

# I Am Woman, But Not Roaring: An Examination of Similarities and Differences in How Male and Female Professional Athletes are Using Twitter

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## *Abstract*

The Twitter activity of male and female athletes was analyzed in this study to determine how they connect with fans and enhance their public profile. The emergence of social media provides female athletes more control over their public image. Drawing on research in public relations, a quantitative content analysis of tweets produced by athletes was examined using the dialogic principles and the use of the structural features of the platforms. Findings from this study indicated some difference between

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male and female athletes' use of Twitter. Males employed the "generation of return visits" principle along with the use of hashtags that indicate a more strategic use of social media, and female athletes tended to produce original tweets with useful information and frequently interacted with other users.

**T**he accessibility that social media affords sport fans to their favorite teams has had a "profound effect on sport" (Pegoraro, 2010, p. 501); this has included bringing together fans from all over the world (Kerr & Gladden, 2008). For fans, social media provide platforms for talking about their favorite athletes and teams (Seo & Green, 2008). Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, and Greenwell (2010) suggest Twitter is a useful platform for sports fans in that it allows them to "create personalized spaces where they can express support for their favorites and discuss sports" (p. 455). On the other hand, sports organizations use the medium to keep fans up-to-date on daily activities of teams (Hambrick et al., 2010).

Twitter is unique among other social media platforms in that it combines different aspects of communication (Clavio & Kian, 2010), including traditional mediated messages (i.e. broadcasting information) and more interpersonal forms of communication (i.e. engaging in dialogue) (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2012). Twitter allows users to engage in two-way dialogue with one another (Fischer & Reuber, 2011; Frederick et al., 2012). By using the dialogic capabilities of the medium, sports organizations and athletes are able to connect with fans on a

more intimate, interpersonal level (Clavio & Kian, 2010). Through interacting with an athlete on Twitter, fans get unprecedented access to the athlete away from the field of play. These types of interactions can allow fans to “develop a greater appreciation for the talent, dedication to their sport, and the day-to-day lives of those athletes” (Pegoraro, 2010, p. 504).

In addition to offering increased interactivity with fans through dialogic capabilities, Twitter and other social media platforms give athletes more control over their public image (Weathers et al., 2014). A considerable amount of research on sports has examined differences in how male and female athletes are portrayed in traditional media. The majority of this work shows that female athletes are underrepresented in traditional media (Billings & Angelini, 2007); it also shows that when they are covered they are framed as inferior to male athletes, thus reinforcing hegemonic masculinity of sports (Coche, 2014). Using social media to exert more control over their public persona through direct access to fans is perhaps one strategy female athletes could use to overcome the shortcomings of traditional media in terms of their portrayal. Put another way, using social media to interact with fans on an interpersonal level could allow the female athlete to show a more realistic view of herself. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the differences between how male and female professional athletes use Twitter.

## **Literature Review**

### **Athletes and Twitter**

Twitter use is prevalent in sports (Frederick et al., 2012), with anyone from athletes to coaches to sports jour-

nalists using the site as a platform to provide fans with immediate access to information about their favorite teams and athletes (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010). Sport teams have harnessed the power of social media to convert casual fans to highly involved fans (Ioakamidis, 2010). For many fans, sports are an integral part of their social identity (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000), and active engagement with their favorite team leads to increased levels of fan identification (Hambrick et al., 2010). Identifying and connecting with athletes deepens the attachment to the team (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). For highly identified fans, online sports websites and social media allow them to connect with their favorite athletes and gain insider information about the team (Seo & Green, 2008).

From the perspective of the athlete, social media allows them to have direct, unfiltered access to fans and, thus, more control over their public persona (Hambrick et al., 2010; Weathers et al., 2014). Social media, and Twitter in particular, allow athletes the opportunity to show sides of their personality otherwise absent from traditional media (Frederick et al., 2012; Weathers et al., 2014). Frederick et al. (2012) suggests, “by revealing aspects of their personal lives (e.g. family life, religious beliefs) along with their sports lives on Twitter, athletes appear to be using this medium as a tool through which they can share their personalities...” (p. 14). Pegoraro (2010) adds that this open communication between athlete and fan allows for fans to feel closer to their favorite player. Sutton, McDonald, Milne, and Cimperman (1997) cited accessibility to a sport team as a primary influence on identification with a team. Therefore, as athletes are willing to “break down

traditional barriers” between themselves and fans, levels of fan identification increase, often having a positive result for the athlete and the team’s brand (Frederick et al., 2012, p. 14).

Scholars have examined the activity of athletes on social media from a variety of perspectives. Findings from a Hambrick et al. (2010) study suggested that athletes use Twitter to provide insights into their personal lives and that it “gives followers a chance to learn more about their favorite players beyond their athletic activities” (p. 464). Frederick et al. (2012) studied the Twitter activity of professional athletes to determine the nature of their interaction with followers. They found that athletes were more likely to communicate with fans and friends in a way that promotes relationship-building efforts. Pegoraro (2010) also found that athletes used Twitter to respond and interact with fans. Each of these studies indicates that athletes use Twitter to engage with their fans (Frederick et al., 2012). Athletes are able to display their personalities on social media in a way that transcends who they are on the field, thus making them more engaging figures with the public (Hambrick et al., 2010). One of the goals of this study is to determine how athletes use Twitter to interact with their fans and subsequently raise their public profiles without the use of the traditional sports media.

### **The Gender Divide**

One theory that helps explain the gender divide present in sports is hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity was originally developed to better understand the roles men and women play in power structures (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Connell (1990) defined hegemonic

masculinity as “the culturally idealized form of masculine character” and contrasted it with the “subordination of women” and “marginalization of gay men” (as cited in Trujillo, 1991, p. 290). In short, hegemonic masculinity is the ascendancy of one commonly accepted definition of masculinity that exemplifies what it means to be a man and that version of masculinity is perceived as superior to all others. Sports tend to exemplify and exaggerate the differences between male and females based solely on sex and conceptions of masculinity (Trujillo, 1991) and this difference is most evident in representations of women in sports. Research on representations of women in sports has revealed that in contrast to men, women are frequently presented as hypersexualized with exaggerated feminine qualities (Coche, 2014).

Coverage and representation of women’s sports has been extensively covered in sports literature, especially in the last 20 years (Delorme, 2014). The majority of these studies have examined the coverage of female athletes in the mass media such as newspapers (Kian & Hardin, 2009; Knight & Giuliano, 2001; Pedersen, 2002; Whiteside & Rightler-McDaniels, 2013), broadcast news (Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013; Hallmark & Armstrong, 1999), and in special events such as the Olympics (Billings, Angelini, MacArthur, Bissell, & Smith, 2014; Jones & Greer, 2012) and the NCAA Final Four Basketball Championship (Billings, Halone, & Denham, 2002). Until recently, most of these studies have concluded with an indictment of traditional media for underrepresenting females in sports and failing to challenge traditional conceptions of hegemonic masculinity and sport (Coche, 2014).

Understanding representations of female athletes in

the mass media is an important area of study. As Bernstein (2002) argued, “when it comes to sport the mass media assume an even greater importance since the overwhelming majority of spectators experience sporting events in their mediated version” (p. 416). The emergence of social media as a major information-source in sports provides female athletes with an opportunity to provide a different perspective than has been shared in the past – one that more fairly represents females in sports and challenges hegemonic masculinity in sports (Coche 2013, 2014). In particular, social media provide a platform for female athletes to interact directly with fans, often providing them with a glimpse of their life off the field (Frederick et al., 2012; Pegoraro, 2010). Through online fan interaction, female athletes have an opportunity to increase their overall exposure to fans and engage in relationship-building strategies that are important in a service market such as sports (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998).

Researchers have started to study how athletes use social media to interact with fans and as a method for self-presentation. Kassing and Sanderson (2010) studied how fans and athletes interacted during the Giro d’Italia (Tour of Italy and Spain cycling race). They found that athletes used the microblogging site to interact with fans as well as provide commentary and opinions about the event for fans. Coche (2014) looked at Twitter profile pictures of professional tennis players to determine if there is a gender difference in how they frame themselves. Results indicated that female athletes in the sample tended to frame themselves primarily as feminine women and secondly as athletes. Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) examined self-presentation of professional tennis players on Twitter and

found that male tennis players tended to engage more as a sports fan as opposed to female tennis players who took on a brand manager role on Twitter. A study of self-representation among female college athletes revealed that when given the opportunity to express themselves in a photo shoot and interview, the athletes were more likely to emphasize pride in being a female athlete (Krane et al., 2010).

### **Dialogic Principles: "Best Practice" Engagement Tools**

Two-way communication, or dialogue, on social media has been studied extensively in public relations literature. Scholars have cited dialogue as an effective strategy for engaging in relationship building with the public (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008). In outlining a theory for building online dialogic relationships, Kent and Taylor (1998) suggested applying of five principles: (1) the dialogic loop, (2) usefulness of information, (3) the generation of return visits, (4) ease of interface, and (5) the rule of conservation of visitors. This framework provided the basis for coding dialogic activity of male and female athletes on Twitter in this study.

*Dialogic Loop.* The dialogic loop allows for two-way communication between an organization and its publics. According to this principle, organizations should go beyond disseminating information in a one-way, broadcast model by incorporating a mutual negotiation with publics, or audiences (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Two-way communication is essential for engaging in dialogic communication (McAllister-Spooner & Kent, 2009). Bruning et al., (2008) add, "when both parties to an organization-public relationship are able to influence the other, an equal partnership



can develop” (p. 29). Twitter has a built-in dialogic loop feature in the “reply” to tweets options. Users can respond to initial tweets from an organization and the organization has the capability to respond to the users' tweets in one feed, thus enabling dialogic communication.

***Usefulness of Information.*** This principle suggests that information provided to publics online should be relatively useful to all publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998). The usefulness of information principle implies that the content distributed on websites or social media is important in facilitating dialogue and relationship building between the organization and its publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998). The information communicated between an organization and public must be mutually beneficial; in other words, the organization may strive to communicate information relevant to their goals, but the public must find that information to be valuable as well (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

***Generation of Return Visits.*** In addition to providing information that is useful to the public, organizations must work to keep them coming back for additional information. Simply maintaining an active presence on the site aids in this principle (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Online media, including websites and social media, allow public relations practitioners to easily update information that contributes to the conversation and keeps the public coming back for more. To maintain an active Twitter presence, organizations can utilize the activities available on Twitter such as posting tweets on a regular basis, utilizing hashtags, embedding multimedia, or hosting special Twitter events to make the content interesting.

***Ease of Interface.*** The ease of interface suggests that the organization's online presence be intuitive and easy for

the public to navigate. Kent and Taylor (1998) suggest outlets for communication with the public should be dynamic, informative, and interactive for all publics of an organization. This principle applies primarily to websites and original online content created by the organization.

***Rule of Conservation of Visitors.*** This principle suggests that organizations should attempt to keep their public engaged in their online information spaces. The assumption of this principle is that once users leave the organization's presence, they may not return (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Integrating social media with an organization's website (McAllister, 2012; Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010) allows for information to be continually updated and thus keep key audiences engaged with the organization's online presence. Social media should be used not only as an information source, but also as a conduit to the organization's complete online presence including other social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Twitter can be integrated with other forms of social media to keep followers engaged in the organization's web presence.

Researchers have applied dialogic theory to Twitter. In their content analysis of Fortune 500 companies on Twitter, Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) found that most organizations used Twitter to keep visitors coming back to their Twitter feed. Smith (2010) examined Twitter as a tool for social public relations. Linvill, McGee, and Hicks (2012) applied dialogic theory to the use of Twitter among colleges and universities. Their results suggested that colleges and universities use Twitter primarily to disseminate news to a general population. The current study continues this research by examining the dialogic capabilities

of Twitter and its role in facilitating relationships between professional athletes and their followers. Most importantly: Are female athletes utilizing the full potential of dialogic activity?

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this research is to examine the differences in how female and male professional athletes use Twitter to engage their public in dialogue in an attempt to build or enhance their relationship with fans. This study accomplishes this in two ways – first by investigating how athletes use the structural features of Twitter to interact with and create content for fans, and secondly by examining how they engage fans in dialogue. Drawing on public relations research, the dialogic principles outlined by Kent and Taylor (1998) provide the framework for investigating the activity of professional athletes on social media. The following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: How do professional athletes use the structural features of Twitter to engage fans on social media?

RQ2: To what extent do female athletes employ dialogic principles on Twitter?

RQ3: To what extent do male athletes employ dialogic principles on Twitter?

RQ4: Is there a difference in how male and female athletes use Twitter to engage in dialogue with their public?

### **Methodology**

The present study used content analysis to examine the tweets produced by professional athletes in order to compare how male and female athletes used the social me-

dia platform Twitter to connect with their public. The use of the dialogic principles provided a theoretical framework for analyzing the Twitter activity of athletes in the study. While it is important to note that these principles have been used primarily in the context of organizations (i.e., nonprofit organizations, universities, Fortune 500 companies, etc.), the authors of this study contend that given their status and public persona, professional athletes manage their personal brand and engage in relationship building activities on social media similar to organizations. Additionally, this study extends research of online relationship building and the dialogic principles by examining the perspective of the individual brand.

## Sample

Twenty-four male and female athletes were selected for analysis. The website [www.fanpagelist.com](http://www.fanpagelist.com) was used to identify the “most influential athletes on Twitter” (Fanpage, 2013). This website evaluates influence based on the number of followers and Klout score of each athlete. Klout.com measures social media influence. To ensure parity between male and female athletes, the top 12 female athletes were selected first from this list. Male athletes comparable to female athletes in number of followers were then selected. Care was taken by the researchers to obtain a sample of athletes from a variety of sports. Each athlete selected had an active Twitter account during the time of data collection. Tweets were collected from each athlete's Twitter feed for a period of one month (August 1 – 30, 2013). A total of 1,575 tweets were collected. The total number of tweets collected for male athletes was 834 (53%) and the total number collected for female athletes

Table 1  
*Descriptive Information for Sample*

<b>Athlete</b>	<b>Sport</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Followers</b>	<b>N Tweets</b>
Serena Williams	Tennis	Female	3,931,636	34
Kobe Bryant	NBA	Male	3,422,151	30
Andy Murray	Tennis	Male	2,169,738	39
Michael Phelps	Swimming	Male	1,442,554	33
Alex Morgan	U.S. Soccer	Female	1,239,460	55
Robert Griffin III	NFL	Male	1,040,074	121
Venus Williams	Tennis	Female	1,025,601	32
Danica Patrick	NASCAR	Female	958,378	28
Stephen Curry	NBA	Male	915,041	32
Gabby Douglas	Gymnas- tics	Female	808,083	91
Maria Sharapova	Tennis	Female	622,132	70
Marc Gasol	NBA	Male	583,847	16
Desean Jackson	NFL	Male	557,173	115
Caroline Wozniacki	Tennis	Female	534,990	21
Jimmie Johnson	NASCAR	Male	483,230	89
Aly Raisman	Gymnas- tics	Female	443,253	163
Serge Ibaka	NBA	Male	428,730	36
Skylar Diggins	WNBA	Female	410,451	87
Russell Wilson	NFL	Male	387,049	123
Missy Franklin	Swimming	Female	372,354	34
Lolo Jones	Track and field	Female	369,311	59
Victor Cruz	NFL	Male	351,406	128
Abby Wambach	U.S. Soccer	Female	268,564	67
Harrison Barnes	NBA	Male	150,826	72
<b>Total N</b>	<b>1,575</b>			

was 741 (47%). Table 1 lists the athletes included in the sample, the number of followers at the time of data collection, and the total number of tweets collected for each athlete.

### **Coding Procedures**

Tweets were manually pulled from the athletes' public Twitter pages and copied into an Excel document, where they were coded by two independent coders. To establish intercoder reliability, both coders independently coded 15% of the tweets. Krippendorff's alpha was calculated to assess coder agreement of the measured categories. Reliability coefficients for each category ranged from (.80) to (.83), exceeding the widely accepted minimum threshold of .70.

Tweets were coded for the use of the structural features of Twitter and dialogic principles. All tweets were coded for the presence (1) or absence (0) of each variable. Like other studies applying dialogic principles to social media (see Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010), the current study did not code for ease of interface because the interface for Twitter is the same for all profiles.

Coding categories were developed based on previous research by Rybalko and Seltzer (2010), who examined the Twitter activity of Fortune 500 companies. Similar to the previously mentioned study, the unit of analysis was the individual tweet and therefore the source of the tweet did not change the coding framework. The presence of each principle was coded as a 1 or 0. Each tweet was coded for the presence of four dialogic principles: (1) usefulness of information, (2) dialogic loop, (3) conservation of visitors, and (4) generation of return visits. Additionally, individual

tweets were analyzed to determine how athletes utilized the structural features of Twitter including: (1) if the tweet was an original tweet, retweet, or a direct reply; (2) presence of a hashtag, "@" mention, link to external website, and multimedia (pictures and video posted from other social media sites).

***Dialogic Principles.*** A tweet was considered *useful* if the information was considered relevant and of value to followers; for example, the tweet contained game or event information, provided information about the team or practice, or provided information about upcoming events. A tweet was coded as using the *dialogic loop* strategy if the athlete engaged in discussion with followers. Tweets that posed questions to followers or responded to tweets from followers were coded as employing the dialogic loop principle. *Generation of return visits* suggests that organizations should keep the public coming back to their online spaces, in this case to check their Twitter feed on a daily basis. Tweets were coded as *generation of return visits* tweets if they contained elements that engaged users and asked them to check back to the Twitter feed; such elements included the use of hashtags (to organize conversation), the posting of pictures and videos (not necessarily to separate social media accounts) and links to external websites. The *conservation of visitors* principle assumes that organizations should keep their audience engaged in their online presence. Tweets were coded for presence of this principle if they included links to the athletes' other websites and social media pages (i.e. Facebook, YouTube, or Instagram). Example tweets for each variable from male and female athletes are in Table 2.

Table 2

*Example Tweets by Variable*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Male Athlete Example Tweet</b>	<b>Female Athlete Example Tweet</b>
Usefulness of information	@RGIII: Check out @ESPN tonight at 7pm ET to see #TheWilltoWin and after the show head over to my FB page where I'll be doing a live Q&A.	@LoLoJones: Just got to Olympic training center. I didn't want to turn on lights and wake my roommate who I can't determine un- der my cellphone light...
Conserva- tion of re- turn visitors	@MichaelPhelps: Another finished round at #eldorado <a href="http://instagram.com/p/c1vi6QyxyQ/">http:// instagram.com/p/ c1vi6QyxyQ/</a>	@Aly_Raisman: love this man <a href="http://instagram.com/p/cfK28MPufE/">http:// instagram.com/p/ cfK28MPufE/</a>
Dialogic loop	@Andy_Murray: Well done to my big bro jamie and his partner john peers on their first quarter final of slam to- gether! Thoughts guys?	@SerenaWilliams: I hear there Is a me- teor shower to- night. Is this true??
Generation of return visitors	@KobeBryant: Thank you all for the love!!!! #35yearVino #TimehasWings #Blessed #carpediem #cuspbaby #LeoVirgo #lottahashtags! #myBday #deal #;D	@AlexMorgan13: Perks of an early flight out of Port- land. Rochester bound. #Gorgeous #nofilter #NWSLChampions <a href="http://hip.pic.twitter.com/paR32moYFZ">hip pic.twitter.com/ paR32moYFZ</a>



## Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 20. Frequencies and percentages are reported in response to RQ1-3. RQ1 investigates the way professional athletes use the structural features of Twitter to engage fans. RQ2 and RQ3 examine how male and female athletes employ the dialogic principles on Twitter. RQ4 is answered using a chi-square goodness of fit test to assess the differences observed between male and female athletes' Twitter behaviors.

## Results

### Athletes' Use of the Structural Features of Twitter

One goal of this study is to investigate the way athletes use the structural features of Twitter. The majority of tweets for male and female athletes are original tweets (males  $n = 585$ , 70.1% and females  $n = 460$ , 62.1%). For female athletes, use of the "@" mention ( $n = 432$ , 58.3%), retweet ( $n = 262$ , 35.4%), and the use of hashtags ( $n = 243$ , 32.8%) were more frequently observed, while for male athletes the hashtag was present in nearly half of the tweets ( $n = 413$ , 49.5%), followed by "@" mentions ( $n = 408$ , 48.9%), and retweets ( $n = 235$ , 28.2%).

Scholars and practitioners alike have touted the two-way dialogic capabilities of social media, and Twitter in particular, as differentiating this medium from other communication platforms (Smith, 2010). Consistent with similar studies investigating the use of dialogue on social media, direct reply feature was utilized the least among both male and female professional athletes (males  $n = 75$ , 9% and females  $n = 68$ , 9.2%); therefore it can be inferred that the dialogic capabilities of social media are being underuti-

Table 3  
*Structural Features of Twitter*

	Male Athletes		Female Athletes	
	*f	%	*f	%
Original Tweet	585	70.1	460	62.1
Hashtag	413	49.5	432	58.3
@mention	408	48.9	262	35.4
Retweet	235	28.2	243	32.8
Social Media: Picture	208	24.9	85	11.5
Link to External Website	79	9.5	68	9.2
Direct Reply	75	9	68	9.2
Social Media: Video	32	3.8	27	3.6

*f* = frequency

lized (see Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Esrock & Leichty, 1999; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009).

This study coded for the presence of multimedia (pictures or videos) that were linked from other social media sites. Male athletes were more likely to integrate other forms of social media (i.e. Instagram or YouTube) into their Twitter activity than were female athletes. Male athletes included pictures linked to social media in nearly 25% of their tweets ( $n = 208$ , 24.9%), while female athletes included pictures linked to social media in fewer than 10% of their tweets ( $n = 68$ , 9.2%). Neither male nor female athletes tended to embed video into their tweets (males  $n = 32$ , 3.8% and females  $n = 27$ , 3.6%). Table 3 summarizes these findings.

Table 4  
*Dialogic Principles*

	Male Athletes		Female Athletes	
	*f	%	*f	%
Usefulness of Information	219	37.6	278	37.5
Generation of Return Visits	314	37.6	217	29.3
Conservation of Visitors	214	25.7	61	8.2
Dialogic Loop	70	8.4	57	7.7

### **Athletes and Dialogic Principles**

RQ2 and RQ3 investigated the dialogic strategies employed by female and male athletes on Twitter. Male athletes were more likely to employ the generation of return visits ( $n = 314, 37.6\%$ ) followed by usefulness of information ( $n = 219, 26.3\%$ ), and conservation of visitors ( $n = 214, 25.7\%$ ). Female athletes employed the usefulness of information principles the most ( $n = 278, 37.5\%$ ) and generation of return visits ( $n = 217, 29.3\%$ ). Unlike male athletes, female athletes employed the conservation of visitors principle less than 10% of the time ( $n = 61, 8.2\%$ ). The least used principle for both male and female athletes is the dialogic loop, which was present in less than 10% of the tweets. Table 4 summarizes these findings.

### **Comparing Male and Female Athletes**

***Usefulness of Information.*** A chi-square goodness of fit test showed a significant difference between gender and tweets that were considered useful,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1575), =$

23.025,  $p < .001$ . While the chi-square indicated a significant relationship, the strength of this association is weak ( $\phi = .12$ ). The observed differences also indicated little difference between males and females tweeting information coded as “useful” (males  $n = 219$ , 26.3% and females  $n = 278$ , 37.5%).

***Dialogic Loop.*** The dialogic loop principle suggests organizations should engage their constituents in two-way communication. In this study, tweets that asked and answered questions from followers were coded as employing the dialogic loop. A chi-square test did not reveal a statistically significant difference between how male and female athletes employed this principle,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1575) = .260, p = .610$ . For each gender, less than 10% of the tweets in the sample employed this principle (males  $n = 70$ , 8.4% and females  $n = 57$ , 7.7%). Male and female athletes in this study employed this principle least.

***Generation of Return Visits.*** For generation of return visits, a chi-square goodness of fit test indicated a significant relationship between employing this principle and gender,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1575) = 12.286, p < .001, \phi = .08$ . However, the phi value indicates a weak relationship between the variables. The observed values confirm this finding, 37.6% of males ( $n = 314$ ) and 29.3% of females ( $n = 217$ ) employed this principle.

***Conservation of Visitors.*** Keeping audiences engaged in an organization’s online space is the conservation of visitors principle. For this study, tweets that included links to the athlete’s other social media platforms (i.e. Instagram) were coded as conservation of visitors. Chi-square goodness of fit did reveal a significant relationship  $\chi^2(1, N = 1575) = 82.690, p < .001$ . The phi value is .22, which is a

relatively weak association, but is the strongest of the variables under investigation in this study. The observed values also indicate that males tend to employ this principle more than females (males  $n = 214$ , 25.7%; females  $n = 61$ , 8.2%) thus indicating that male athletes are more likely to integrate their communication strategies across social media platforms.

## **Discussion**

Social media is often lauded for its ability to bypass traditional media and give public figures direct, unfiltered access to key publics (Wallace, Wilson & Miloch, 2010; Weathers et al., 2014). Connecting and establishing a relationship with fans can have positive effects for sport teams and individual athletes (Pegoraro, 2010). Social media also allows public figures to have more control over their public persona (Weathers et al., 2014). This is important, especially for female athletes who are largely underrepresented in traditional media (Coche, 2014). Social media provide female athletes an opportunity to connect with fans directly and confront conceptions of hegemonic masculinity present in sports. Additionally, through the two-way communication capabilities of social media they can connect in a way that is more personal than with traditional media.

Findings of the analysis of the usage of structural features of Twitter indicated that female athletes tweeted directly at other Twitter users more frequently than did male athletes, as indicated by the presence of the “@” mention in tweets (female athletes 58.3%; male athletes 48.9%). Even though the athletes rarely used the direct reply feature to interact with fans, the presence of the “@”

mention indicates there is some type of interaction. This could be attributed to athletes using Twitter to communicate with those in their own interpersonal networks (i.e., family, friends, other athletes or celebrities) rather than with fans who would largely be considered outsiders. This finding is consistent with previous research that has found that despite the ease with which two-way communication can occur on social media, this feature is rarely used (Levenshus, 2010). Waters and Williams (2010) have suggested that perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on two-way communication on social media and that situation should determine whether two-way or one-way communication is appropriate.

Additionally, the findings of this analysis revealed that male athletes employed the use of hashtags “#” more frequently in tweets (male athletes 49.5%; female athletes 32.8%). Hashtags are used on Twitter to organize tweets by category. Social media strategist Gary Vaynerchuk (2013) describes Twitter as a cocktail party where there are multiple conversations going on at once. Hashtags are the mechanism that allows a user to find a relevant conversation to join. Because male athletes are more likely to use hashtags in their tweets, the content they create is more visible to the wider Twitter community outside of their followers, thereby increasing their exposure. Athletes, or public figures for that matter, interested in raising their public profile should consider incorporating hashtags into their Twitter content to increase the visibility of their content to a wider audience.

Male athletes were also more likely to incorporate pictures and visual content into their tweets than female athletes. Nearly a quarter of tweets from male athletes in-

cluded a picture whereas less than 10% of female athlete tweets included a picture. Athletes in the sample rarely included video content with their tweets (male athletes 3.8%; female athletes 3.6%). Including pictures with social media content allows for a more personal connection between the public figure and the audience and enhances the relationship building efforts (Vaynerchuk, 2013). Previous research has found that female athletes tend to be more brand and image conscious than male athletes (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2014), which could account for why they do not post as many personal photos as the male athletes in the sample.

An examination of the dialogic principles revealed a significant difference in how athletes employed the usefulness of information, generation of return visits, and conservation of visitors principle. However, further investigation into the phi value for these principles revealed these differences to be weak. This is supported by the observed differences. Male athletes used the generation of return visits most frequently (male athletes 37.6%; female athletes 29.3%), while tweets from female athletes were more likely to contain useful information (male athletes 26.3%; female athletes 37.5%). Neither male nor female athletes employed the dialogic loop principle in more than 10% of their tweets.

What is interesting about this analysis and worthy of continued discussion is the difference in how male and female athletes employ the conservation of visitors principle. This principle states that in order to keep publics engaged, an organization must keep them involved in their online spaces. This study coded this category as integrating other social media platforms with Twitter. While significant dif-

ferences were found for other principles, the phi value indicates that conservation of visitors represents the strongest difference ( $\phi = .22$ ). This implies that, at least among athletes in this sample, males were more likely to integrate their social media accounts. An integrated social media presence indicates a more strategic approach to brand management on social media. The research implication of this finding leads to the question of who is managing an athlete's social media accounts – the athlete him or herself or a public relations professional?

Overall findings from this study indicate that there are some, albeit limited, differences in how male and female athletes use Twitter. Social media provide new outlets outside of traditional media for athletes to manage their personal brand. This includes how they choose to interact with fans and present themselves on social media. This is especially important for female athletes, who as research has consistently shown, are underrepresented in traditional media outlets (Bernstein, 2002). Continued study of self-presentation on social media can shine more light on specific strategies used by female athletes. Weathers et al. (2014) conducted one such study in the context of two sports broadcasters and found that the male broadcaster used Twitter to reinforce his on-screen persona and the female broadcaster used Twitter more to discuss her life away from sports. Similarly, results of this study also indicate that female athletes may be using their social media presence to present fans with a version of their lives away from the field (i.e., interacting with users using the “@” mention feature and composing more original tweets with useful information), while male athletes are strategically reinforcing their public persona (i.e., conservation of visi-



tors/strategic integration of social media platforms and using hashtags to increase visibility). Research has consistently found that mass media representations of athletes reinforce notions of hegemonic masculinity. Studying self-presentation of athletes on social media is important to determine how the athletes are reinforcing or contesting notions of hegemonic masculinity.

### **Limitations and Conclusion**

This study does have its limitations. For one, the sample could be considered problematic. While the authors thought it was important to have a variety of athletes from different sports represented in the sample, the resources for managing social media among the athletes could be different. In other words, the authors concede that it is possible and likely that some athletes have hired public relations professionals or a social media consultant to manage their Twitter accounts while others maintain the site themselves.

Another limitation of this study is the time frame in which the tweets were collected. Data collection was limited to a one-month time period. Given the variety of athletes and sports represented in this study, it is likely that some athletes were in-season, others were in their off-season, and some were in training camp. The “busyness” of their schedule related to their respective sport could also influence the results of this study.

In terms of extending the research on dialogue and social media, the current study is consistent with the findings of previous research – the dialogic capabilities of social media are being underutilized. The one-way relationship between athlete or celebrity and fan can be frustrat-

ing for fans as they still feel as if they only have restricted access to the public figure (Stever & Lawson, 2013). Stever and Lawson (2013) suggest “people who would persist in this kind of relationship are getting some kind of gratification from it that outweighs the negative aspects of it (i.e., lack of reciprocity)” (Stever & Lawson, 2013, para. 34). Continued research on dialogue and social media is necessary to fully understand its influence on relationship building efforts.

Clavio and Kian (2010) suggest, “the number of followers of sports figures and organizations on Twitter would seem to call for increased levels of scholarly inquiry into a whole range of topics including produced content, audience awareness, audience gratification, athlete gratification, and public relations impact” (p. 486). In keeping with this, experimental design research to quantify the impact of exposure (on fans) to a dialogic orientation by athletes would be a reasonable next step. Measurement of awareness amongst fans of athletes' Twitter activity, fan likelihood of participation in dialogue with athletes, and differences in fan attitudes toward athletes before and after exposure to dialogic communication is suggested.

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