

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Digital Qualitative Research in Sport and Physical Activity

Edited by
Andrea Bundon



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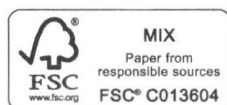
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Digital Qualitative Research in Sport and Physical Activity

Twitter, Facebook, online forums, blogs and websites – scholars are increasingly turning to digital sources to study sport and physical activity. These platforms have generated new digital content ripe for analysis and are making it possible to investigate communities that were previously inaccessible. However, they have also created theoretical, methodological, practical and ethical challenges.

This book critically examines the opportunities open to qualitative researchers working in digital spaces and offers novel insights into how the rise of new technology is helping to shape sport studies. Showcasing original research on emerging themes, trends and issues such as digital sociology, media citizenship, online gaming, Big Data, fitness apps and online fan cultures, this collection leads the way in this fast-developing field of study. It not only considers the possibilities and limitations of using digital tools to conduct qualitative research into sport, but also provides innovative examples of how researchers can adapt successfully to ever-evolving technologies.

Digital Qualitative Research in Sport and Physical Activity is essential reading for all students and scholars interested in the latest digital developments in sport studies and research methods.

Andrea Bundon is an Assistant Professor in the School of Kinesiology at the University of British Columbia, Canada. Her work, which spans the fields of sport sociology and critical disability studies, uses (often digital) qualitative methods to explore the intersections of sport, physical activity, disability and social inclusion. She has published in international peer-reviewed journals including *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, *Disability and Society* and *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*. She has also contributed to several published and forthcoming books, including *The Routledge International Handbook of Qualitative Methods in Sport and Exercise*.

Qualitative Research in Sport and Physical Activity

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Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
Introduction: digital qualitative research in sport and physical activity	1
ANDREA BUNDON	
 PART I	
The potential of the Web for sport and physical activity studies: theoretical foundations	13
1 (Digital) culture, media citizenship and major event narratives	15
DAVID MCGILLIVRAY	
2 The datafication of everything: towards a sociology of sport and Big Data	28
BRAD MILLINGTON AND ROB MILLINGTON	
3 Transformative potential? Feminist approaches to digital sport media research	43
DUNJA ANTUNOVIC	
 PART II	
Going digital: methodological questions and considerations	57
4 Understanding athletes' online participation: a ticket to qualitative research on online sports arenas	59
URBAN CARLÉN AND NINITHA MAIVORSDOTTER	

5	Guarding against quick and easy: tightening up qualitative sport and social media research	80
	JIMMY SANDERSON	
6	Research considerations when investigating psychological factors and health-related issues in online contexts	93
	MATTHEW HALL AND SARAH GROGAN	
 PART III		
	Contributions from the field: digital research in practice	107
7	Mommy blogging: understanding athlete-mother identities in a running community using discursive psychological analysis	109
	KERRY R. MCGANNON AND JENNY MCMAHON	
8	Unless you go online you're on your own: blogging as a bridge in para-sport	125
	ANDREA BUNDON AND LAURA HURD CLARKE	
9	Sponsorship goes social: analyzing Twitter users' discussion of French Open sponsors	141
	ELIZABETH DELIA AND COLE ARMSTRONG	
10	Shaky footage from the field: envisioning a new terrain with film-based inquiry	155
	YOSUKE WASHIYA	
	Afterword: sport's digital future: biodigital design, e-sport, mixed reality, fan engagement and gamification	166
	ANDY MIAH	
	<i>Index</i>	172

Introduction

Digital qualitative research in sport and physical activity

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Introduction: doing qualitative sport and physical activity research in the digital age

I had no intention of doing ‘digital qualitative research’ when I started the AthletesFirst blog project in 2010. I doubt I had even heard the term and I certainly did not know what it meant. What I did know was that I was interested in doing research for and with amateur athletes ... and they were blogging. Blog is an abbreviation of ‘Web log’, and in 2004 it was the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*’s ‘word of the year’. By 2007, it was estimated that there were 70 million active blogs, yet in the summer of that year ‘throughout the ostensibly dead blogosphere, word spread rapidly that blogs had been killed by boredom, success, and even newer media’ (Dean, 2010, p. 33). But blogs didn’t die that year or even the next. Instead, different genres of blogs and communities of practice started to emerge. We saw celebrity blogs and bloggers who became celebrities, mommy blogs written for and by mothers, and blogs that became books and launched their authors onto the bestseller lists.

Athletes were another group who rapidly adopted the practice and, in 2010, blogs were the digital platform of choice for those preparing for and competing in the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics and Paralympics. Blogs solved (at least) two problems commonly encountered by amateur athletes: first, they provided a means of staying in touch with family, friends and fans while on the road; and, second, they provided a place where athletes could build their personal brand and publicize the contributions of their sponsors and other supporters. The advent of mobile blogging platforms *circa* 2009 made it even easier for athletes to publish posts from airport lounges, hotel rooms or even training and competition venues. While it is impossible to know exactly how many athletes were using blogs at any given time, my own experience as a guide on the Canadian Paralympic Team heading into the 2010 Games was that most, if not all, of my teammates had a blog. In this sense, the AthletesFirst blog that I created with community co-researchers (see Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2015; Chapter 8, this volume) was reactive rather than proactive. We weren’t trying to pioneer a new method or be leaders in

the emerging area of digital qualitative sport studies. We were just trying to talk with athletes, and to do that we needed to go where they were – online.

The contributors to this volume will largely attest that my experience is not unique. Digital qualitative study of sport and physical activity is a young field and most of us do not consider it our primary research focus. Rather, the chapters in this book represent our forays (sometimes our *first* forays) into online spaces, and our work is solidly grounded in ‘older’ disciplines and traditions. We come from the fields of anthropology, sociology and psychology, and draw on theories from media studies, physical culture studies, gender studies, disability studies, education studies, health studies and more. We are united by a commitment to qualitative research methodologies and our desire to do better research. We also believe that in today’s networked world that means learning to use digital tools and navigate digital realms, and teaching others to do the same.

The need for digital qualitative research in sport and physical activity

At the turn of the millennium there was a much clearer demarcation between online and offline social lives. If a researcher had sent me a survey in 1999 (they would have had to do so by ‘regular mail’, as I didn’t have email at the time) and asked me to record how much time I spent online and what I used the Internet for, I could have answered their questions easily. Not so any more. A few years ago, I was interviewing a university student in a coffee shop and asked him how much time he spent online. He sincerely replied, ‘How would I know? Am I online now?’ He wasn’t trying to be funny; he was challenging a distinction between online and offline activities that he saw as artificial. We may have been sitting in a coffee shop, engaged in a face-to-face conversation, but we also had our phones in our pockets and were logged into multiple accounts. We were receiving messages from friends and colleagues by email, Facebook Messenger and Twitter even as we conversed with each other. A few minutes earlier, I had pulled out my iPad and we had watched a YouTube video together, looked up a news story and read a few blogs. Such behavior complicates and contradicts the notion of a real world/virtual world dichotomy. The boundaries are even less clear today. The Internet¹ is deeply integrated into nearly all of our activities at work and at play. Most of us would struggle to complete even even simple tasks without our smartphones, laptops, tablets and other wired and wireless devices. Furthermore, our social networks are not fixed in a single realm either – we communicate with family, friends, colleagues and research participants across multiple channels, often starting a conversation online before continuing it face-to-face or vice versa.

The purpose of this book is critically to explore how the rise of the digital age has shaped and continues to shape our social worlds *and our research activities*. Whether it is via Twitter, Facebook, online forums, blogs or websites, scholars are increasingly relying on digital sources to study sport, exercise