was solid” illustrated fans reflecting on the play of their team. Other comments in this theme focused on the outcome: “Edge of seat game. Result reflected talent available to Wallabies at the moment and a quality committed Irish side”. The second theme focused on the Wallabies team and was more focused on supporting the team (i.e. That was a great game! I think the Wallabies have shown us that their tenacity and cool heads combined with obvious talent will be a real threat at the 2015 world cup). The third key theme identified was Team and this involved comments discussing both teams with a lot of focus on the name of the Australian team (i.e. Qantas Wallabies?! They sold the name of their national team?) and discussion on what makes a team successful (i.e. There is no I in team- the captain does not play 15 positions. The captain is fine). There were also several themes on the periphery in the analysis that involved debates around the team (i.e. Need, Lost, Phipps) and the match itself (Ireland, Lost). Unlike the data from Twitter, the Facebook themes were less unidirectional and more focused on debates around a theme.

This study analysed the differences in posting behaviour and style of consumers during the Wallabies Spring Tour in 2014. This tour was broadcast exclusively on pay-TV channel Foxtel and free-to-air network Channel 10 in Australia, so most Australian households would have been able to watch. However, the games were played at times that were not conducive to capturing a large segment of Australian viewers – let alone rugby fans, as three of the five games started at 1:30am, one game started at 3:30am, and one game started at 7:00am. Due to these early broadcast times it could be anticipated that overall viewership – and associated social media commentary – would be lower than a match played in Australia. Therefore it is anticipated that further analyses of home Wallabies fixtures will be studied in future; furthermore the 2015 Rugby World Cup will be played in England in September and October, so interest in those matches will also be higher than the 2014 Spring Tour, because of the importance of the event to Australia and many other nations.

## Summary

Much sports social media research to date has featured content analysis of fan posts to Facebook (e.g. Scott, Hill & Zakus 2014 ) and Twitter (e.g. Frederick et al. 2014). Sanderson highlights the ‘mushrooming’ of scholarly article submissions on sports social media (2014) as a result of which Pedersen warns that the insufficient number of appropriate reviewers available could lead the academic debate into an emerging “groupthink” (2014). Partly to avoid this outcome, the aim of this study was to understand differences in cross-platform sports fan conversation on Twitter and Facebook, rather than to focus upon specific social media content. A particular strength of this research design was that all data were captured and analysed using MUSTT and Leximancer rather than a sample of downloaded tweets – this method avoided the potential omission of important themes and/or tweets from capture and analysis which can result from sampling. The site of investigation was an international rugby union fixture between the Irish and the Australian national teams, which was selected on the assumption that the comparatively high-income bracket of rugby union fans worldwide might support second-screen behaviour whereby a fan simultaneously followed the game on broadcast TV whilst conversing with other fans via social media.

Within this framework, this study was driven by two research questions: (1) does fan conversation differ by platform; and (2) is there a discernible difference between fan conversation on formal hashtags vs. informal conversation (Twitter only)? In response to Q1, analysis of fan interaction via Twitter and Facebook on the day of the Ireland vs. Australia rugby union match on 21 November 2014 clearly supports a difference in conversation by social media platform. The brief nature of Twitter posts means that fan comments to this platform could be comparatively unidirectional, declarative and/or rhetoric. In contrast Facebook conversation themes were less unidirectional and more focused on debates around a theme such as gameplay or individual player or coach performance. This confirms comparable findings from a study of social media use by Australian Football League fans (Hopkins 2013).

In response to Q2, the analysis indicates that although the same top theme emerged (Ireland vs. Australia) in the two Twitter data sets, there was a difference in the content created overall. The second theme in the formal hashtag #IREvAUS produced game-related content, while this content was identified as the third theme in the MUSTT data. The MUSTT data also identified IrishRugby as its second theme, illustrating that Irish fans were tweeting more about their team outside of the formal game hashtag than were Australian fans. This result could be partially explained by time zone differences, but it is important to note that informal conversation on Twitter in this case produced an identifiable theme related to fandom for one team over another.

This study sought to highlight the importance of cross-platform research design in order to generate insight into the identity of online fans and the meaning of their conversations. Its findings support the contention that different platforms support different conversations: Twitter conversation was more unidirectional whereas Facebook conversation themes were more focused on debates around a theme. Insufficient data were returned by this study to infer the prevalence and/or impact of second-screen behaviours. A 2015 survey of news access and consumption indicates that a significant proportion of

Australian news consumers use four or more devices to access news content (Watkins et al. 2015) which may support a claim that second-screen behaviour by sports fans is likely to increase. However further research is required to link multiple device usage for sports fan conversations.

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