

## How the NWHL uses Twitter to #GrowTheGame

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### Abstract

Four men's sports largely dominate the U.S. sports industry. The National Football League (NFL), the National Basketball Association (NBA), the Major League Baseball (MLB) and the National Hockey League (NHL) combined brought in about \$31 billion in revenue in 2016, placing them all in the top 5 leagues with the most revenue worldwide (Kutz, 2017). But, other leagues now have a chance of finding their own audiences through online media. Indeed, social networks allow leagues and teams to communicate directly with their target audience without the need for traditional media. As such, social media plays an increasingly important role as sports marketers use them for various purposes, including promotions (Hambrick and Mahoney, 2011), public relations (Waters et al., 2011) and endorsements (Brisonet al., 2013). The possibility of building an online community has become a key strategy for sports brands and organizations to develop greater loyalty. Using a grounded theory approach, the proposed study employs a digital participant observation, following the netnography (Kozinets, 2002; Muniz and Schau, 2007) process, of how the National Women's Hockey League's four teams used Twitter during their first and second seasons. Modeled on the ethnographic method, a netnography requires the researcher to study an online community over an extended period of time, identifying the field and taking notes to then analyze the data. This study seeks to answer how new (minor) sports organizations use social media to build brand communities and what types of messages build fan engagement. This study furthers social media research by exploring how communities are established online – an essential part of advertising, public relations, and marketing. It will help social media practitioners, particularly those in niche markets, including those involved in sports competing with “the Big Four,” as they build and maintain social relationships online.

**Keywords:** Sports, Social Media, Branding, Women's Sports, Netnography.

### 1. Introduction and Purpose

October 2015 marked the start of the inaugural season of the National Women's Hockey League (NWHL), the first professional women's hockey league in North America (its Canadian counterpart, the Canadian Women's Hockey League –CWHL– does not pay its players). The NWHL will try to survive in a sporting industry that has been difficult for women's leagues, with one women's basketball league folding before the men's NBA helped the creation of the WNBA, two women's soccer leagues folding since the 1999 World Cup, and one women's softball league folding before being revived with only six teams in 2004.

One of the things challenging women's leagues from getting established is the lack of both quantity and quality of women's sports coverage in the media, which has been widely documented for more than 30 years (Boutilier and San Giovanni, 1983; Cooky, Messner & Musto, 2015; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Musto, Cooky & Messner, 2017). However, the creation of Web 2.0, which eased media interactivity, and the subsequent social networks

that emerged have allowed athletes and leagues to communicate directly with their targeted audience without the need for traditional media.

With the recent technological and societal advances of social media on a global basis, multidirectional engagement with audiences has become a huge focus for businesses and brands (Christodoulides, Jevons, & Bonhomme, 2012; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxon, 2012; Men & Tsai, 2012; Sanderson, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011). Scholars have previously stated that fans heavily base their identities on the fortunes of the team they follow (Schweitzer, et al., 1992; Haught, 2014). The central theme to this paper concerns how the new teams within the NWHL will use social media to promote the team and build a fan base.

Using a grounded theory approach, the present study employs a digital participant observation, following the netnography (Kozinets, 2002; Muñiz&Schau, 2007) process, of the Twitter pages of the newly founded National Women’s Hockey League’s four teams—the Boston Pride, the Buffalo Beauts, the Connecticut Whale and the Metropolitan Riveters (former New York Riveters). Modeled on the ethnographic method, a netnography requires the researcher to study an online community over an extended period of time, identifying the field and taking notes to then analyze the data.

Through this method, the present study seeks to answer how teams from a new league, which must fight gender stereotypes and overcome the financial challenges most minor sports leagues face, use Twitter to build brand communities, and what types of messages on these pages build fan engagement. This study furthers social media research by exploring how communities are established online — an essential part of advertising, public relations, and marketing — and examining ways newly established entities can engage fans with their brand. It will help social media practitioners, particularly those in niche markets, including those involved in sports competing with “the Big Four” (men’s basketball, baseball, football, and hockey) professional sports, as they build and maintain social relationships online.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Gender, Sports and Media Coverage

Although gender inequality has somewhat eroded in American society, it is still greatly central to the sports world, despite the gap narrowing in athletic participation, especially since Title IX was enacted in 1972. What Cooky et al. (2015) have called “conservative gender ideologies, structured inequities, and sex segregation” (p. 19) all persevere in sports, facilitating the hegemony of boys and men over girls and women (Cooky et al., 2015; Musto, 2014, Musto et al., 2017). Without doubt, women at the elite level are better than the average male, but these female athletes still face gender stereotyping when breaking boundaries and participating alongside men of being too manly or a lesbian (Cahn, 1993; Krane, 1996; Sartore& Cunningham, 2009).

This gender inequality is in part fuelled by traditional gender stereotypes, which place women as the weaker sex, or as Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011) phrased it in her book *The Second Sex*, as the “Other.” This hegemonic masculinity represents a struggle for women, who struggle to achieve the same level of benefits men receive –airtime, salaries, prize winning and respect. Large discrepancies in the prize money and salaries women receive compared to their male counterparts have brought female athletes to fight back in public ways. In soccer, for instance, several players on the U.S. women’s national team sued U.S. soccer seeking equal pay (Spies-Gans, 2016). A year later, the ice hockey women’s national team went on strike in an attempt to receive a financial raise and, more importantly, gain the same logistical support their male counterpart get from USA Hockey (Zirin, 2017).

The large financial gap between male and female athletes can be easily explained by the differences in sponsorship and media rights. Indeed, one of the greatest hardships for

women's sports to overcome is the small amount of media coverage they get. Scholars have studied the issue for more than three decades in traditional media and found that women's sports are greatly underrepresented compared to men's sports, and that female athletes are often framed as women rather than athletes, while the opposite is true for male athletes – in both print (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Christopherson, Janning, & McConnell, 2002; Hilliard, 1984; Eastman & Billings, 2000; Allen & Frisby, 2017) and on television (Adams & Tuggle, 2004; Cooky et al., 2015; Musto et al., 2017; Turner, 2014; Whiteside & Hardin, 2011). The one exception comes every four years during the summer Olympics when female athletes receive as much or sometimes even more media coverage than male athletes do (Billings & Young, 2015; Coche & Tuggle, 2016).

The trend seems to continue online on news pages (Coche, 2015; Kian, Mondello, & Vincent, 2009) and non-profit collegiate websites (Cooper & Cooper, 2009; Sagas, Cunningham & Ashley, 2000).

Interestingly, Berdahl, Uhlmann and Bai (2015) found that countries with less gender inequality won more medals in men and women's competitions in the Olympics. This suggests that societal promotions of gender equality result in a more competitive and productive sphere. Today, to try to fight the masculine hegemony in the sports world, women's sports advocates have turned to the Internet and social media, hoping to narrow the gender gap (Evans, 2009; Bruce & Hardin, 2014; LaVoi & Calhoun, 2014; Ravel, 2015).

## **2.2 Social Media and Sports**

The importance of social networking in today's world cannot be denied. As of August 2015, social networking sites are used by 2.8 billion global social media users, reaching about 37% of the world's population and as much as 74 percent of its online population (Forer, 2017). As such, social media have become a key tool for both marketers and organizations as they try to connect with their fans and target audiences (Armstrong, Delia & Giardina, 2016; Haight, 2014; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxon, 2012). This, Hutton and Fosdick (2011) found in a longitudinal study of world social media use, can drive brand loyalty.

Like most things in life, social media come in various shapes. Some have a single purpose – for instance Instagram focuses on sharing visuals, photos and videos, only– while others have several purposes such as Facebook or Twitter through which one can share information, photos, videos, and links. These multitask networking sites receive more traffic than single-purposed social networks, and microblogs, such as Twitter, are central to “media meshing,” the phenomenon in which a user engages in the same media content with multiple devices, at least one of which is connected to the Internet (Hutton & Fosdick, 2011). A simple example of media meshing is someone who responds on Twitter to a show s/he is watching on television, using a hashtag (#) associated with the show. This, of course, happens during sports events as well. Overall, these tactics help engage people and strengthen an organization's communication with its target audience, which in turn can build loyalty and reputation (Haight, 2014).

In sports, Twitter is the most used tool by athletes to interact with their fans and wider audience (Pegoraro, 2010). The rise of social media has allowed fans to identify with their idols and get a glimpse into their everyday life (Sanderson, 2010). Facebook allows users to “like” material, but Twitter has been able to facilitate conversations, so teams, players and fans use it more. This provides fans with a platform for “fan identification” or “attachment to a team” (Trail, Fink, & Anderson, 2000).

## **2.3 Media and Hockey**

North American media generally frame hockey as a men's sport “about physicality, body contact, and self-sacrificing masculinity” (Mason, Hill & MacLatchy, 2010). The National Hockey League (NHL, which is generally a men's league), created in 1917, is an established

league with 31 teams in four conferences. This clearly gives it a much better audience than the NWHL, because of the vast geographic advantage it has and this undoubtedly provides more media coverage of games, something the NWHL needs to aspire to. Much like the NWHL, which launched with four teams in the northeast, the NHL originally started with six teams: Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Montreal, New York and Toronto.

The average salary for NHL players is \$2.58 million (Badenhausen, 2015), so unlike their female counterparts, male players evidently do not need another job to support themselves. This allows men to focus solely on playing hockey, which in turn, makes them more likely to become visible sports stars and, therefore, brands for teams to capitalize on through social media and advertising. Smitko (2012) says knowledge is built on a relationship, which builds social capital, something the NWHL must attain. By not utilizing the interactivity of social media, teams or brands cannot effectively engage with their community and wider audience (Lovejoy, Waters & Saxon, 2012). This capital is something that the NWHL may struggle to get. The most marketable player in the history of the women's game is Hilary Knight (Berkman, 2015). When the NWHL started, Knight had fewer than 60,000 followers on Twitter, while Alex Ovechkin, the Russian star of the Washington Capitals, had more than 1.1 million. However, Knight's team, The Boston Pride had only 7,000 at the start of the season. Two years later, in November 2017, Knight has more than 71,000 followers, but the Boston Pride account still has fewer than 13,000. In fact, Knight's following is larger than all four NWHL teams' Twitter accounts combined, which suggests players will probably be used to build both the league's and the teams' brands.

Unsurprisingly, there is also a stark contrast in the number of Twitter followers between WNHL teams and NHL ones. As an example, taking the Metropolitan Riveters (approximately 13,000) versus the men's New York Rangers (more than 1.3 million) followers illustrates how male-dominated the sport is, and why the NWHL faces an uphill task of growing its social media to survive as a league.

Much of social media derives from user-generated content today, including networks such as Facebook and Twitter. This can drive discussions, hence the importance to engage with your audience. Regular communication and content through social media pages of a brand allows brand development, and ultimately a "persona" to develop for users to identify with (Haught, 2014). The goal of this study is to determine how the WNHL is building its "persona" in order to explore how the professional women's hockey community is being established online.

#### **4. Method**

To analyze the fan communities, researchers followed the Twitter communities of the Boston Pride, Buffalo Beauts, Connecticut Whale, and Metropolitan Riveters during the 2015-16 and 2016-17 seasons in netnographic observation. Twitter was selected because of its tendency to foster ongoing conversation, opposed to Facebook, which is more one-way (Haught, 2014).

A netnography is similar to an ethnography, except the field of study exists virtually. Netnography (Kozinets, 2002; Muniz & Schau, 2007) seeks to understand the culture and norms of a community that exists online. In the present study, netnography is used to understand the norms of fan and team communications in the NWHL.

Researchers logged posts to the four teams' Twitter accounts, as well as mentions and hashtags during the 2015 and 2016 seasons. Then, researchers used an open coding scheme to identify themes typical for posts. Coders used memoing (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) to note recurrent themes and their supporting evidence, as well as to assure the study's internal validity.



## 5. Findings

Researchers identified six themes: (1) Game, (2) Athlete as Athlete, (3) Athlete as Person, (4) Team Building, (5) League Building, and (6) Promotion. Undercurrent in all these themes include entertainment value, inclusion, and gender equality.



Figure 1: The Buffalo Beauts' Twitter account is the NWHL account with the most sophisticated graphics, akin to an NHL team's account, which gives the women's league credibility.

Game theme posts represented action in the game itself, including scores, hits, time remaining, and outcomes. Game posts are information driven, and hashtags tend to reference the game itself, such as #BOSvsBUF. In this context, the NWHL content is no different than any other sports league (Haught, 2014). The Game posts seek to update fans, and build fan engagement with the update. For example, Figure 1 shows game posts from the Buffalo Beauts (NWHL) and the Pittsburgh Penguins (NHL). On the left, a branded BEAUTS SCORE graphic catches the user's attention, and the hashtag #chasethecrown encourages people to create a movement built around the team's goal to win the WNHL championship. This image mirrors those posted by teams in the men's league; for example, the Pittsburgh Penguins (right) posted a similar image in 2017. These kinds of game graphics, showing statistics and outcomes, are typical visuals posted by Buffalo during and after games. However, teams had a distinct visual style for these posts. The Metropolitan Riveters posted a simple logo graphic, while the Connecticut Whale and Boston Pride focused on text and photo posts (Figure 2). Graphics require a bit more technical skill to create, while photo and text posts are simple.



Figure 2: Other NWHL teams (Metropolitan Riveters, Connecticut Whale and Boston Pride) use simpler graphics or photos of the game when providing score updates, neither of which require as much skill as the Beauts' posts.

The style for game posts was consistent throughout the two years, except for Buffalo, which upgraded to the NHL-comparable graphics in 2016-17. The Riveters moved from New York to New Jersey, and thus adopted the Metropolitan name for 2016-17. They then upgraded

from text/photo posts for the second season of the league. However, the technical skill needed to create the Riveters' graphics is lower than for Buffalo. In both cases, however, the graphics are generic enough to have been pre-made, while the one for the Penguins was clearly created live, with photographs from the present game. Obviously, the Penguins have a larger social media team than the NWHL teams do; however, the intrinsic value of the more complex graphic used by the Beauts gives the team's social media feed more credibility than the others. These advanced aesthetics position the NWHL and Beauts as a peer to major sports leagues and franchises, while the less complex graphics of the Whale, Pride, and Riveters diminish the league's status. Further, the Beauts have made Twitter posting more frequent than the other teams, with more than 8,000 tweets since 2015, to fewer than 5,000 for the Pride; the Riveters had about 7,000 and the Whale had about 6,000 in the same time span. Game posts also typically included popular memes, ranging from Linda Belcher from "Bob's Burgers" to a squealing-for-joy Jonah Hill. These popular culture references position the NWHL as in-the-know and part of the larger ongoing meme conversation.

Athlete as Athlete posts showed the players in uniform or in game preparation. These types of posts position athletes in the spotlight for their athletic ability, not their personality. Some of these posts represented players in live game action, while others showed game or practice action after the game or practice. This pattern is in contrast to female athletes' typical visual self-presentation on social media, which tend to highlight the athletes' personal lives and/or looks, rather than their athletic prowess (Coche, 2017; Emmons & Mocarski, 2014; Geurin-Eaglemana & Burch, 2016). Athlete as Athlete posts were common year-round, but tended to be related to events associated with the season, such as with all-star voting, game recaps, and player stats. Figure 3 shows examples of these types of posts, with Connecticut Whale players and Coach Lisa Giovanelli practicing, or the Boston Pride linking to a game recap.

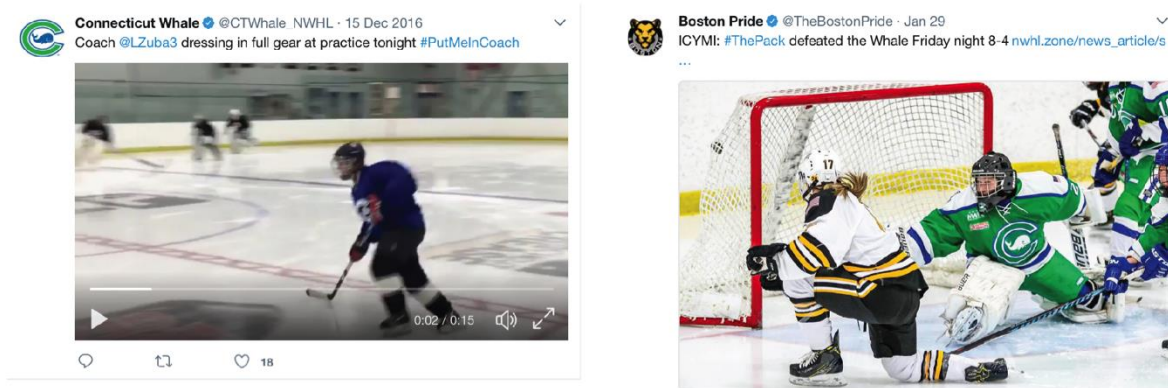


Figure 3: Many tweets from the NWHL and its teams show the players on the ice, sometimes at practice (left) and other times in games (right).

Athlete as athlete posts increased during the two-year study period. In the 2015-16 season, posts tended to focus on athletes connected to engagement in some way, such as positioning athletes as role models or friends. That style of post changed for 2016-17, when athletes were also identified for their athletic appearance and ability.



Figure 4: NWHL players are portrayed not only as athletes, but also as human beings. On the left, Connecticut Whaleplayer Elena Orlando wears a whale-themed sweater during an ugly sweater party promotion. On the right, some Buffalo Beauts teammates play in a gingerbread house at a Dunkin Donuts, an NWHL sponsor.

Conversely, several posts coded as Athlete as Person, which showed the athletes dressed in non-athletic clothing living their daily lives, or doing something team related that did not pertain to hockey. These posts were common, but not as common as the other post types. Although showing athletes as people adds to their humanity, it reduces their perceived athletic focus (Coche, 2017).

The NWHL has generally not followed the convention of focusing on women athletes' personal lives, but has balanced these types of posts with Athlete as Athlete posts. Figure 4 shows two examples of Athlete as Person posts, both of which are connected to a promotion of some kind, either as a game or with the league sponsor. These types of posts did draw a higher number of favorites and retweets than other types, however.



Figure 5: NWHL teams interact with one another on Twitter through replies, quotes and retweets. This helps build a league culture, which fans can feel a part of.

Team Building posts were less frequent than other types, but tended to be the primary means of interaction between teams. Because the league is new, teams do not have established rivalries or much history. Further, because there are only four teams, same-team interaction is frequent. Thus, teams react to each other by retweeting, quoting, and replying. Figure 5 shows Team Building posts from the Connecticut Whale and Metropolitan Riveters. These posts had varying levels of engagement, but did serve to recognize the collective nature of the league. Because it is new, the NWHL needs all of its teams to thrive so it can continue to operate. Fans need to become engaged with teams and the league to have a long-term commitment, and seeing the interaction and traditions of a team spectators might have watched just once can help fans to feel like they are a part of something bigger than just their hometown team. As Haught (2014) found, fans tend to identify with their teams, and identify their teams with their communities. Because all NWHL teams are concentrated in the Northeastern United States, communities have a natural, geographic affinity/confrontation. Boston and Buffalo tend to have rivalries with New York teams; therefore, rivalries within



the Beauts, Riveters, and Pride are natural. For Connecticut, the team presents the singular pro sports franchise in the state (the NHL's Hartford Whalers left to become the Carolina Hurricanes in Greensboro and then Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1997). Thus, the Whale are building on an established brand, and repositioning that affinity and pride as Connecticut's team.

League Building posts focused on raising awareness of the league itself and women's hockey in general. Posts in #FutureDraftPickFriday (Figure 6) show young athletes, or even babies, dressed in hockey gear. These posts encourage girls to start or keep playing hockey, even through high school and college, to eventually play in the NWHL. Because the existence of professional sports for women is not inevitable, girls might think of their youth hockey as a hobby, rather than a potential life path. By supporting these girls as Future Draft Picks, girls and other fans can see the NWHL as an aspirational goal. This kind of promotion gives the league credibility and perceived longevity, despite its newness.



Figure 6: Teams regularly posted photos of fans and young athletes for the league-wide Future Draft Pick Friday campaign.

Other League Building posts showed the values for which the NWHL has decided to stand for. Among them, the league unsurprisingly shows a holistic support for women's hockey and its athletes. Indeed, similar to #FutureDraftPickFriday, posts encouraging college teams and the national team show overall support for women's hockey athletes. Figure 7 shows the Buffalo Beauts retweeting a family in Beauts shirts representing three athletes who played for Robert Morris University in Pittsburgh; another post promotes the U.S. Women's National Team, which had some Beauts athletes on it, in a game against Canada. Teams also posted to promote the NWHL All-Star Game in February 2017 in Pittsburgh.

Other values that the NWHL promoted on Twitter included the fight against hegemonic masculinity in sport: not only does the league and its teams want to increase the influence of women in a perceived men's sport, but teams also showed support for the LGBTQ community, for instance, by posting photos of rainbow tape on hockey sticks or speaking of partnerships at Pride festivals. Among the four teams, the Buffalo Beauts, whose center Harrison Browne is transgender, particularly addressed these issues.



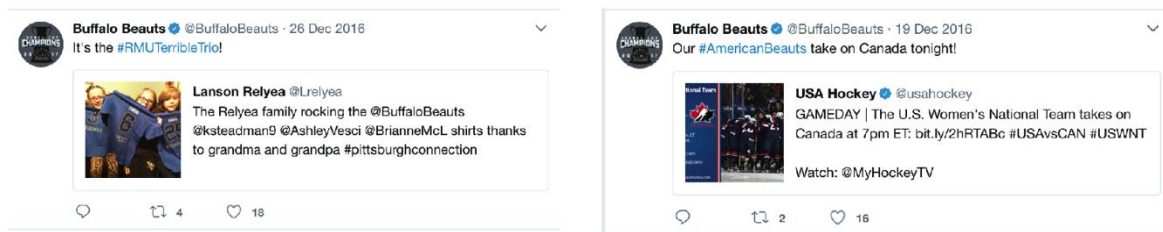


Figure 7: The NWHL and its teams show a holistic support for women’s hockey in general in an effort to grow the sport.

Finally, Promotion posts invited fans to attend games or engage with the team. Game posts were the focus of the conversation on game days, with Promotional posts leading up to and following the game. Fans were enticed with ticket discounts, teddy bear donations, military appreciation, and partnership events with Dunkin Donuts. Figure 8 includes two typical examples of this genre of posts, encouraging fans to buy merchandise or attend games. Promotional posts functioned as organic advertising, yet drew some engagement.



Figure 8: Promotional posts sold merchandise and encouraged game attendance.

Overall, through six identified themes (Game, Athlete as Athlete, Athlete as Person, Team Building, League Building, and Promotion), the NWHL teams use Twitter to build a community supportive of women’s hockey as an entertaining and inclusive space. However, the teams’ accounts too often represented one-way communication. Teams retweeted fans’ posts, and fans certainly engaged the posts with favourites and retweets, but teams too rarely replied to fans’ posts and hashtags. Instead, they focused on promoting the game of hockey itself and telling the story of their athletes as both athletes and people. These posts showed women athletes as worthy of admiration and attention, which contrasts with previous research analysing sports media content (Boutilier and SanGiovanni, 1983; Cooky et al., 2015; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Musto et al., 2017).

### Discussion and Conclusion

Although the NWHL began as #GrowingTheGame, the two-year-old league has grown into a model for fan engagement and women’s sports promotion. Teams are actively engaging fans in Twitter with live, in-game updates, pregame promotions, community engagement, women empowerment, and acceptance. Teams emphasized their athletes as athletes first, and followed by showing their athletes as people. Ultimately, NWHL teams are finding their groove in their Twitter postings, and fans are responding.

Primarily, tweets focus on the sport itself. The bulk of tweets are in-game updates with scores and reactions to action. These posts use photographs, graphics, text, and memes from popular culture. Such a blended approach shows NWHL teams are interested in engaging with fans in a fan-style conversation, even if the tactics need more refinement to be comparable to peer professional sports leagues. Indeed, the NWHL teams speak more often the way fans would rather than the way brands would. Typically, athletics brands speak only with official communications and only branded graphics (Haught, 2014). Established brands often tend to speak at consumers with information, thus placing the brand above its followers and the followers as prime receivers of the brand content; NWHL teams tweet as fans themselves, cheering and celebrating rather than purely informing. This humanization of the brand differs from mainstream professional sports accounts, but might be appropriate for an audience made of millennials and younger generations, which seem to be the NWHL teams' target audience, as evidenced by the #FutureDraftPickFriday promotions and teams' heavy use of youth-targeted pop culture references.

Moreover, the athletic focus shows NWHL teams use social media as a space of resistance where women's sports can thrive and female athletes are perceived as athletes primarily rather than women (Evans, 2009; Bruce & Hardin, 2014; LaVoi & Calhoun, 2014; Ravel, 2015), which contrasts with previous research of sports media content. Because the teams further fight against masculine hegemony through pro-LGBTQ tweets, they also use social media as a space of resistance for causes that go beyond hockey. NWHL teams shared such posts freely on Twitter, addressing issues with compassion and support.

While the teams do not capitalize on the interaction Twitter enables, they do take advantage of the fact that mainstream media can be bypassed. The teams speak to their fans and potential fans directly, reaching as many people as possible through various tools: a conversational tone, pop culture references, multimedia and supportive language toward minority communities, including the transgender community that is so often excluded from sports (Owen, Mitchell & Somerville, 2017).

While the NWHL still needs time to establish itself as a long-term professional league, the teams' retweets, replies and quotes of fellow teams, players and fans, have allowed the league to create a small Twitter community that promotes equality: not only can everyone love hockey, everyone can play hockey because hockey will welcome everyone. In fact, while gender equality could have easily been hypothesized as a finding given the subject of the study (the women's league of a perceived male sport), overarching equality was a recurrent underlying value in NWHL teams' tweets. Regardless of age, sex, gender, citizenship, or race, it seems that the teams wanted their online audience to feel like a part of the community. Even children were given a moment to shine: The #FutureDraftPickFriday implies that children today are the future of hockey tomorrow, so investing in them is just as important as investing in current athletes. And because these current athletes are framed as people, not just as athletes, fans are given an opportunity to feel like they are – or at least they can be – on the same level as their idols.

While the present study offers a valuable contribution to the field, it is limited in its scope. It focuses on the active Twitter feeds for the four NWHL teams during the two-year span since the league's inception. As the league begins to grow, it is likely these themes will evolve. Future research should examine the evolution of these themes, as well as the style of posting on the athletes' individual accounts. Further, comparison of the NWHL to its male counterpart, the NHL, or to other established women's professional sports leagues, especially the WNBA, which is the longest-running professional women's sports league in the U.S., would help determine if the uncovered themes are unique to hockey, women's sports, or the WNHL.

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