Toxicity Within the Women's Sport Social Media Discourse

Megan C. Piché, BSM (Honours)

Applied Health Sciences (Sport Management)

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Faculty of Applied Health Sciences, Brock University
St Catharines, Ontario

Abstract[1]

By applying a multidimensional approach, the purpose of this integrated article thesis was to explore the prevalence of toxicity within the women's sport social media (SM) discourse. Specifically, the study sought to uncover how toxicity manifested in online networks as well as the influence of this activity on the fan experience and their behaviours. Two theoretical frameworks were adopted to understand toxicity from multiple lenses, including network theory and (digital) imagined communities as they pertain to the women's sport context on SM. Results from the research revealed several key aspects; first, in relation to the volume of posts collected from two SM platforms, toxicity rates were considerably high for the women's sport leagues. Second, when discussing the fan experience within women's sport online communities, the presence of toxic activity was noted by participants but, it did not negatively affect their continued use of or intentions to interact in these spaces. Rather, fans in the study increased engagement on SM to continue supporting women's sport despite the potential for toxic reaction. The findings are promising for the future of women's sport as some fans are becoming more deliberately involved in online spaces thus, offering insights for sport practitioners. Deeper theoretical and conceptual understanding of the dark elements of SM is provided and the study further highlighted the utility of adopting multiple frameworks in complement to explore a complex issue across various other online discourses.

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[1] ***Keywords:*** *women's sport, toxicity, social media discourse, fan networks*

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Chapter I

Introduction

Imagine you are at a social event, like a casual dinner party. You are enjoying mingling with friends, familiar acquaintances, and meeting new people. You begin engaging in pleasant conversation over typical small-talk topics such as the weather, your weekend plans, or the latest sport match score. Then the conversation takes a turn into a more controversial topic like health policy or politics. The discussion does not seem as open and free flowing as before and the overall feeling becomes awkward. In uncomfortable situations such as discussing contentious topics, people often become more closed and defensive of their opinions or may even find ways to change the direction of the conversation.

Attitudes and opinions can vary significantly on socially divisive issues, such as political stance, views on public health, and religious beliefs, which can create difficult situations if these subjects are brought up in conversation (Aggarwal-Shifellite, 2022). When there is no clear, widely shared social opinion during discussions on certain topics, feelings of threat or discomfort may arise (Simons & Green, 2018). Further, when discussion topics are perceived to split social opinion or division, Simons and Green (2018) argued that individuals may have a higher level of guarded response because of this uncertainty. This is not to say that disagreement and division are necessarily bad as for some social issues like democratic processes, they are integral components. However, complications can emerge when this polarization becomes extreme and toxic (Moore-Berg et al., 2020).

Forms of digital communication like social media (SM) offer many opportunities for users to connect to one another and engage in discourse over given topics (Mastromartino et al., 2020; Naraine et al., 2021). Discourse has been framed in this work as the sequence of sentences

and the ways in which they connect and relate to each other across time both orally and in writing and, as individuals speak or write, they choose which words and phrases they use to communicate (Valentini et al., 2016). In SM, language exists through online communicative interactions (herein referred as discourse), where the act of creating and sharing content can carry specific forms, meanings, and in different contexts which affects how others perceive, relate, and act on those discursive structures (Valentini et al., 2016). With respect to topics that produce critical attention, Valentini and colleagues (2016) further explained that discourse shapes the SM environment and has an influential role on relational outcomes. Yet, there is undoubtedly a dark side to new media (Baccarella et al., 2018). As more individuals are brought into public digital spaces, they are able to discuss their mutual likes (and dislikes) (O'Hallarn et al., 2018). When these disagreements begin to dominate discourse on SM, the potential for toxicity grows.

Toxicity refers to extreme attitudes or behaviours of an individual against another with the intent to harm that person to some degree (Sheth et al., 2021). In the last decade, increased attention has been placed on toxicity and the "dark web" to explore how those behaviours influence others within networks (cf. Fan et al., 2021; Gruzd et al., 2020; Gruzd & Attarwala, 2021). Dark characteristics of SM as described by Baccarella et al. (2018) include sharing misinformation or inappropriate content, exploiting or targeting others in the digital sphere, and manipulating relational dynamics among others. A common form of toxicity is internet trolling in which "an individual deliberately initiates quarrels or angers people online in an attempt to distract and stir up discord" (Fan et al., 2021, p.3). Further, these behaviours are facilitated by the ease of SM to share unfiltered thoughts and very little repercussion. In online networks, animosity has also increased due to the rise in inter/outer-group conflict related to socially

divisive topics due to the role of emotion and individual or group identities in sharing on these sites, which may also be considered as toxic (Rathje et al., 2021). Although SM promotes discussion among users and affords the capacity to debate over topics, discourse can quickly become problematic when users post content that is emotionally charging or at the expense of others (Konikoff, 2021).

Much like the polarization of political partisanship, the same can be said for sport as fans develop strong affiliations to their favorite teams and brands (Frederick et al., 2021). Sport is a unique phenomenon that drives intense emotional relationships between fans and their favorite teams and/or athletes (Newson et al., 2022). Further, the degree to which these fan identities are expressed to the public may change depending on the environment in which an individual is situated and whom they are interacting with (Osborne & Coombs, 2013). The high level of passion and affiliation for a sport entity can also lead supporters to become fanatical and exhibit toxic attitudes such as hating opposing teams and their fans, and acting upon those sentiments (Breger et al., 2019; Vallerand et al., 2008). In the last decade, as SM has risen in popularity and use globally, the lines between social issues and sport have blurred, allowing the industry to become more heavily influenced by societal affairs (Frederick et al., 2021). As nationalism and sport continue to be combined, partisan rhetoric can further spill into fan culture and discourse (Sorek & White, 2016). When divisive topics like patriotism bleed into an already emotionally charged industry like professional sport, the consequences can be toxic when in-group cohesion causes out-group animosity like in team rivalry (Newson et al., 2022).

Toxicity has become a growing concern in the sport industry as more individuals use SM platforms to voice their thoughts and opinions, of which may or may not be accurate (Rossini et al., 2021). As sport organizations continue to grow their SM presence for marketing and

communication, more people are brought to digital sphere to engage with their favourite sport entities (O'Hallarn et al., 2019). Although SM creates spaces where sport fans across the world can connect, the ease of access to digital networking has also significantly increased the risk of toxicity to enter these spaces and become consumed with extreme passion or obsession that can harm others (Kavanagh & Jones, 2017). Current research has demonstrated the prevalence of abuse, racism, and harassment online in sport both towards athletes and among fans (i.e., Antunovic, 2019; Cleland, 2014; Matz & Bowes, 2021). In recent years, fans have unprecedented access to information about almost any sport organization or athlete and with this heightened knowledge, the potential of toxicity surfacing grows in attempt to prove oneself as "more of a fan" than another or invalidate others in the network (Hirshon, 2020).

In the contemporary sport context, there have historically been long-standing practices of gender discrimination, including the polarizing debate over the legitimacy of women's sport as "elite" (Rogers et al., 2022). Women's leagues and sporting programmes have traditionally been underrepresented and marginalized, which further contributes to the already highly divisive sport landscape (e.g., Coche, 2016; Cooky et al., 2015; Fink, 2015; Pegoraro et al., 2019; Vann, 2014). Several scholars have conducted longitudinal studies exploring the coverage of women's sport in televised media, finding that the broadcasting rate of which is abysmal (Bowes et al., 2021; Cooky et al., 2013, 2021). On top of that, of the stories broadcasted, the content focused on the objectification of women athletes in ways that were unrepresentative or respectful of their athletic abilities (Sherwood et al., 2019). These issues produce a discouraging outlook for the growth of women's sport in traditional media (Symons et al., 2021). As a method to overcome some of these barriers, SM provides an opportunity for women's sport entities to bypass

traditional broadcasting and more intimately connect with their fans (Pegoraro et al., 2019; Piché & Naraine, 2022).

However, SM also comes with its own challenges for women's sport to gain equitable opportunities for exposure. Although digital networking offers ways for women athletes and brands to self-represent (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012), the way in which media outlets frame women's sport related content is also important to consider. How women's sport is framed in the media can be very influential in its acceptance within the industry as well as its potential to grow and gain new fans (Fink, 2015). Sport media often presents sports as masculine (e.g., ice hockey, football) and feminine (e.g., figure skating, gymnastics) to align with traditional gender stereotypes (Kane et al., 2013; Scheadler, 2018; Vezzali et al., 2022). These gender stereotypes reinforce female inferiority within the sport industry and place even more strain on women's sport's attempt to grow (Romney & Johnson, 2020). Women's sports are often depicted as less exciting and slower than men's, perpetuating the lack of interest for this vertical (Pope, 2018; Scheadler, 2018). Women athletes have been traditionally framed and portrayed in ways that are not reflective of their athletic abilities, but rather, the narrative focuses on sexualizing and objectifying them through a male biased lens (Adá Lameiras & Rodríguez-Castro, 2020; Pope, 2018; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Women's sport continues to be covered in ways that lessen its importance and entertainment qualities, contributing to the ongoing gender disparity (Cooky et al., 2015; O'Shea & Maxwell, 2021).

In addition to their representation in the media, women's sport leagues are also questioned on their validity as a professional industry (Toffoletti et al., 2021). Further, the gendered discourse of women's general participation in sport often includes women fans not discerned as "real fans" (Sveinson et al., 2019). Perceived genuine and authentic fandom are in

part due to gender stereotyping of femininity with respect to both fans and athletes, in both off- and online environments (i.e., Asada & Ko, 2019; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016). Many women fans feel threatened by gender norms in sport fandom which can affect their consumer behaviours in various sport sectors (Sveinson et al., 2019). This notion can be further applied within online contexts where SM users may feel they need to express their fandom in performative ways to be accepted by the male-dominated discourse (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro et al., 2019).

Toxicity has become an increasing problem as women sport fans are experiencing harassment and changing their behaviours, such as leaving more public online spaces (Hynes & Cook, 2013). Concomitantly, the creation of inclusive spaces for new fan groups to share authentic identities has also proliferated in attempt to exclude abusers (Fenton et al., 2021; Hardin & Whiteside, 2012). But these spaces are also susceptible to the dark side of SM. For example, in some soccer-related Twitter threads, toxic behaviours persist that reinforce male hegemony and sexism towards female fans or those who express femininity in their fandom (Baccarella et al., 2018; Hynes & Cook, 2013). It is therefore worth further investigation on how individuals interact within online communities specifically in the women's sport context to avoid toxicity and to engage in more inclusive spaces. If dark elements of SM continue to dominate the discourse, perhaps this avenue of communication is not viable to promote and grow this vertical.

Thus, the purpose of this thesis was to explore the prevalence of toxicity within the women's sport discourse and its influence on fan experiences and behaviours in online communities. SM offers opportunities for women's sport to overcome barriers and continue improving its position in the sport landscape. However, if these spaces are deemed "toxic" and negative, it may hinder the fan experience. Accordingly, this thesis sought to understand fans' perceptions of virtual platforms related to women's sport and whether toxic interactions in these

digital settings affected their overall experience or intentions to engage. By doing so, this research extended our knowledge of women's sport fan communities through answering the following questions:

RQ₁: How does toxicity influence the experiences and behaviours of women's sport fans in online communities?

RQ₂ₐ: How toxic is the conversation within the women's sport discourse and what does it look like?

RQ₂ᵦ: How do fans experience interactions in women's sport online communities and is their continued expression of fan identity or behaviours affected by toxicity?

To address the aforementioned issue, the research was theoretically rooted in Network Theory (NT) and (Digital) Imagined Communities (DIC). Relationships and connections within networks were understood using NT (Borgatti & Foster, 2003), by exploring the existence of toxicity within women's sport discussion and how engagement in the network may be influenced by these attitudes, answering RQ₂ₐ. Toxic behaviours in these spaces, if not mediated by the SM sites or others active in the network, have the potential to dominate the conversations and therefore influence individuals' intentions to continue interacting. Along the same vein, DICs facilitate belonging and shared values that promote members' authentic self-expression and genuine connection (Kalman-Lamb, 2021; Lutz & Toit, 2014). DICs are often formed to counteract toxic behaviours occurring in other digital spaces but, it does not mean that these communities are immune from toxic activity (Fenton et al., 2021). This theoretical perspective aided to address RQ₂ᵦ by exploring the individual experience of being engaged in women's sport DICs and how interactivity within them affects their continued fan behaviours. Together, NT and

DIC assisted in understanding how toxic behaviours can influence members' intentions to interact in online spaces (RQ$_1$).

This research sought to explore some women's sport fans' experiences related to their networked connections. SM is a growing area of research interest in sport management and needs to be better understood in the women's sport context (Pegoraro & Taylor, 2021). The increased frequency of use of digital media to grow brands and increase exposure thus creates the need for scholarship to further explore how interactions within networks affect consumer behaviours. Current research has identified that fan engagement with women's sport entities in virtual spaces can improve the gender disparity in the professional sport landscape (e.g., McLachlan, 2019; Pegoraro et al., 2019, 2021). But at the same time, SM can be susceptible to toxic behaviours that have the potential to negatively affect this progress (Antunovic, 2019; Fenton et al., 2021; Lebel et al., 2021; Razack & Joseph, 2020). By uncovering how toxicity manifests in online communities and the influence of such on fan sentiments and/or behaviours in women's sport, scholars and practitioners can make appropriate decisions to combat this issue.

Theoretical Contributions. This integrated article thesis provided contributions within several theoretical frameworks. Its dual structure sought to extend knowledge related to the application of both NT and DIC in the sport management context (Bergholz, 2018; Gruzd et al., 2011), specifically as they relate to toxicity. This work adopted Social Network Analysis (SNA) and phenomenology to assist in the methodological approaches (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011; Quatman & Chelladurai, 2008a; Scott, 2017). The multidimensional design of this work offered a more rigorous understanding of women's sport fans' experiences in digital environments related to toxic discourse and demonstrated their practicality in sport management research. Specifically, this research explored the influence of toxicity on women's sport fans through two

studies, which is unique to masters' theses. The SNA approach undertaken by Chapter 2a explored toxicity that exists in digital networks specific to women's sport, thus advancing knowledge of NT and the dark side of SM in this context. Chapter 2b enhanced theoretical knowledge of DICs as they pertain to how some individuals in women's sport fan communities interpret toxicity and its influence on their intentions to interact within them. Findings from the two studies demonstrated their complementary use to further existing literature in the women's sport context.

Overview of Literature

Social Media

In the last decade, SM has become increasingly integrated as a marketing tool by brands in hopes of increasing exposure and generating revenue (Chu & Kim, 2011; Nisar et al., 2018; Voorveld, 2019; Zhang et al., 2011). For industry brands that may not naturally exist in the digital space, like automotive, household or jewelry, implementing promotional activities on SM significantly increases consumer awareness and strengthens its image (Bilgin, 2018). Technological advances and societal factors have grown the need for businesses of many different contexts to integrate digital methods in their communication strategies (Mastromartino et al., 2020). To remain competitive and simultaneously gain advantage in the industry, brands need to use innovative methods to connect with their consumers and fans.

Early SM scholarship defined it as an interactive channel for two-way interaction, communication and feedback that also provides instantaneous information to users (Marjoribanks & Farquharson, 2012; Terry, 2009; van Dijck, 2013). SM allows for "real-time interaction, reduced anonymity, a sense of propinquity, short response times, and the ability to 'time shift', or engage the social network whenever suits each particular member" (Kent, 2010,

p.645). SM distinguishes itself from other media outlets and/or internet-based digital

technologies for its ability to incite user-generated content creation (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Kaplan

& Haenlein, 2010; Voorveld, 2019). Due to the constantly evolving technological infrastructure

of mobile data, Carr and Hayes (2015) explained that SM creates environments where

individuals can engage with others in these networks, which reinforces the notion of electronic

propinquity, or psychological closeness based on shared interests.

SM platforms circumvent traditional restrictions posed by traditional media like news and

television broadcasting, allowing users to gather information and share it with others in a more

convenient way because of how accessible those sites are (Khang et al., 2012; Wilson et al.,

2012; Zhang et al., 2011). Further, SM overcomes the shortfalls of one-way information

dissemination of traditional media and rather, is designed for two-way communication so users

have greater power over information messaging and consumption (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010;

Hull & Lewis, 2014).

To date, Facebook has been regarded as the most popular social networking site used

worldwide (e.g., Achen et al., 2018; Miranda et al., 2014; Robinson, 2022; Voorveld, 2019). In

order to remain relevant and "humanize" their brand, businesses have integrated Facebook and

other SM platforms to elevate their marketing strategies (Carter & Levy, 2012). The platform's

infrastructure is comprised of individuals or public figures creating profile "pages" where they

may post to their page and users can send a "friend" request which needs to be accepted by the

other to see their created and shared content. Facebook has several engagement behaviours to

interact with content, including the like, comment and share functions (Kim & Yang, 2017). A

like is an emoticon response to a page or profile's post, indicating the user's reaction to the

content. The comment feature allows users to post commentary and engage more intimately with

the post and authoring profile. The share function acts as a way for a user to post the original profile's content to their own feed so their friends may also see the original post and engage with it. New features such as Facebook Live now permits users to video livestream to create more engaging and interactive content (Haimson & Tang, 2017), providing businesses with more opportunities to communicate with their consumers and integrate marketing strategy.

Facebook records the highest usage among its social networking competitors and boasts vast information-sharing capabilities but Meta, its parent conglomerate (Meta, 2021), is not without its problems. In recent years, Meta have faced scandal amid privacy concerns and data breaches (i.e., González-Pizarro et al., 2022; Paul, 2021; Tuttle, 2018). The social network was investigated for deceptive privacy policies and for obtaining data from millions of users to predict and influence voters in the 2016 American Presidential election (Tuttle, 2018). The outrage from the public prompted the U.S. Federal Trade Commission to launch an official investigation into Facebook's privacy practices which highlighted of the importance of stronger personal data protection and increased accountability for Big Data corporations. Following the scandal and class-action lawsuit, the push for increased regulation regarding personal data led to Facebook's pledge to more transparently update user terms and conditions with more stringent policies to protect individuals' privacy (González-Pizarro et al., 2022). Since then, scandal surrounding Facebook has only increased, with other investigations undertaken including potential political involvement and whistleblowing that exposed the company's knowledge of the harmful effects it was having on users and society (Paul, 2021).

Beyond the scandals facing the social networking site, there is also concern among users and the public regarding its ability to encourage misinformation-sharing. Facebook, and other more privately-operating networks can be characterized as echo chambers, which "can act as a

mechanism to reinforce an existing opinion within a group and, as a result, move the entire group toward more extreme positions" (Cinelli et al., 2021, p.1). Echo chambers have been identified within SM (and specifically Facebook) due to its ability to polarize users based on certain topics; Cinelli et al.'s (20121) study explored the network dimensions of Facebook and found that it showed higher homophilic patterns and biases in the information diffusion within these groups. Closed group features on SM contributes to the proliferation of potentially toxic discourses in which the biased opinions shared dominate the overall sentiment and reinforce extreme views (Bradshaw et al., 2021). Additionally, these echo chamber environments are also more likely to contain mis-, false and disinformation sharing (Cheng & Chen, 2021). Facebook's closed, more private operating system allows for individuals with strong views on topics to influence others, spread inaccurate information, and propagate negative sentiments.

Because of scandal and misinformation, the overreliance of SM research on Facebook leads to Voorveld's (2019) call to shift the focus to other platforms. Twitter is a popular SM platform with several characteristics that differ from Facebook that are as effective for communication and marketing of brands (e.g., Carr & Hayes, 2015; Culnan et al., 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Robinson, 2022). Twitter plays a town hall-like role, to facilitate more open discussion and real-time engagement among users (O'Hallarn et al., 2019). The platform's structure creates a space for open, deliberative democracy and, where Habermas' concept of public sphere can achieve its four key principles: (a) a space for the formation of public opinion, (b) allows access for all, (c) unrestricted conference through the freedom of assembly, expression, and publication of opinions, and (d) debate over the rules governing relations (O'Hallarn et al., 2018). Research conducted by O'Hallarn and colleagues (2018, 2019) demonstrated that Twitter's hashtag function creates public sphere-like conditions in which

individuals may engage in open dialogue without the need to join groups. Twitter links

individuals who may be previous acquaintances or strangers together, to take part in public

discourse (Hughes et al., 2012). Rather than users needing to be accepted into chat groups with

the risk of them becoming echo chambers of homogenous ideas or opinions, they can search for

discussions on topics of interest and join freely.

By design, Twitter is a platform where users create profiles and can follow other accounts

without requiring a request approval (O'Reilly & Milstein, 2012). Content generated on this app

is called a "tweet", which is a 140-character post and appears in a timeline on the home feed

interface (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The platform is intentionally designed to be user-friendly,

making it easy to write and read posts, meet new people and can be a useful marketing tool

businesses (O'Reilly & Milstein, 2012). Twitter engagement functions consist of likes,

comments, and shares, the latter known as a "retweet". The likes and retweets of users appear on

the feed of the followers, creating an opportunity for business-related marketing activities to

extend brand exposure by followers of the brand to interact with the content in ways that people

in their network will see (Culnan et al., 2010). Twitter can be highly effective in sharing

promotional content as well as facilitates more personal interactions between users and

organizations/individuals of most interest (Maderer et al., 2018; Naraine & Bakhsh, 2022).

In addition to seeking information and passing time, consumers have many motivations

for engaging on Twitter (Holton et al., 2014). Twitter users are able to follow organizations and

individuals of most interest to them, promoting interactivity through the opportunities to connect

with brands and celebrities (Li et al., 2019). Findings from Li et al.'s work (2019) revealed that

users are more active on Twitter when their needs are fulfilled such as their desire to interact

with others who share similar interests. Interactivity on Twitter is also connected to temporal

factors such as time of day, day of the week, month, and when particular events or momentous occasions are occurring (Naraine et al., 2019). The platform's ease of access and ability for users to instantaneously share information at their convenience promotes engagement in these more open spaces (Naraine & Bakhsh, 2022).

Twitter's unique hashtag element, denoted by the "#" symbol, helps people categorize posts on Twitter and connects users over shared topics (O'Reilly & Milstein, 2012). Users can efficiently retrieve information related to that topic as well as connect with each other based on shared interest of the hashtag (Cruickshank & Carley, 2020). These hashtagged conversations are stored in threads, which contain all posts using the common keyword so people can see what others are saying about that topic (Blaszka et al., 2012). Hashtags are of great value on Twitter as it provides a more quality experience to users when searching for specific topics of conversation, and interacting with those posts (Small, 2011). Scholars found that motivations of using hashtags include amusement, organization, information sharing, engaging in trends, bonding with other users, expanding profile exposure, and endorsing, among others (Rauschnabel et al., 2019). Twitter users have ease of access to hashtag threads and the interactivity within them promotes connection to a community. The platform's user-friendly infrastructure creates a digital environment where individuals can interact easily to each other on the topics that matter most.

Reddit is another SM platform in which the content is supplied by its users and facilitates the connection of individuals based on topics of interest (Elson Anderson, 2015). Initially created as a news aggregator, Reddit has evolved from just a place to post news content into an interactive virtual community (Moore & Mei-Ling Chuang, 2017). Subreddits, denoted as "r/[topic]", are virtual communities or groups created to facilitate discourse on topics. Users can create an account and subscribe to topics and join specific subreddits to engage with others

sharing similar interests (Straub-Cook, 2017). Much like Twitter threads, Reddit allows users to move across subreddits to create and interact with content in multiple places (Moore & Mei-Ling Chuang, 2017). Within subreddit conversations, users have the ability to vote on posts to demonstrate they like the content by clicking an up arrow to increase the visibility of the post, or conversely, a down arrow if they do not like the post (Elson Anderson, 2015). This platform promotes public sphere activity where individuals can share and interact with each other in an open space, as well as allows individuals without accounts to view content (Straub-Cook, 2017). According to Moore and Mei-Ling Chaung (2017), the rise in popularity of SM coupled with a growing online participatory culture has allowed for increased levels of engagement, collaboration, communication, and construction of social connections on Reddit.

In the digital space, users are brought to the center of interaction (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010), therefore increasing the need for organizations leveraging SM for marketing purposes build relationships with their consumers and better understand how to service them (Abeza et al., 2020; Achen, 2017). The unique characteristics of SM facilitate greater communication and information sharing efficiency, as well as enhanced entertainment for users (Billings et al., 2017). These features of SM platforms satisfy the goals of social networking to easily connect with other users to create and growth of online communities to share common interests (van Dijck, 2013). Organizations have the potential to tap into these online networked groups to engage more efficiently and effectively with their base, thereby increasing loyalty and awareness (Abeza et al., 2019; Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011).

Social Media and Sport

In the business context of sport, implementing strategic marketing has allowed for organizations to more intimately connect with their fans, innovate, and continuously adapt

content delivery that best meets the changing needs and desires of fans (e.g., Achen, 2017; Pronschinske et al., 2012). For instance, international soccer leagues have made improvements in their SM platform activities to enhance fan engagement and relationship-building (Miranda et al., 2014). This study found that European soccer teams placed more attention in cultivating two-way communication with their fans through more interactive content.

Twitter and the use of its hashtag feature facilitate the formation of networks of users who connect with one another to share their mutual interest (Gruzd et al., 2011). In an examination of a promotional hashtag for the Toronto Raptors NBA team, "#WeTheNorth", a close-knit community of fans sharing in passion for the team was produced (Naraine et al., 2021). Not only did users in this hashtag network identify as fans of the teams, but also were members in other brand-related communities influenced from their NBA affiliation. Naraine and colleagues (2021) highlighted the formation and prevalence of subcommunities in SM networks anchored by the salient brand. Many users in the #WeTheNorth thread did not actually follow the Raptors account but were brought into the network due to their interests in subcommunities thus, demonstrating that brands should continue to be active in digital networks and grow their connections. These findings suggest that commercial brands and sport organizations have the opportunity to engage in cross-promotional activities in virtual fan communities to expand their exposure as well as connect with users across various segments (Amin Beig & Khan, 2019; Naraine et al., 2021). The creation of networked communities on SM allows fans to connect to each other without having to physically be with those individuals (e.g., Feder, 2020; Grix et al., 2021; Kaplanidou et al., 2021; Nauright et al., 2020).

The use of the hashtag also allows for fans to self-identify and connect with others in the digital network (e.g., Clavio & Walsh, 2014; Hambrick & Pegoraro, 2014; Yan et al., 2019).

This identification serves as a membership ticket for users into an online community that connects them to others using the hashtag (Smith & Smith, 2012). Findings from Smith and Smith's (2012) research demonstrated that the Twitter feature allows fans to create custom hashtags to engage in commentary, share encouragement, and express fandom by creating proverbial "watercoolers" where users in these communities feel welcome and able to discuss the sport-related topic. Along the same vein, these motivations to join discourse highlighted the need for sport organizations to proactively operate in the digital space and leverage this feature by creating opportunities to interact with fans as well as build and maintain relationships (Stavros et al., 2014). Sport organizations and athletes can therefore capitalize on fans' desire to engage within these hashtag-driven communities by creating and delivering relevant content to them that encourages interactivity (Clavio & Walsh, 2014).

From a consumer behaviour perspective, recent work found that fans' perceptions and opinions matter and that they hold substantial influence in the digital sport landscape (Gong et al., 2021). Additionally, sport fans commonly use SM to share their positive experiences and sentiments, which have the potential to influence their networks (Wakefield & Bennett, 2018). The same can be inferred for negative experiences to also be shared, potentially hurting the sport entity's brand image and fan loyalty. Thus, there is a growing interest to further explore consumer motivations and behaviours from a deeper lens to better understand brand audiences and more effectively service their needs (Gong et al., 2021).

The Dark Side of Social Media

Social networking sites have many positive features that allow for individuals to connect with one another and share their thoughts (Kietzmann et al., 2011), but there is undoubtedly a "dark side" to SM that encompasses toxic behaviours among users, undermining the freedoms

and well-being of the communities the platforms were designed to serve (Baccarella et al., 2018). As Moore-Berg et al. (2020) argued, disagreement and division are not inherently bad and sometimes can be a positive contributor to learning and cooperation. It does however become problematic when the degree of disagreement and dislike are toxic and extreme. Initially developed by Kietzmann et al. (2011), Baccarella and colleagues (2018) adapted the SM functionality honeycomb framework to explore the dark sides of these characteristics and ramifications for users in the European business context.

The seven building blocks of SM as described by Baccarella et al. (2018) are conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, groups, and identity (see Figure 1.1). Conversations refer to the extent to which users engage with each other using SM, but the dark side of this building block is that misinformation and excessive or inaccurate conversation can occur in digital spaces. The sharing functionality is concerned with the degree to which users distribute, receive or exchange content on SM, but this also poses a risk of the shared content to be inappropriate, undesirable, or distributed without permission or consent from the holder of the intellectual property rights or individual within the multimedia (Baccarella et al., 2018). The presence functional block explores the location of a user in a SM network and the extent to which they know whether, where and when others in the network are accessible or active, however, this functionality can turn dark through the use of tracking users without their consent or awareness. Relationships are defined by Baccarella et al. (2018) as the mechanisms on SM that facilitate the building of connections between users. While SM helps to establish relationships, it also enables dark consequences such as stalking, harassment, and cyberbullying.

Baccarella et al. (2018) refer to reputation as the degree to which individuals can identify and influence the social standing of others within a SM network and can pose risks from

inappropriate content. For instance, the user sharing inappropriate content may have harm to their reputation or social standing online if they have offended others with what they posted. Additionally, users may also have the intent to harm the reputation of others online by sharing inappropriate or inaccurate content about them to attempt to discredit their profile. Groups are the function of SM that affords users to create communities and spaces in which they can share interest that can raise concerns over in-group and out-group animosity or hostility. A central aspect of SM is the ability for individuals to present identity, whether gender, age as well as more subjective details like their interests which also has downsides. The extent to which an individual shares about themself online, and on SM where it is encouraged to share as much information as possible, posing many risks (Baccarella et al., 2018). The dark sides of the other functionalities play roles in the identity block as the visibility, transparency, and interactivity of an individual online can affect their life offline.

Privacy and safety are major concerns raised by Baccarella and colleagues (2018) when the dark sides of SM commandeer a seemingly positive aspect. These toxic elements have the ability to take control over how individuals can interact or operate online, as well as turn the profile into an identity that may no longer be their own. Functional aspects of SM, like how individuals can converse online, share their thoughts and beliefs, and form relationships or groups, can and do have dark implications that create the opportunity for toxic behaviours to manifest in the digital space with the intent to negatively affect and/or harm the community (Sheth et al., 2021).

Figure 1.1

Baccarella et al.'s (2018) Dark Side of Social Media Functionality Honeycomb Framework

Researchers have developed SNA programs to detect and analyze toxic behaviours in online settings (Gruzd & Attarwala, 2021). One program, called Communalytic, uses Google's Perspective Application Programming Interface (API) to run models and algorithms to detect toxic SM posts on various platforms. The toxicity analyses produce scores for overall toxicity, severe toxicity, profanity, identity attack, insult, and threat attributes (Table 2.1). In addition to Sheth et al.'s (2021) definition, Perspective Developers (2022) also characterize toxicity as rude, disrespectful, or unreasonable comment that is likely to make an individual leave a conversation. Severe toxicity is detected by the API as behaviours that are very hateful, aggressive, and disrespectful, or otherwise very likely to make a user leave a conversation or give up on sharing their opinions (Gruzd & Attarwala, 2021). The identity attack attribute consists of "negative or hateful comments targeting someone because of their identity" (Perspective Developers, 2022). Insults are described as inflammatory or negative comments towards an individual or group of

people; threats are intentions to inflict pain, injury or violence against others; and profanity is defined as swear and curse words, or other obscene language (Perspective Developers, 2022).

The toxicity analysis available on Communalytic has recently been employed by several researchers to examine toxicity on Twitter related to COVID-19 public health measures, including the mask-wearing controversy (Pascual-Ferrá et al., 2021). The results found that toxicity scores for posts that were of anti-mask sentiment were much higher than tweets of pro-mask sentiment. Pascual-Ferrá et al.'s (2021) discussion highlights that in this case, an explanation for the higher levels of toxicity among individuals on Twitter was also centered around in-group and out-group membership related to self-identity on SM. The data further suggested that over time in these threads, there was a growing need for anti-mask group members to reinforce their beliefs with increasing strength (i.e., toxicity) regarding public health behaviours (Pascual-Ferrá et al., 2021). Additionally, the authors reported that the highest toxicity attribute in the data set of tweets was threat. This attribute is defined as a score representing "the degree to which a post displays an intention to inflict pain or violence against an individual or group" (Gruzd & Attarwala, 2021, para. 6). This form of virtual toxicity was further explored and had found some spillover effects on society at large, with these negative behaviours influencing beyond the digital world, causing concern from a public health perspective that misinformation and unfounded rhetoric are quickly able to spread among the masses (Pascual-Ferrá et al., 2021).

Toxicity has detrimental consequences on individuals active within online communities. In an analysis of cyberbullying, results determined that generally, toxic behaviours present in digital spaces are cyber-attack, dominant profiles causing the negative discourse, goal to gain control, and cyber standpoint in which the anonymity available on SM could propagate more

toxic activity (Vallesteros et al., 2020). Social networking sites have profound effects on how users interact with their community, and if the interactions that individuals have are of a negative nature, they are at an increased risk of psychological and/or physical harm (Garett et al., 2016). Users are thus highly likely to then change their virtual habits to avoid such toxic interaction in the future.

Toxicity on SM has the potential to counteract the positive characteristics of digital spaces to connect individuals during a time of uncertainty and reinforce feelings of isolation (e.g., Banerjee & Rai, 2020; Drouin et al., 2020; van der Werf et al., 2021). Because abusers have the ability to capitalize on the dark characteristics of SM and gain control of their virtual communities to spread toxic content, this activity has proliferated into a much larger problem than ever before (Baccarella et al., 2018; Vallesteros et al., 2020).

Women's Sport

In the contemporary sport context, the women's sport vertical has historically been underrepresented and marginalized (e.g., Coche, 2016; Cooky et al., 2015; Fink, 2015; Pegoraro et al., 2019; Symons et al., 2021; Vann, 2014). To date, women's sport has been afforded with less than 10% in traditional broadcasting coverage (Cooky et al., 2021). Even when women's sport programmes are covered, they are portrayed in ways that diminish athletes' and reinforce gendered biases (Adá Lameiras & Rodríguez-Castro, 2020; Cooky et al., 2015). The concept of gender bland framing highlighted by Cooky (2015, 2021) is particularly of interest given that if women's sports are shown on television at all, the stories are not presented in as exciting or notable ways as men. The manner in which women's sport is framed in the media can be very influential in how this sport vertical is accepted within the industry as well as its potential to grow and gain new fans (Fink, 2015).

Historically, women's sport has been framed through a male biased lens with a focus on portraying female athletes in a sexualized way (Adá Lameiras & Rodríguez-Castro, 2020). Sport media often presents sports through a gendered lens conforming to masculine (e.g., ice hockey, football) and feminine (e.g., figure skating, gymnastics) framing to align with societal norms (Kane et al., 2013; Vezzali et al., 2022). Because of these traditional gendered roles in sport, Scheadler (2018) explained that it is difficult for athletes to break those barriers and legitimize themselves in sports that challenge these stereotypical expectations, and thus contribute to the lack of coverage for women participating in more masculine sports. Gender roles and stereotypes imposed place even more strain on women's sport's attempt to grow as well as reinforcing male superiority and female inferiority from a societal perspective (Romney & Johnson, 2020). Research has identified that women's sports are depicted in the media as less exciting and slower than men's, perpetuating the lack of interest for this sector of sport given its societal characterization (Pope, 2018; Scheadler, 2018).

Sexualized images and narratives continue to garner the majority of sportswomen coverage in the media (Geurin, 2017). If women athletes are not sexualized in the media coverage, they are often portrayed using discriminatory gender characteristics to depict the athletes as compassionate, nurturing, pretty, and domestic individuals (Bell & Coche, 2022). The representation of women's sport in the media often takes away from athletic performance and achievement to focus on womens' personal lives such as being wives, mothers, and/or overcoming personal challenges, perpetuating the notion of inferiority in sport as well as reinforcing characteristically female roles (Cooky, 2018; O'Shea & Maxwell, 2021). Women's sport continues to be covered in ways that lessen its importance and entertainment qualities,

therefore contributing to the ongoing gender disparity (Darvin et al., 2021; Kavanagh et al., 2019).

Despite these challenges, women's sport in the last five years has gained momentum in fan interest. There is an emerging shift in media coverage and representation of women's sport, suggesting that the industry is moving and working towards a new age of media coverage that promotes greater gender equality (Petty & Pope, 2019; Sherwood et al., 2019). In recent years, women's sport has used traditional barriers as motivation to find other opportunities to gain exposure such as alternative communication methods like SM (Piché & Naraine, 2022). SM offers these marginalized individuals the opportunity to gain exposure in diverse markets as well as create and build more intentional relationships with consumers to promote transactional benefits like merchandise sales (Abeza et al., 2020; Williams & Chinn, 2016). To address these gaps, women's sport organizations have shifted in communication strategies to reach new audiences while maintaining current fans, including the integration of digital methods (e.g., Carragher & Lolich, 2021; Coche, 2016; Petty & Pope, 2019).

The use of SM for women's professional tennis has had profound effects in these athletes' ability to gain exposure and enhance their personal brand value (Thompson, 2019). These women are no longer forced to rely on traditional media such as broadcasting to frame the narrative of their coverage which can influence their commercial value for potential sponsorships. Thompson (2019) further discussed that female tennis players have begun to use digital communication methods more heavily to build their brands to bypass mainstream media sources and reduce the reliance on these gatekeepers, making their platforms more self-representative. The growth and success of women's tennis has garnered more attention from a commercial standpoint, affording these athletes more opportunities for endorsement (Thompson,

2019). In recognition of the importance of SM to increase visibility, the Women's Tennis Association launched digital platforms dedicated to promote fan engagement and enhance promotional efforts for the organization and its athletes (Milani, 2016).

To engage with consumers and expand their digital presence, women's professional leagues are beginning to create strategic partnerships with SM (Pegoraro et al., 2021). The Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) has partnered with Twitter to broadcast games since 2017, and renewed this agreement in 2022 to stream twelve live games, increase highlight distribution throughout the full season, and expand the use of Twitter Spaces, which are public online discussion groups and video chats hosted by WNBA journalists and broadcast personalities to cover stories on players and previews of upcoming events to serve as a gathering place for fans (Twitter, 2022; WNBA, 2022). Pegoraro et al.'s (2021) study highlighted that WNBA team Twitter accounts experienced an increase in post-game engagement and indicated several other factors were significantly associated with interactivity, such as star players on the team and strong performance. SM and digital streaming methods present the opportunity for women's sport with limited traditional broadcasting resources to produce their own content and engage with fans and thus, research should continue to explore these methods (Pegoraro et al., 2021; Piché & Naraine, 2022).

Since SM has been increasingly embraced by women's sport and has assisted this vertical in gaining exposure and expanding its audiences, it is now providing more access to those who might seek to engage in toxic behaviours towards women's sport. O'Shea and Maxwell (2021) explained that although new media developments have offered women's sport and athletes more opportunities to connect with their fanbase, these communication methods are also challenged with the proliferation of male-dominated discourses and harassment. Women in sport and

women's sport as a whole experiences online misogyny and sexism frequently to which these behaviours are regarded as symptoms of deeply rooted social and cultural issues that only contribute to the ongoing inequitable representation or exclusion from the sport landscape (Antunovic, 2019).

Sexist remarks and the downplaying of these gender-stereotyped comments is not uncommon in sport media (Litchfield et al., 2018). For instance, in women's professional golf, women athletes are quite familiar with misogynistic narratives from both traditional media outlets such as broadcasting commentators as well as within social media discourse (Matz & Bowes, 2021). Media headlines following the U.S. Open were found by Matz and Bowes (2021) that commentator's racist and sexist remarks clearly downplayed the significance of the event and dismissed the severity of the discriminatory language used to a public audience. Actions such as these by both commentators and mass media is problematic as it reinforces the normalization of discriminatory practices, racial stereotyping and maintaining White privilege in the sport environment (Matz & Bowes, 2021).

Both subtle and overt forms of toxicity permeate traditional and new media coverage (Litchfield et al., 2018). Looking beyond gendered toxic discourses such as sexualization, objectification and delegitimization, racial prejudice is also very concerning in the digital space (Kavanagh et al., 2019). Elite women athletes face abuse and criticism regularly, but what is also problematic is that they are also questioned on the basis of their femininity if they are of such high caliber (Litchfield et al., 2018). Several studies have explored the ways in which women athletes like Naomi Osaka and the Williams sisters are presented in the media compared to other women in the sport, noting that narratives shift based on the color of their skin which lead to public responses expressing racialized prejudice (e.g., Litchfield et al., 2018; Schultz, 2005;

Spencer, 2004). The prevalence of sexism, misogyny, and racism in women's sport SM

discourse contribute to the ongoing issue facing this sector of the industry. Women athletes of

color and of intersectional background experience increased harassment and threats of violence

(Razack & Joseph, 2020). Toxic activity on SM trivializes women's sport and raise real social

concerns that extend beyond a sporting issue.

Dark behaviours on SM have long-lasting effects on women's sport. In addition to the

negative impact on one's personal well-being, toxicity online has a trickledown effect on these

users' consumer behaviours in sport and specifically in the women's sport space. Beyond the

impact on sportswomen and their ability to build their digital image, O'Shea and Maxwell (2021)

described that online trolling and abuse have broader effects on consumers and fans in women's

sport. Individuals in these spaces exposed to and experiencing negative interactions may be less

inclined to engage and/or participate due to the emotional risk of harassment or, may leave these

spaces altogether (O'Shea & Maxwell, 2021; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013).

An early study in this space revealed that female participants in online discussion forums

often conform to hegemonic notions of fandom to fit in as well as hiding their gender identify

and/or gendered sport fan identity in fear of being harassed (Hynes & Cook, 2013). In another

study, sexual harassment and toxicity towards female users caused these individuals to hide their

identity and/or leave these groups entirely (Seering et al., 2017), consistent with Hynes and

Cook's (2013) findings. Further discussed by Toffoletti et al. (2021), women discussed their

experiences in sport where online activities often excluded or marginalized those who did not

meet male-defined measures of fandom. These exclusionary practices are not uncommon and

occur both in the virtual and physical world thus, reinforcing the notion that gendered fan

identities should be hidden to reduce the risk of harassment (Sveinson et al., 2019; Toffoletti, 2017).

The rise of dark SM in women's sport, scholarship has also shifted in focus to include how fans have developed strategies to overcome toxic and sexist behaviours prevalent in online spaces. Fans of women's sport have turned to creating inclusive communities outside of general sport discussion threads to avoid the negative conversations and misogynistic discourses prevalent in public sport fan groups (e.g., Antunovic, 2019; Fenton et al., 2021; Toffoletti et al., 2021). Researchers have determined that constructing inclusive digital spaces allowed individuals to make connections with others sharing the same interest (O'Shea & Maxwell, 2021). This practice useful for the women's sport vertical and its fans to engage in communities designed to promote the growth and success of this sector, as well as leaving exclusionary spaces that did not share similar sentiments.

Fenton et al.'s (2021) findings revealed that over half the fans in the study reported not engaging in discussions on SM where the threat of sexism existed, or passively behaved in these groups to avoid negative interactions. Instead, these fans decided to create their own content and communities to discuss their fandom without threat of harassment. These spaces are highly valuable to women sport fans as they used as a means of self-protection and countering the toxic hegemony dominating most professional sport fan forums so they may express their fandom authentically (Fenton et al., 2021; Veletsianos et al., 2018). Similarly, women fan communities promote the ability of members to frame conversations and sport in empowering and inclusive ways to facilitate relationship-building and positive well-being (Antunovic & Hardin, 2015). Further, these spaces are designed to share user-generated and interactive content, by, for and about women in sport to provide the opportunity for fans to bypass traditional marginalization

and toxic behaviours in online media discussions, allowing for alternative expressions and practices of fandom (Toffoletti et al., 2021).

Increased SM popularity and its features to more effectively connect users further contributes to digitally-enabled spaces where fans, and more specifically, women's sport fans, may gather to feel part of a larger community of like-minded individuals and form more intimate relationships with female athletes themselves (Maurice, 2019). Traditionally neglected women sport-fan voices gain agency and autonomy by creating their own groups to interact, as well as shift the narrative of sport fandom away from being a homogeneous group of primarily White, adult men, toward a collective of individuals from various intersectional backgrounds (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016). Online communities have the ability to promote safe expression of oneself and inclusivity, and thus raises the need for scholarship to further explore how activity in these spaces influence the fan experience.

Epistemological and Theoretical Perspective

The assumptions that framed this integrated article thesis aligned with a post-positivist lens. As a philosophy, this paradigm aims to produce knowledge about social patterns and understanding the causes that influence outcomes (Pabel, 2021). Epistemological use of post-positivism as outlined by Pabel (2021), searches for constructed meaning in specific social and cultural contexts by exploring structures linked by commonalities. However, observations are inherently laden with cultural and individual biases and, although it is difficult to get to the truth with absolute certainty, post-positivism contends that research should strive to come as close as possible (Spencer et al., 2020). Further, Spencer et al. (2020) argued that multiple worldviews can aid in explaining and understanding those different individual experiences of the phenomena. This paradigm attempts to reduce such biases through the design of the research and using

multiple forms of measurement or methods in order to identify relationships between factors of study (Spencer et al., 2020).

Further, post-positivism offers the ability for the pragmatic use of different theoretical lenses to understand the research problem in a way that is most suitable to interpret the findings (Henderson, 2011). Post-positivism is valuable for social science and sport research as it adopts practical approaches to collecting data in multiple ways to uncover the complex interpretations of the topic, offering the capacity to bridge theory and praxis (Henderson, 2011). A post-positivist worldview was therefore appropriate for this research as it sought to explore the presence of toxicity within women's sport online communities and understand members' multiple interpretations of that activity. Spencer and colleagues (2020) explained that research rooted in post-positivism aims to identify factors that may predict outcomes and relationships between them. This thesis sought to explore toxicity and its composing factors to examine whether it may predict/influence or have a relationship with fan behaviours. By further understanding this complexity on SM in the women's sport context, contributions can be made for practitioners in marketing and communication roles. By adopting a sequential mixed method approach from a post-positivist lens, this integrated article thesis used contextual data of the phenomenon (toxicity on SM) and multiple perspectives, enabling the possibilities of solutions to the problems studied (Henderson, 2011).

Network Theory

This study utilized NT as both theory and methodology (SNA) to explore how individuals form social connections with each other. A network consists of relationships among individuals who may or may not be previously connected by prior exchanges, demographic attributes (e.g., gender, race, etc.), location and affiliations of interest (Naraine & Parent, 2016).

The use of NT emerged from social philosophy's question of how individuals connect and form order within groups (Borgatti et al., 2009). Contemporary SNA exploring structures and patterns linking individuals was developed by the work of Moreno, Jennings, and Lazarsfeld in the late 1930s (Freeman, 2004). Around the same time, a group of researchers led by Warner at Harvard University were also studying interpersonal relationships and networks within societal groups (Scott, 2017). Early use of this analysis method explored how social-psychological concepts such as organizational and social circles' structures could be mathematically calculated to optimize performance and understand how they were influenced by societal factors (Freeman, 2004).

In the latter half of the twentieth century following the contemporary adoption of SNA, sociologists employed this methodology to explore the changing social ties in community structures with the rise of urbanization (Borgatti et al., 2009). Around the same time in the 1970s, network analyses were also used by social anthropologists to study how roles and relationship functions were formed and maintained in group structures, such as family and/or gender role dynamics.

A key contribution to early NT included the adoption of strength of weak ties theory in which the centrality of an individual has effect and influence on their network connections (Granovetter, 1973). In the framework, Granovetter (1973) described that strong ties have "clumps" in which the close contacts tend to know each other so information translation is less extensive due to the contact being in each other's networks. Conversely, weak ties, like acquaintances, can be easily disconnected from the network due to low bond and therefore can pass more novel information (Borgatti et al., 2009). Social network research is concerned with exploring how these different ties affect each other individually and within a larger environment.

NT is further conceptualized in two parts: Network Theory Proper and Theory of Networks (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). NT Proper is described as "the mechanisms and processes that interact with network structures to yield certain outcomes for individuals and groups" (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011, p.1). This theory is concerned with the consequences of network variables, such as the number of ties within them or the centrality of certain individuals, resulting in the network's configuration (Borgatti et al., 2009). This approach explores network structures from a micro-level, exploring the actors and activities within them (Naraine & Parent, 2016).

Conversely, Theory of Networks examines the processes that determine why networks have the structures they do – the antecedents of network properties (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011, p.1). This theory explores how structures became the way they are and considers the actors' agency in creating those networks. According to Borgatti and Halgin (2011), contextual factors play a role in how actors occupying positions got there in the first place to create the networked outcome and that there is potential for actors to deliberately shape them. Naraine and Parent (2016) considered this theory as a macrolevel approach in which there is further understanding of the processes of networks as whole units.

It is also worthwhile to note the importance of social capital in NT (Borgatti & Foster, 2003). This concept is concerned with the value of connections, where an individual's ties or network position has significant outcomes within the structure (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Brass, 1984, 1985). Brass has explored the application of social capital from several organizational and business management perspectives such as leadership, performance, and the impact of power. Social capital, from the network paradigm, looks to the features of social organization, such as trust, norms and shared values within networks that can improve their efficiency (Burt, 2000). Value is therefore found through the information sharing and connection formation mediated by

network structures, to enhance member experience. Social capital is also gained through increasing one's network so that more knowledge sharing and communication may enhance the community's prosperity (Kitchin & Howe, 2012).

Underpinned by NT, SNA as a methodology analyzes the interrelationships between individuals within networked structures (Scott, 2017). In behavioural business and logistics research, these theories have been applied both within and between organizations to explore relationships that exist in those structures (Carter et al., 2007). More specifically in business research, several studies have employed social network theories in the field of organizational research better understand cross-functional working relationships, interactions, and decision-making in business contexts to provide important information for managerial practice. The researchers also pointed out that in a market landscape where organizations are increasingly competing against one another, the ability to gain and manage knowledge and information is critical to their network efficiency.

Carter and colleagues (2007) outlined that SNA in organizational research can be particularly valuable in understanding how networks are formed, how they operate, and how connections are used by members of the structure to gain social capital. For example, Brass (1984) investigated the relationship between an individual's influence and their location within an organizational network, and further, how that position held within such network coincides with job performance. From an interorganizational perspective, social networks can promote trust and therefore strengthen their efficacy (Burt, 2000; Gulati, 1995). In sport management, social capital has also been explored within networks to understand relationships among sport actors in various spaces ranging from community to commercial sectors (Kitchin & Howe, 2012), and how those connections therefore impact overall network functionality.

In SM research, platforms act as networked tools and have been studied using NT/SNA to understand how these perspectives can provide novel ways of learning and how it can be represented, evaluated and aid in designing technologies to improve pedagogy (Del Valle et al., 2020; Gruzd et al., 2016). SNA has additionally been used by Gruzd et al. (2016) in education settings to depict instructor and learner communication patterns, to further explore how those patterns in networked environments facilitate the exchange of resources and creation of social relations between individuals. Exploring the SM network from the perspective of an individual actor allows greater understanding of the information that user has been exposed to, how clusters emerge within the ecosystem that have influence on interactivity, inclusivity, or conversely, can create exclusive cliques (Haythornthwaite & de Laat, 2010). On the other hand, viewing the network as a whole allows the researcher to see how relationships form in virtual settings, to understand how behaviours and interactions within these groups occur that contribute to its overall function.

The social network paradigm is also valuable in consumer behaviour research to understand how SM users connect to each other and brands of importance to them (Watanabe et al., 2021). Network patterns of cosmetic retailers on Twitter were explored by Watanabe et al. (2021) to investigate user activity and determine which types of network structures are most effective for consumer connectivity. Their analysis highlighted that brands were able to deliver messages through their digital platforms and engage with their consumers but had limited control with respect to the communication and interactions within the networks (Watanabe et al., 2021). The implications from this research revealed that brands in an ego-network have little ability to govern the spread of information within their communities. However, this research provides a greater understanding of how brands can connect with current and prospective consumers using

their SM networks and develop strategies to more effectively engage with them (Watanabe et al., 2021).

Early sport management research identified the need for scholarship to continue to use new methods of inquiry and highlighted the advantageous potential that social NT can offer (Quatman & Chelladurai, 2008a). NT serves as a method of analysis to explore social ties and behaviours within structured interactions, from a variety of ontological, epistemological, and methodological lenses, demonstrating its utility and applicability to many facets of sport management. Research using this paradigm has looked at various contexts including, but not limited to interorganizational networks in North American professional sport leagues (Cousens & Slack, 2005), and in leadership career success within athletic departments and coaching (Sagas & Cunningham, 2005).

Since then, Naraine and Parent (2016) identified that relationships and networks, can occur in various contexts, including digital environments. Moreover, SM has been widely regarded as a mechanism that facilitates the formation of networks among users (Del Valle et al., 2020). The implications of connectivism perspectives in the integration of social learning and communication with digital technologies facilitate the formation of networked processes. SM platforms, and the network of communities that emerge from them offer spaces for users to openly discuss, share ideas and/or information, and connect with others (e.g., Gruzd et al., 2016; Naraine & Parent, 2016).

NT has additionally been used to explore relationships within the brand community triad as it relates to sport consumer behaviour and team identification in hockey (Katz et al., 2018). This theoretical underpinning adopted by Katz et al. (2018) examined how both vertical (e.g., team identification) and horizontal (e.g., centrality) relationships influence consumer behaviours

with respect to sport event attendance. The results revealed that these relationships had positive effects on attendance and that the fan communities formed from network ties strengthened consumer behaviours and brand loyalty, thus enabling the creation of predictive models. This study highlighted that networks and interpersonal relationships matter in the sport landscape as "fans are embedded in a number of different networks that each influence their decisions and attitudes" (Katz et al., 2018, p.184). This concept was further reasserted by Naraine et al. (2021) in their examination of a professional basketball team Twitter hashtag.

This study employed NT Proper as a theoretical foundation as it concerns itself with structural components and interactivity within SM connections. Additionally, as NT Proper is common within organizational scholarship to explore connectivity (Borgatti & Foster, 2003), it was most appropriate for the current research. In this thesis, the network paradigm assisted in interpreting the unique patterns of relationships among individuals, in particular SM users and how those patterns can affect and be affected by phenomena. Further, understanding the patterns that exist in the networks, and specifically SM fan groups, helped to draw conclusions about how structured environments online influence behaviours (Quatman & Chelladurai, 2008b).

(Digital) Imagined Communities

The network paradigm was further supported by the theory of IC. First developed by Anderson's (1983) work focusing on nationalism, ICs are socially constructed on the notion of common social identities (Bergholz, 2018; Gruzd et al., 2011). These communities are developed upon shared interests and operate under mutually accepted "rules" or social norms that may or may not be explicitly outlined (Phillips, 2002). According to Bergholz (2018), much of Anderson's sociological focus on nationalism provided a reorientation for historical and political research to move away from the analytical gaze of ideology, elites, and socioeconomic change,

toward cognitive processes and conceptually imagined factors connecting individuals together. Commonalities and group belonging are built on social identity theory leading to the creation of communities based on the determinants of interaction frequency, interconnections and a sense of solidarity (Gruzd et al., 2011; Phillips, 2002). Collective identity is of particular value as it explores the elements comprising how individuals' social identity is formed by the perception of belongingness to a group or community and thus enhancing their self-esteem (Heere et al., 2011).

Phillips (2002) also identified that Anderson's development of ICs is centralized upon self-attachment and personal sense of belonging to these communities. This crucial aspect concerns itself with the multilayered nature of personal attachment and the consequences of this connectedness to individuals and groups. IC theory further suggests that the combination of interacting in multiple layers with an intense sense of attachment and/or self-identification can come together with the potential to make socially meaningful and powerful consequences for other aspects of the social world, such as relationships moving from the digital sphere into physical settings (Phillips, 2002).

Early application of IC theory has been situated in sociological research landscapes (Galindo, 2020; Suh et al., 2015). Investigations by Phillips (2002) found through quantitative methods that Anderson's idea of personal attachment in ICs is multidimensional, heavily influenced by geographic identification. This research additionally identified that future works should focus on exploring how the meaning of ICs for self-identity is shaped within social contexts as well as factors most salient to members of these groups (Phillips, 2002). This framework was also adopted by Suh et al. (2015) to understand how individuals may be part of

several ICs in the context of immigration, that they identify with the where they presently live as well as their country of origin.

Galindo (2015) explored IC demographics of fans of a professional basketball team and found that linkages within these groups stem from their sharing of fan identity and geographical location. Sports teams and brands therefore have the ability to create ICs to connect with their consumer base and appeal to their myriad of attachments to strengthen loyalty (Galindo, 2020). In the university setting, ICs have also underpinned research examining peoples' identification to the institution's sports teams and with the wider university (Katz & Heere, 2016). This longitudinal study found that the formation of new sport programmes and the maintenance of existing programs were salient enough to significantly alter the participants' identification and behavioural involvement with the larger university. Katz and Heere (2016) also highlighted that this result further supports the notion that campus stakeholders and sponsors should continue to be involved in intercollegiate activities due to their positive return on investments from increased identification by both students and residents near the university. From a marketing standpoint, ICs provide an opportunity for consumers to strengthen ties with each other and the brand of interest, and therefore, should continue to engage with consumers where they most often frequent.

In today's digital age, Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking sites are now conduits for digital ICs to form, also known as DIC (Lutz & Toit, 2014). SM is experiencing the development of DICs for various social identities, including sport fandom. Digital media has become a dynamic phenomenon that allows individuals to connect without geographic bounds and facilitates the evolution of ICs to manifest in virtual contexts (Levental et al., 2016). Research contends that the prerequisites for an online community is the presence of a "virtual

settlement", which includes interactivity, more than two communicators, a common public place where individuals can meet and interact, and a sustained membership over time (Gruzd et al., 2011; Jones, 1997). Similarly, this concept describes the postmodern phenomenon of individuals interacting through network-supported digital spaces, bound together by a common purpose and with the purpose of exchanging information and opinions (Norman, 2014). The formation of these online groups hinges on individuals using technology to form social groups based on common interest and developing social norms of behaviour.

However, Gruzd and colleagues (2011) argued that even in the instances these prerequisites being met to affirm these virtual groups, it does not necessarily guarantee the presence of a community. They identified the need to meet criteria establishing a sense of community. According to McMillan and Chavis' (1986) framework, sense of community is met when there is some degree of membership to feel a belonging to the group. Members feel that they can make a difference or have influence in the community, provide support and are supported by other members (integration and fulfillment of needs) (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). There is a shared emotional connection from shared history, events, positive interaction and identification with the community (Abfalter et al., 2012; Gruzd et al., 2011).

DICs facilitate belonging, support, and shared self-identification to the phenomenon forming the groups. In the sport context, these digital spaces create a sense of community and connectedness among fans and more specifically communities concerned with women's sport. Along the same vein, given that online communities are characterized by shared vision, social trust and reciprocity, it can be further suggested that digital fan communities are ideal spaces to build social capital, much like its applicability in NT (Fenton et al., 2021; Putnam, 2000). The relationships formed in digital communities promote bonding and bridging among members.

In other realms of sport management research, the formation of DICs of sport fandom through spectatorial affiliations with teams to satisfy individuals' desire to connect with others and cultivate social relations (Kalman-Lamb, 2021). Communities of fans form around sport because of the need to socialize, however Kalman-Lamb (2021) outlined that capitalism displaces its facilitation of relationship-building into landscapes predicated on consumption, such as SM platforms. This study highlighted from several qualitative analyses of different sport fan groups that DICs provide fans an environment where they feel the sense of security and stability of an identity shared with others in the community. From a gendered lens, DICs offer the opportunity for sub-cultures of sport and intersectional identities to gather and serve as an empowering space to express these identities and affiliations (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013). These researchers found that in women's roller derby, there has been a proliferation of websites and social networking sites dedicated to supporting, producing, and circulating both individual and collective identities related to the sport. Further, Pavlidis and Fullagar (2013) demonstrated that these communities formed in digital settings present an opportunity for virtual movements of equity in sport and for fans to share and celebrate their multiple identities.

Using DIC as a conceptual framework in this research helped explore, understand, and interpret fan perceptions and sentiments regarding their community membership connected to women's sport. As with in-person group dynamics, there are both positive and negative experiences, in which the same could be applied virtually. DICs formed by sport fans create safe spaces for these individuals to represent themselves authentically and engage with other members sharing similar interests (Kalman-Lamb, 2021). This study looked to extend the knowledge of this conceptual frame within the sport environment to examine how emotion and passion related to sport fandom, particularly women's sport, influences interaction. From a

gendered context, the growth of women's sport fan communities present an opportunity to continue to grow this area of the professional sport industry and serve its constituents in a more meaningful way (Fenton et al., 2021; Lebel et al., 2021; Pegoraro & Taylor, 2021).

NT and DIC, together, served as a multidimensional framework to explore and understand how online communities and the interactivity within them affect one's expression of sport fandom and intention to engage in these spaces. The use of NT in this thesis aided to unpack the proliferation of dark SM within women's sport online communities. It was useful for such purpose as the networked perspective helped understand how individuals in online discourse influence or contribute to the narrative and thus, how toxic content can affect the overall sentiment in the network. Using DIC as a complimentary theory was useful to frame the fan response to SM interactions in women's sport. Looking at the online environment from this lens assisted in exploring how women's sport fan groups operate and the ways in which toxicity can affect the member experience in these spaces. Understanding the intention of DICs to promote inclusivity, dark SM activities were able to be unpacked and how they may influence the fan experience in women's sport communities as toxicity effectively works against the purpose of these groups. NT and DIC worked together to better understand how toxicity within women's sport fan groups can influence members' intentions to engage in these spaces.

Overall Methodology

This research explored both the digital landscape and the perspectives of fans as it pertains to women's sport. This study adopted a post-positivist approach to understand how toxicity on SM has the potential to influence women's sport fan engagement and consumer intentions. The following details the sequential multiple methods design of this research

including data collection, recruitment, ethical considerations, and analysis are outlined. Finally, strategies for authenticity and trustworthiness in this research was provided.

Use of a Multiple Methods Approach

This integrated article thesis adopted a sequential "mixed methods-lite" design. This research was designed to have two complete studies within themselves but have some elements of integration (Greene, 2012). The sequential design involves the combination of multiple methods of quantitative and qualitative strands in which the former strand is conducted first, then the latter is undertaken with a more limited scope focused on explaining the quantitative results (Paek et al., 2020). The coupling of methods and theoretical underpinnings are explained by Greene (2012) to provide the potential for greater understanding of the phenomena (toxicity in women's sport SM discourse). The work of Paek et al. (2020) utilized this design to collect quantitative data from surveys and employed semi-structured interviews analyzed thematically for the qualitative strand to generate inferences.

This research adopted a similar design in which the first study (Chapter 2a) explored the current digital landscape on SM related to women's sport topics quantitatively through a SNA technique. This study was conducted to examine toxicity present in women's sport public sphere discourse holistically. As Chapter 2a's preliminary findings were analyzed, ethical clearance was obtained, and recruitment began for the qualitative component (Chapter 2b) of the thesis. Next, Chapter 2b employed a qualitative, phenomenological design using interviews with self-identified women's sport fans on SM to understand how their perspectives of toxicity and the influence of such on their intentions to engage in online discourse. This two-fold research design provided a multidimensional glance at the current virtual conversation centered in women's sport and how fans experience and/or are influenced by interactivity in these spaces (Figure 1.2). Once

both studies were complete, their findings were interpreted together to discuss toxicity's role in online discourse related to women's sport, answering the main research question whilst Chapters 2a and 2b specifically addressed RQ$_{2a}$ and RQ$_{2b}$.

Figure 1.2

Visualization of thesis structure
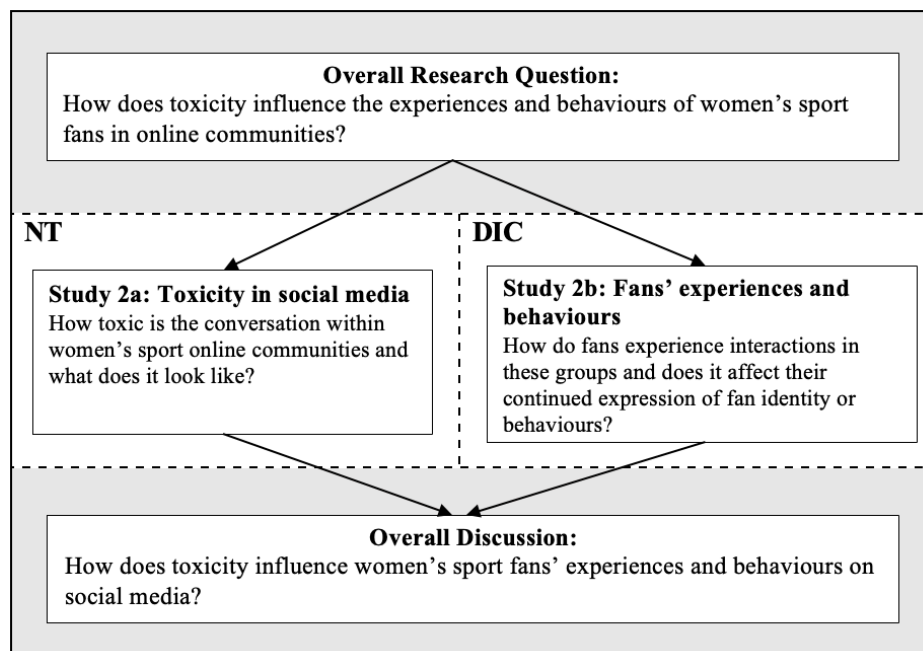
Data Collection

Social Network Analysis

The first study (Chapter 2a) in this multidimensional approach was to explore the current online network related to women's sport. SNA using Communalytic, a web-based research tool, studied patterns of toxic behaviours in online fan communities. Communalytic was developed as an extension of the Perspective API by the Social Media Lab at Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University) (Gruzd & Attarwala, 2021). This study investigated the toxicity of messaging regarding women's sport on Twitter and Reddit to understand what the dominant sentiment was among fans.

First was the identification the women's sport of most interest to study on SM. The women's sports of focus chosen were the WNBA and the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL), both professional women's leagues based in the United States of America. The leagues' official hashtags on Twitter (#WNBA and #NWSL) were used to collect tweets in these threads for analysis. Additional hashtags and keywords were also used to expand the data sets for analysis. For the WNBA, the playoff hashtag "#WNBAPlayoffs" and keyword "WNBA" were included. The Twitter data sets for the NWSL also included keywords such as "NWSL" and "NWSL Playoffs" as the league did not have a specific promotional hashtag for the Playoff period of the season. On Reddit, posts and comments were collected from the subreddit threads for these two leagues (r/WNBA and r/NWSL). The use of general league Twitter hashtags allows for greater public sphere activity (O'Hallarn et al., 2019). Outlined by O'Hallarn and colleagues (2018, 2019), public spaces like Twitter and Reddit promote "town hall" engagement where individuals have the ability to openly share their thoughts and opinions for others to discuss or dispute. In the interest of exploring online communities holistically, sampling data from open discussions allowed for the potential of more authentic conversation compared to specific hashtags or niche subreddit groups that may be more closed in nature (O'Hallarn et al., 2018).

Communalytic Pro has the capacity to collect and analyze posts, including submissions, comments and replies to comments on Reddit from a public subreddit for up to any 31 consecutive days in the past. For Twitter, Communalytic can gather tweets and public replies within the previous 7 days up to 500,000 posts across 50 data sets (Communalytic, 2021). With the consideration that there may be periods of high SM engagement online related to the leagues' respective playing activity (Naraine & Bakhsh, 2022; Piché & Naraine, 2022), four periods of data collection were selected for the WNBA and NWSL season cycles to examine toxicity from

different time variables (see Table 1.1). For each league, consecutive 7-day periods at the

beginning of the season, during in-season play, during playoffs, and off-season were determined

to explore whether toxicity fluctuates throughout their respective cycles.

In order to contextualize toxicity scores for the WNBA and NWSL, the same data

collection dates of the women's cycle periods were used to gather and analyze SM posts of the

analogous men's leagues: the National Basketball Association (NBA) and Major League Soccer

(MLS). Posts pertaining to the NBA that contained "#NBA", "NBA", and "r/NBA" were

gathered. SM data collected for the MLS included posts that used "#MLS", "MLS", and

"r/MLS".

Table 1.1

Data collection periods for the WNBA and NWSL in the 2022 Calendar Year

	WNBA	**NWSL**
Season Cycle	May 6 – September 18	April 29 – October 29
Period 1: Pre-Season	April 29-May 6	April 22-29
Period 2: In-Season	July 20-27	July 20-27
Period 3: Playoffs	September 12-19	October 4-11
Period 4: Off-Season	October 4-11	November 1-7

Once SM data were collected and uploaded to Communalytic, toxicity analyses were

performed. Communalytic uses the Perspective API to produce toxicity scores for each post in

the dataset based on specific attributes defined by the program including toxicity, severe toxicity,

identity attack, insult, threat, and profanity (Jigsaw LLC, 2022; Pascual-Ferrá et al., 2021) (Table

2.1). Once toxicity scores have been assigned, Communalytic provides the distribution of the

overall level of toxicity in the dataset by identifying the average scores, distribution of each

toxicity factor, as well as the top-ten posts that received the highest scores (Gruzd et al., 2022).

These scores were examined to determine which factors were most prevalent in the various digital spaces chosen for analysis.

A secondary, manual textual analysis of the posts was conducted to ensure accuracy of the toxicity scores. For instance, Communalytic may deem profanity as toxic but in the context of the post, it may be used in a positive or exclamatory way. The top-ten posts detected for the toxicity attributes for each data set were read to verify whether the scores were appropriate for the post. The full analysis data sets were also examined as solely reading the top-ten posts may not have been enough to deem the toxicity scores accurate. For some posts, the contexts were salient in understanding whether the content was toxic. As such, the confirmation across the data sets sought out certain key words or topics that may have been important contexts with respect to toxicity in women's sport. The manual checking included looking for profanity and curse words to examine what the rest of the post said, any posts with racialized elements, as well as posts of sexist nature. Due to program limitations, it did seem as though some posts that would be considered toxic in their contexts, were not detected by the API as overtly toxic that a manual analysis may characterize as toxic from Communalytic's definitions.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Recruitment. Given the online context of this study, participant recruitment was primarily conducted on SM sites to examine toxicity in women's sport. Chapter 2b intended to explore and understand SM interactions of women's sport fans, and it was therefore appropriate that the recruitment method reflected this target population. Graphics and information regarding participation were shared online on various platforms for open recruitment of those who identify as women's sport fans and who are active on WNBA and NWSL Twitter and/or Reddit online groups. The research was cleared by the Brock University Research Ethics Board (HREB) on

October 25, 2022 (Appendix A). An REB-approved advertisement poster was created by the researcher and shared on SM platforms to invite interested participants (Appendix B). Recruitment occurred over the researcher's personal accounts on Twitter, Reddit, and LinkedIn. The account settings were adjusted to be open or "public" so any interested individual could send private messages to the researcher for more information. Recruitment materials were posted at several time points in order to maintain circulation within SM threads; these dates were October 25, 2022, November 21, 2022, and January 3, 2023. To address the potential barrier for recruitment that individuals may not be as forthcoming to participate on the initial SM platforms, additional recruitment was conducted through other personal social networks (i.e., friends in-person and sharing online to their connections, Instagram, and Facebook).

This research was situated in the digital space and invited those with relevant experience and involvement in communities dedicated to North American women's sport to share their opinions and experiences. Recruitment parameters were focused on individuals who are 18 years of age or above and engaged regularly, meaning at least weekly engagement or higher (Pew Research Center, 2021), in WNBA and NWSL Twitter and Reddit online discussion groups. It is important to note that user accounts from the SNA were not tracked. Thus, since the recruitment criteria focused on the same Twitter hashtags and Reddit discussion feeds, it is possible that participants may have also contributed content collected in the quantitative study.

Social networking sites are open platforms without requiring gender to sign up and individuals may express themselves in any way they choose (Bivens & Haimson, 2016), and as such, all fan demographics (i.e., gender, race, socioeconomic status, etc.) were invited to participate if they identified as women's sport fans and active in North American women's sport (WNBA and NWSL) digital networking spaces and were given a safe space to share their

thoughts. This qualitative study did not target a specific gender (e.g., only female fans) and welcomed any individual who self-identified as a fan of women's sport to participate. For instance, male fans of women's sport could provide a different perspective to the online discourse and contribute to the increasing knowledge of consumer behaviour research (Delia et al., 2022). The intent of this study was to holistically examine SM discussion forums, so it was of value that participants ranged in personal backgrounds to understand the complex and multiple experiences of fans (Lee, 2012). In an attempt to gather diverse representation among research participants, this study welcomed individuals of any intersectionality to participate. An optional demographic questionnaire was sent to participants to complete following the interview to gather information on their intersectional representation (see Appendix E).

   Interviews. The qualitative, phenomenological study in this sequential, integrated article design featured the use of semi-structured interviews to explore the perspectives of individuals active in online women's sports communities. Chapter 2b primarily worked to answer RQ_{2b} to dig deeper about how SM users experience and perceive toxic behaviours in these digital environments. The interview was designed in a semi-structured format to allow for open and flexible discussion with some structure of topics to focus on (Kallio et al., 2016) (see Appendix F for the Interview Guide). This format was appropriate for the study as it allowed participants to discuss their experiences, feelings, beliefs, and convictions to the topic in question (toxicity in women's sport) (Groenewald, 2004). A total of twelve interviews were conducted ranging in 40-60-minutes with an average of 45 minutes and occurred online via video-conferencing platform (i.e., Zoom and Microsoft Teams). Further, the questions aimed to generate rich and detailed descriptions of how individuals experienced and made meaning of the phenomena studied while facilitating a normal flow of conversation (Rabionet, 2009). The semi-structured interview

approach allowed for dynamic discussion with the participant on various topics and aimed to capture a rich, detailed experience of women's sport fans' online interactions or observations with toxicity. This design was helpful for the phenomenological study as it allowed for the potential of unscripted questions and probes to discuss participant responses in more depth. The use of these techniques encouraged further description and promoted a more natural flow in the discussion, as well as provided the opportunity for participants to ask their own questions or discuss anything else that was not already covered pertaining to the overall research topic.

Ethical Considerations

Consent was obtained from participants using a digitally signed form that was emailed to the participant with the Letter of Invitation (see Appendix C and D). This procedure was beneficial for the participants as they were able to complete the online form at their convenience and reduced the physical and/or health risks associated with in-person document completion. Informed consent was an ongoing practice, ensuring the participants were comfortable and willing to participate throughout the entire process. At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked again for their consent and were informed that they could withdraw from the interview and the study at any point.

An important ethical consideration was voluntary participation. This study invited those of all background and intersectionality to participate of their own interest. It was critical for this research that participants chose to participate and did not feel obligated or coerced. It was also critical to acknowledge the potential emotional risks for the participants when discussing their experiences related to toxicity. Recalling and explaining past experiences could be distressing to the participants. As such, the participants were given the right to end the interview and withdraw from the study at any point. Additional mental health resources were provided in the consent

form and following the interview if participants wished to seek professional assistance if they began to experience emotional distress.

Confidentiality and privacy were integrated into this research. Given the nature of social media where individuals have the freedom to express themselves as they choose, it was important that the study also reflected this freedom. To create a safe space for open and honest communication, participants had the option of how much of their personal information they wanted reported by the researcher to be stored in the dataset or shared in the findings. The participant was given the opportunity to give consent for their first name to be used in the findings and discussion or choose to use a pseudonym for their privacy. All data from the study including participant information, interview recordings, and transcripts were stored securely and privately in the Brock University student cloud drive. Data obtained from the study were not shared with anyone outside of the research group (student researcher, supervisor, and committee).

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the phenomenological data collection, an in-depth analysis was conducted. First, the data were prepared through transcription of the recorded interviews. The practice of transcription by the researcher themself allowed for more intimate engagement with the data (Poland, 1995). The verbatim transcription process further satisfied trustworthiness and rigor of the research process as participant accounts were accurately written of what was said in the interview without any researcher editing or manipulation (Poland, 1995). The transcription process gave initial familiarity in generating themes from the interviews.

Chapter 2b adopted Braun and Clarke's (2020) reflexive thematic analysis (TA) to explore and understand experiences related to factors and processes that influence phenomena.

TA is flexible in nature and suits qualitative inquiry as it can be used to examine underlying patterns from many types of data collection, especially semi-structured interviews in this case (Braun & Clarke, 2020). An iterative and deductive approach was also used in which the theoretical underpinnings helped to frame the analysis process.

The analysis process consists of six steps. The first step was to become familiar with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2020). This process involved immersing oneself in the data to become one with the content and critically engage with the data. The intention to achieve this step was by transcribing the interview data and reading the transcripts multiple times, making notes along the way so key concepts and ideas could be pulled out. These notes included topics and ideas that were poignant from the interviews that were quite meaningful to why the participant was engaged in women's sport SM spaces. This included how some individuals described their intentionality in their interactions and some of their attitudes towards toxicity within the DICs they occupied. Engaging in the analysis process in this way helped to unpack how toxicity may or may not have influenced these participants' online activities and relationship-building. These notes facilitated reflection between interviews and assisted in generating initial themes when common topics or perspectives were discussed by participants.

The second step was coding, where labels were created to identify ideas and concepts of interest in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The initial coding process involved closely reading the data in clusters and creating tags for sections of relevance. This practice was flexible and organic to allow for codes to be used multiple times, tweaks to existing codes, and the expanding or contracting of codes. Initial coding was performed by coding line-by-line in each interview question response so the data could be intimately engaged with. After the first set of codes are developed, Braun and Clarke (2020) recommended going through the dataset twice to ensure the

analysis consists of a systematic, coherent, and robust set of codes, as well as to facilitate the development of more codes or concepts not initially discovered. Additional codes were generated by engaging in this iterative process.

Upon completion of the coding step, the third step of theme development began (Braun & Clarke, 2020). This step involved gathering and grouping the codes into potential themes with the theoretical underpinning of DICs in mind. Clustering the codes identified the broader meanings that captured several overarching ideas. The codes were placed into these groupings to help provide meaning about the topics that were most poignant among the codes. Deductive analysis occurred in this step where theoretical underpinnings were used to understand meaning and context of the codes. Bringing in DICs to this step provided deeper meaning to the codes that could assist in creating several overarching ideas from the constructs of online communities. For example, many codes included the community-building aspects of DICs such as friendships, inclusive, support, and enjoyment, which helped to form the overarching theme of continued engagement in women's sport discourse and why participants chose to remain in these spaces even if toxicity was present.

Next, step four included a review of the themes to ensure the themes made sense, were relevant to the research questions, and aligned with the deductive analytical lens (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Reviewing ensured that the analysis fit well with the data and that descriptions and perspectives from participants were not inadvertently misinterpreted. The deductive analysis process helped to frame this step to interpret the generated themes in terms of DIC. The four themes created encompassed both the overarching research topic of toxicity and the behaviours associated with those dark activities online. The fifth step of TA involved defining and naming the themes to refine the specifics of each overarching concept. This step generated a clear

definition of and name for each theme to create a story in which it was described using the codes from the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Raw data were turned into themes through describing the overall meaning of the codes. For example, participants described the many ways in which they interact with toxicity online. Codes included the behaviours themselves in response to toxicity as well as participants' attitudes and intentions. Themes were generated to include participants' management of toxicity and their continued engagement online.

Once the data well-captured and addressed the research questions, the analytic narrative was built. The sixth and last step in the analysis process was the discussion of the findings and what it meant for the purpose of the study. It was important to consider the write up of the findings as a part of the analytical process as it involved representing the data in a meaningful way and providing commentary. It was the intention to balance data extracts and discussion to provide a clear and compelling demonstration of the relevance of this study to the overall topic at issue. Additionally, to ensure participants' experiences were represented and shared, the use of quotes was integrated in the findings. Exploring the data in this research by using TA assisted in more deeply understanding participants' experiences and generated meaningful findings.

Upon completion of Chapters 2a and 2b, the findings were aggregated to form an overall research discussion (Chapter 3). Here, the toxicity analysis results were interpreted in complement with participant perspectives to explore the influence of toxicity in women's sport SM discourse. A deductive analysis was conducted in which theoretical and conceptual perspectives were used to understand the findings through NT, DICs, and Baccarella et al.'s (2018) dark side of SM framework. Engaging in this process produced meaningful findings about how individuals actually involved in women's sport discourse observed toxicity, interacted with it, and the effect on their intentions to continue participating within online communities.

The amalgamated analysis in Chapter 3 also assisted in interpreting the SNA results by having a better understanding of the contexts in which toxicity emerged and occurred. For instance, the SNA results found that toxicity is indeed present in public sphere discourse related to women's sport and provided another explanation of the dark systems within networked discourse. To further unpack those findings and how toxic activity influences behaviours within the networks, a deeper understanding was achieved regarding why participants may have chosen to interact in less public spaces, such as DICs to seek more specific or personal discussion on mutual interest and based shared values. Participants explained their motivations to continue engaging despite the presence of toxicity because of the sense of community and belonging built within these DICs. Bridging the two studies' findings together to discuss their theoretical, practical, and substantive implications offer a greater depth of contributions to sport management scholarship in women's sport.

Trustworthiness and Authenticity

Throughout the research process, it was important to ensure the quality of the work. The sequential mixed methods design of this thesis intentionally built-in rigorous techniques. For example, exploring toxicity in women's sport online fan communities from two methodological perspectives allowed a greater understanding of the phenomenon. First, Chapter 2a provided an initial look at the quantified toxicity within the women's sport SM discourse. This study produced raw data to gain an understanding of the current state of the online public sphere to which Chapter 2b offered further insights of how this toxicity is experienced. The qualitative dimension of this integrated article thesis assisted in unpacking what toxicity looks like to individuals engaged in the discourse and how this activity may (or may not) have influenced their engagement. This research design was useful to interpret toxicity from various dimensions

that one study alone would not have produced the same complexity of findings. For instance, toxicity on SM is not a novel concept, but also complementing the results specific to the women's sport context with the perspectives of individuals involved in the discourse adds meaningful insights to the intentionality of women's sport fans.

Following Lincoln and Guba's (1989) framework and criteria for trustworthiness, this research satisfied credibility by adopting an appropriate and well recognized research method, in this case interviews (Shenton, 2004). This study also used triangulation through different methods of analysis. Member-checking was used to ensure the transcripts were correct and accurate interpretations of their experiences and perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). This crucial technique for establishing credibility ensured that the realities/perspectives of participants were the ones being presented in the research. Participants were sent the interview transcript and given ten days to confirm the content. Additionally, to enhance authenticity, rapport was also key in the study to foster organic conversation and understand the lived experiences of the participants. The use of reflective commentary was also integrated into the research and is further discussed below.

Transferability was satisfied through an in-depth provision of background data and literature to establish context for the need of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). The sampling strategy that used intended to maximize the range of information uncovered such that thick, rich descriptions was generated. This permitted comparison of this specific research context to other possible contexts (Guba, 1981). Additionally, a detailed description of the phenomenon was made to allow for comparisons and similar studies to be conducted in other digital contexts. In this case, SNA explored the current digital landscape with respect to toxicity in women's sport fan groups and was complemented by qualitative inquiry to understand individuals' experiences

with toxicity online. To allow for this study to be repeated, it was important to use detailed description of the methodological approach and its rationale.

Finally, confirmability was satisfied using triangulation in a similar way to credibility. Throughout the data analysis process, diagrams and conceptual models were created and used to demonstrate the "audit trail" and formation of themes within the data (Shenton, 2004). Throughout the analysis and interpretation process, themes were checked with regards to the verbatim words of participants in the data transcripts. This ensured that as themes were developed, each theme was constructed fully supported by the data and not solely created based on researcher assumptions of interpretations.

This process therefore demonstrated the integrity and rigor of the study as well as developed transferable conceptual frameworks for future research. In both studies, there was the recognition of the shortcomings and limitations, consistent with any research project. Understanding that one research project cannot solve all the problems that exist was an important consideration and therefore admitting the (de)limitations and shortfalls allowed for the potential to explore this topic further. Reflexivity was an important consideration as the researcher must admit their beliefs and assumptions so that they did not influence the study (Shenton, 2004).

Positionality and Reflexivity

Acknowledging that, within qualitative research, "just as the participants' experiences are framed in social-cultural contexts, so, too, are those of the researcher" (Bourke, 2014, p.2). Specifically, positionality was an aspect of reflexivity that helped identify the researcher within the study with respect to how this position would influence how the research was conducted, the outcomes and the results (Holmes, 2020). Understanding how positionality influenced meaning-

making because of personal experiences also enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings (Bourke, 2014; Holmes, 2020).

As a researcher, I am connected to my research topic because I have benefitted from participating in competitive sport and have experienced how women's programmes are not always given equitable treatment. As a former varsity swimming athlete in a mixed-gendered sport, I have been provided with institutional services and resources that other sports of a more separated nature may not. For example, swimming is a sport that both genders train and compete together rather than sports like basketball or soccer which may operate unique from one another. I acknowledge that my sporting experiences are different than other female athletes, nevertheless, within institutional and other sporting structures, women's programmes are, in general, given less opportunity or investment. Being part of a mixed team such as swimming produced different team environments where inequitable treatment or toxic interactions may not be as prevalent in public settings. It is not to say that in the locker rooms, these behaviours do not exist. However, in a team that competes together, there is less segregation and therefore, athletes of both genders may interact differently than in sport settings where male and female teams do not regularly engage with one another. In cases such as these at the institutional level, uni-gendered sports are inequitably treated, for example, in funding opportunities and media exposure. It is also not uncommon for toxic environments to proliferate when there is less diversity among individuals, such as gender, and particularly in male-dominated settings (Breger et al., 2019).

I also needed to be cognizant of my own position as an active sport fan on SM. Regardless of my own fan identity, I recognized and reflected on my experiences being a fan of women's sport within online chat communities. For the integrity of this research, I suspended my

own fan affiliations so that I created a space where participants of any fandom may authentically express their opinions. While conducting the interviews, I attempted to be open and remove my personal biases to allow for the participant to feel comfortable to share their thoughts and experiences. This was achieved by not demonstrating any (dis)agreement if, and when, participants were describing their fan identities to teams or athletes. I wanted to ensure that participants could share their thoughts and opinions without fear of judgement so when they spoke about leagues, teams, or athletes they felt most connected to, I did not comment on those affiliations but rather invited them to explain their experiences online through open-ended and dynamic conversation.

I also considered my positionality with respect to power dynamics within the research process. It was important that the participant felt they had some agency throughout the interview process. If there were topics they did not want to discuss, they had the option to move to the next question, as well as if they wanted to continue discussing a certain topic, they were welcomed to share as much as they felt necessary. At the end of the interview, if participants wanted to comment on any other topic not already covered, they were invited to share their thoughts. This process helped to build rapport with the participants as well as assist in removing some power imbalances during the interviews by giving them to opportunity to direct the discussions as they felt comfortable.

Chapter II

Findings

The findings chapter contains two research articles: Toxicity within the women's sport social media discourse (i.e., Chapter 2a) and Exploring women's sport fans' experiences with toxicity in online communities (i.e., Chapter 2b). These articles correspond to the research questions on toxicity and the fan experience as they pertain to women's sport and the SM landscape. A version of Chapter 2a is under review at *Sport Marketing Quarterly*. A version of Chapter 2b was submitted to *European Sport Management Quarterly* on March 8, 2023, and is awaiting reviewer feedback. Each study's findings underpin the broader discussion in Chapter 3.

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Chapter 2a: Network theory approach to toxicity in women's sport social media discourse

In the last decade, digital networking technologies such as social media (SM), have seen rapid growth for both professional and personal means of engagement, including the consumption of information related to interests like news and sports (cf. Abeza et al., 2019; Gruzd et al., 2016). SM's design provides instantaneous information, connection, and interaction to and between users that reaches beyond physical borders (Hambrick & Pegoraro, 2014; O'Hallarn et al., 2018; van Dijck, 2013). This constantly evolving technological infrastructure creates environments that incite user-generated content where individuals can engage with others in their pre-existing networks as well as establish new connections (Naraine et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2019).

The shift in mass communication from traditional media to interactive digital mediums has illustrated the role of SM in generating participatory audiences and, these individuals use their platforms to create and interact with content (Abeza et al., 2019). Additionally, SM facilitates town hall-like engagement among users to share their ideas in real time (O'Hallarn et al., 2019). These spaces create open deliberative democracy where the concept of public sphere activity can achieve four key principles: the formation of public opinion, allows access for all, provides unrestricted conference through the freedom of assembly, expression, and opinion publication, and promotes debate (O'Hallarn et al., 2018). However, this does not negate the potential existence of hidden environments within SM that permit users to gather and share attitudes that do not reflect democratic discussion and are not intended to be seen in more publicly accessible spaces.

Although SM provides many benefits to both users and brands looking to connect to others with shared interests, these sites also come with potential negative effects like toxicity.

This term is defined as "threats, obscenity, insults, and identity-based hate" as well as the inclusion of "harassment and socially disruptive persuasion, such as misinformation, radicalization, and gender-based violence" (Sheth et al., 2021, p.312). Gruzd and colleagues (2020) outlined that SM platforms are particularly susceptible to toxic behaviours due to their open structures that allow for easy accessibility to anyone. The fusion of digital networks and discourse on certain topics can thus create highly contentious environments. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, discourse concerned with anti-face mask sentiments were found to have high levels of toxicity (Pascual-Ferrá et al., 2021). Open-access platforms provide the ability to individuals to create and participate in toxic acts with little to no repercussions, increasing the possibility of toxicity to spread rapidly (Baccarella et al., 2018; Gruzd et al., 2022; Gruzd & Attarwala, 2021). Highlighted by Pascual-Ferrá et al. (2021), when individuals engage in heated conversation on SM and mainstream media echoes the polarization, the spillover effect into society at large is a major concern and reinforces division.

In sport, toxic behaviours are regularly present related to many factors, such as the performance or personal lives of athletes, the politicization of sport, and other topics of polarizing nature (i.e., O'Hallarn et al., 2018; Pegoraro et al., 2014; Yan et al., 2018). It is not unlikely that disagreement will occur in public sphere-like SM activity (Moore-Berg et al., 2020; O'Hallarn et al., 2019), but these spaces become problematic when content spread is racist, sexist, or highly toxic as it contradicts the purpose of sport entertainment to provide enjoyment to consumers (Cleland, 2014; Fenton et al., 2021).

Toxicity exhibited by fans and followers of sport entities online has become an increasingly significant social problem and research has called for more attention in this space (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Litchfield et al., 2018). Dark characteristics on SM have the

potential to derail growth efforts by sport organizations. Given that alternative methods of communication have been vital for continued development in marginalized sport verticals (Piché & Naraine, 2022), toxicity must be further explored in the women's sport context to explore whether this marketing avenue is viable.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to uncover toxicity within women's sport SM and how these behaviours are characterized in digital spaces. The focus of this work was to examine the networked sport fan environment and the emotive discussions within them, advancing the following research question:

RQ$_{2a}$. How toxic is the conversation within women's sport online communities and what does it look like?

This study was guided by existing sport management literature and the network paradigm in which fans and their ties in digital environments (i.e., engagement with respect to language) result in meaningful outcomes related to their intentions to participate in these spaces following negative conversation and content dissemination. As a result, these questions extended previous works of SNA by applying it to women's sport setting and exploring the discourse in the digital landscape and its potential influence on fan behaviours.

Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

New Media, Toxicity, and Women's Sport

Although SM provides many benefits to both users and brands looking to connect to others with shared interests, social networking sites also come with some potential negative consequences. Disagreement and having dislikes is not necessarily atrocious (Moore-Berg et al., 2020), but it does become problematic when opposing views are displayed to an extreme degree. In recent years, SM has been a breeding ground for toxic activity as the social and political

climate become more divisive (cf. Frederick et al., 2021; Gruzd & Attarwala, 2021). A contributor to the proliferation of dark spaces and toxic activity is the ability for users to create content anonymously and as such, there are little to no repercussions for those behaviours (Baccarella et al., 2018; Kavanagh & Jones, 2017). SM activity in North America for instance, has experienced significant influence from politics and divisive views, producing highly toxic environments (Pascual-Ferrá et al., 2021). Former U.S. President Donald Trump's tweets related to the COVID-19 pandemic were explored by Gruzd and Attarwala (2021), and they found that his content and conversations around his posts had a high degree of toxicity. In a similar study, Pascual-Ferrá et al. (2021) examined the polarization of wearing face coverings during the pandemic and found the highest levels of toxicity were associated with hashtag threads of anti-mask sentiment and against public health measures. One explanation for this toxic activity was the degree to which political views affected users' opinions on such matters and, when actors possessing power or influence spread toxic content, others felt more inclined to follow suit (Pascual-Ferrá et al., 2021). Toxicity disrupts the network and poses the risk of influencing others in these digital spaces.

Examining toxicity on SM from different contexts demonstrates that this issue is increasingly prevalent, including within the sport discourse. Toxic behaviours manifest in various ways in digital communities related to sport, such as gender, race and cultural discrimination (i.e., O'Shea & Maxwell, 2021; Razack & Joseph, 2020; Yan et al., 2018). For instance, Cleland (2014) examined the presence of racism in soccer fan communities online and found a high degree of racist posts in those digital spaces. A similar study was also conducted in the American football context which found that homophobia, sexism, and misogyny were rife in SM fan communities and toxic attitudes were often uncontested by others (Kian et al., 2011).

Given SM's design to enable more personal interaction among users and public figures, Kavanagh and Jones (2017) highlighted the widespread nature of abuse in fan communities directed at athletes and sport organizations across the industry on various platforms. Thus, toxicity becomes yet another issue that marginalized communities must face and overcome.

Historically, women in sport have generally been largely underrepresented (cf. Cooky et al., 2021; Fink, 2016; Lebel et al., 2021). According to Hindman and Walker (2022), gendered discourse refers to the shared knowledge that may manifest in multiple mediums in which hegemonic gender ideology is socially constructed and internalized by individuals, resulting in a "normalness" of masculinities being superior to femininities. While some forms of oppression or sexism are more overt, Fink (2016) outlined that subtle forms are much more prevalent in the sport industry and permit this discourse to persist despite efforts to promote gender equity. The underlying issue in gendered discourse here, is toxicity.

Culture in sport related to women is primarily pessimistic due to engrained ideologies that allow the perpetuation of feminine inferiority (Hindman & Walker, 2020). Toxicity exists in the biased culture within networked systems that have long been deemed as "old boys clubs" and preclude the entrance of women (Hindman & Walker, 2020; Katz, Walker, et al., 2018). Through an organizational lens, hegemonic gender discourse makes individuals think it is indeed natural or normal for powerful roles to be held by men and thus, undermines access for women and their ability to break through barriers and gain agency (Hindman & Walker, 2022). Further illustrated by Katz et al. (2018), the institutionalized result of gendered discourse is problematic as it bars the opportunities for equity and the development of women in the sport industry. Toxic cultures within networks allow for sexist ideologies to permeate into social practices.

At the spectator level, toxic attitudes related to gender also manifest among fans and several studies have explored the effect of such discourse on the lived experience (Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Sveinson et al., 2019; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016). Feelings of marginalization among female fans is not uncommon as Sveinson and Hoeber (2016) noted that the majority of those sentiments stemmed from gendered discourses and assumptions that fandom was inauthentic. Individuals felt as though they needed to prove fandom, including downplaying their gender identity to male fans to gain acceptance. Similarly, in their self-ethnographic study, Hoeber and Kerwin (2013) emphasized the challenge of female fans to legitimize oneself as a "real fan" at sporting events by demonstrating knowledge of the game to fit with the hegemonic masculine culture of sport fandom. Sveinson et al. (2019) highlighted that perceived genuine or authentic fandom was also questioned when heteronormative, feminine sporting apparel is worn. Toxic discourses that continue to dominate female fandom in generally male-dominated sport spaces reinforce inferiority and illegitimacy, making it even more difficult to break through these barriers.

Toxicity is also present in the media, including legacy and digital mediums. The stark reality for women's sport specifically is that traditional coverage, such as television and print, is minimal (Cooky et al., 2021). If, and when women's sports are shown on broadcast networks, they are framed in such ways that reinforce feminine inferiority (Johnson et al., 2022). Women's sport has been framed through a male biased lens with a focus on portraying female athletes in a sexualized way which is consistent with the ongoing persistence of gender stereotypes and norms (Adá Lameiras & Rodríguez-Castro, 2020; Matz & Bowes, 2021). Given traditionally low coverage rates and inauthentic story portrayal, SM presents opportunities for women's sports to connect with fans on their own terms (Piché & Naraine, 2022).

Although new media developments have offered women's sport and athletes more opportunities to engage with their fanbase, these communication methods also contain issues related to gendered discourse (Hindman & Walker, 2022; O'Shea & Maxwell, 2021; Sveinson & Allison, 2022). Despite the positive characteristics of SM to promote the growth of women's sport and overcome barriers, online spaces also pose the potential for toxic behaviours to emerge and harm progress for this sector. In sport journalism, online misogyny and harassment including discriminatory language on SM towards female journalists has been an increasing problem (Antunovic, 2019). Gendered discourse extends across many social networking sites and often also manifests in racialized tones. Beyond traditional sexualization and delegitimization, women athletes of color are harassed even more so in online spaces based on racist narratives (Kavanagh et al., 2019; Razack & Joseph, 2020). These toxic behaviours in online communities are further described as symptoms of deeply rooted cultural and social issues facing women's sport, perpetuating exclusion from participation and representation (Fink, 2016; Katz, Walker, et al., 2018). Toxicity is not solely a problem in sport and raises real concern for the emotional and physical well-being of individuals engaged in digitally mediated activities.

In women's sport, toxicity and its many forms have been explored through cultural, organizational and experiential lenses (e.g., Hindman & Walker, 2020; Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Sveinson & Allison, 2022), but is deficient in this SM-specific research context. Thus, the present study attempted to occupy this gap by providing a greater understanding of toxic activity among individuals engaged in the women's sport discourse online.

Network Theory

NT was formed to understand how individuals form connections with each other (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). Networks are composed of relationships and linkages among

individuals who may or may not be previously socially connected by demographic attributes (i.e., gender, race, religion, etc.), prior exchanges and/or shared common interests (Borgatti et al., 2009). Networks consist of two or more individuals and these social ties can occur in multiple contexts, including digital environments (Katz et al., 2020; Naraine & Parent, 2016). Borgatti et al. (2009) described the early use of NT emerged from social philosophy exploring how individuals connect to each other and form order within groups. As it evolved, theoretical foci turned to uncover structures and patterns linking individuals that could be influenced by social settings or other factors such as position (Scott, 2017).

The network paradigm is further conceptualized into NT Proper and Theory of Networks (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). NT Proper as outlined by Borgatti and Halgin (2011) is considered a macrolevel approach in which the focus lies in the understanding of structures and processes of the whole networked unit. Theory of Networks, however, adopts a more microlevel approach that focuses on the specific linkages and actors within the networks (Naraine & Parent, 2016). For the present study, NT Proper was more useful as it emphasizes the importance of the structural components of the networks as a whole and the resulting connectivity within them.

SNA, underpinned by NT looks to analyze the relationships between individuals within social structures (Scott, 2017). SM platforms, like Twitter and Reddit, act as networked tools connecting users together and facilitate novel ways of learning and information sharing (Gruzd et al., 2016). Exploring the patterns of communication and interaction between SM users in these networks provide a greater understanding of how certain behaviours can influence the overall function of the group. The coupling of NT and SNA assists scholarly inquiry to offer new ways of understanding behaviours among individuals participating in group activities (Quatman & Chelladurai, 2008a).

This method of analysis explores social ties and behaviours within structured interactions, from a variety of ontological, epistemological, and methodological lenses, demonstrating its utility and applicability to many facets of sport management. Research in this space has employed NT to understand connection in a wide variety of contexts, such as National Sport Organizations (Parent et al., 2018), professional sport leagues (Cousens & Slack, 2005), in leadership processes (Katz et al., 2018; Sagas & Cunningham, 2005), and relational ties between sport fans (Katz et al., 2020). Relationships and networks are not limited to physical settings, and can also occur digitally, facilitated by SM (Naraine & Parent, 2016).

SM platforms and the network of communities that emerge from them offer spaces for users to connect with others to openly discuss ideas and information (Gruzd et al., 2016). Individuals may be engaged on several platforms and in various groups within them to expand their networks, strengthen ties with others sharing similar interest, connect with public entities they have an affinity for like sport teams and athletes, and engaging in other consumer related behaviours (Naraine et al., 2021). From this lens, interpersonal connections matter as fans are deeply embedded in networks that each influence their attitudes and decisions related to their strong sporting affiliations (Katz et al., 2020).

Networks link individuals together through common interests. However, conversation anchored by those commonalities can also bring people together to form new connections (Hambrick & Pegoraro, 2014). Actors can enter networks through the discussions they contribute to or desire to be engaged in. Within structured environments, Naraine and Parent (2016) outlined that many intersectional individuals or groups can be involved, such as men, women, organizations, and sponsors. On SM, features like hashtags promote public sphere activity that

are open for individuals to join in on the conversation that is connected by a common topic (O'Hallarn et al., 2018).

In the last decade, researchers have explored the use of hashtags to form networks for dynamic conversation (i.e., Naraine et al., 2020; Pegoraro et al., 2014; Yan et al., 2019). Discussions can quickly change in digital spaces, shifting in sentiment as individuals receive and disseminate information or opinions. Pegoraro et al. (2014) illustrated that discussions anchored by a common hashtag can evolve away from the initial intention of the hashtag, which poses consequences to various actors in the network that are linked to it, like stakeholders. To explore what conversations look like, Yan et al. (2019) examined an official league-affiliated hashtag on Twitter and found that open, networked environments created democratic participation on SM. As users entered and exited this space, the attitude of discussion also fluctuated based on which actor had the most centrality to influence the discourse. This research highlighted the complex, dynamic construction of communication processes in online networks. The results of Yan et al.'s (2019) study indicated that over time, connectivity, and conversations in social networks change as more individuals contribute to discussion and interact with other users.

The types of conversations using hashtags and those occurring in networked communities evolve and diffuse rapidly (Hambrick & Pegoraro, 2014). The underlying sentiment of discussion in these spaces can also quickly change in both positive and negative ways as more individuals become involved. Users large and small can influence a hashtagged community thus, Hambrick and Pegoraro (2014) posited that it is less about who spreads the message and more about what each user says. The nuances of conversation, particularly in democratic spaces in which users may have opposing views is of considerable value for continued research.

NT affords individuals with connection over mutual interest but can also provide a space for the mutual dislike of a given topic. Although the optimist would view SM as a conduit for positive connection, there is also the possibility for toxicity to foster through shared disinterest. Network gatekeeping theory can assist in unpacking the dynamic relationships at play in the digital space. It is not as linear as in the physical world and is not just limited to one key decision-maker but rather, gatekeeping can be multi-directional interaction between individuals engaged in the digital space (Konikoff, 2021). Further, the distinction between gates, gatekeepers and gated is much more porous and fluid in online contexts as roles may shift from network to network (Konikoff, 2021) and thus, toxicity can emerge depending on who is driving the discourse.

Here, NT provides a method of understanding the dynamic relationships present in online fan communities and their discussions of topics they enjoy and do not. Exploring women's sport and, specifically toxic activity, through a networked perspective on SM can assist in unpacking what toxicity looks like and how it can influence the discourse. The culture of women's sport in various mediums, physical and digital, and can seep into fan attitudes resulting in harm to the growth of this industry (Fenton et al., 2021; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013). This research focuses upon the nuances present in digital communities connected by common hashtags (Hambrick & Pegoraro, 2014), uncovering how toxicity and negative conversations proliferate in these spaces. Through this theoretical paradigm, knowledge related to toxicity and its effect on consumer behaviour in women's sport is extended.

Method

A SNA approach was adopted to explore the levels of toxicity in women's sport fan networks. This study employed Communalytic and Perspective API to conduct toxicity analyses

on SM discussion threads for two North American professional women's sport leagues: the

WNBA and NWSL. Communalytic Pro stores up to 10 million records from various SM

platforms across 50 data sets (Communalytic, 2021). On Twitter, 500,000 tweets and replies can

be collected during a 7-consecutive day period for a given data set. For Reddit, Communalytic

Pro simultaneously gathers historical data including submission posts, comments and replies to

comments for up to 31 consecutive days in the data set. The toxicity analysis on Communalytic

is composed of six attributes (Table 2.1) in which their definitions are detected by Perspective

API to assign scores as percentages (Perspective Developers, 2022).

Table 2.1

Perspective API Toxicity Attributes and Definitions

Attribute Name	Description
Toxicity	A rude, disrespectful, or unreasonable comment that is likely to make people leave a discussion
Severe Toxicity	A very hateful, aggressive, disrespectful comment or otherwise very likely to make a user leave a discussion or give up on sharing their perspective. This attribute is much less sensitive to more mild forms of toxicity, such as comments that include positive uses of curse words
Identity Attack	Negative or hateful comments targeting someone because of their identity
Insult	Insulting, inflammatory, or negative comment towards a person or a group of people
Profanity	Swear words, curse words, or other obscene or profane language
Threat	Describes an intention to inflict pain, injury, or violence against an individual or group

Data Collection

The present study collected data on Twitter and Reddit for the WNBA and NWSL to

provide a holistic view of the degree to which toxicity is present in women's sport fan

discussions (see Table 2.2). In the interest of capturing public sphere activity and exploring

women's sport threads holistically (O'Hallarn et al., 2018, 2019), this research focused on the main hashtags and subreddits for each respective league. Using Communalytic, tweets containing "#WNBA", "#WNBAPlayoffs", keyword "WNBA", and posts from the subreddit "r/WNBA" were collected. The hashtag "#NWSL", keywords "NWSL" and "NWSL Playoffs", as well as the subreddit "r/NWSL" were captured. Four 7-consecutive day periods of tweets and replies, and subreddit comments were collected in the pre-season, in-season, playoffs, and off-season of the WNBA and NWSL's respective cycles to explore toxicity in the leagues throughout the 2022 season (Table 1.1). To contextualize the scores of the women's leagues, the same toxicity analyses were also conducted at the same time points for the analogous men's leagues: the NBA and MLS. Tweets containing "#NBA", "NBA", and posts from the subreddit "r/NBA" were gathered. SM data collected for the MLS included posts that used "#MLS", "MLS", and "r/MLS".

Analysis and Findings

Using Communalytic and Perspective API, toxicity analyses revealed toxicity in digital women's sport spaces and what some of those attitudes looked like. In total, this study conducted 32 separate toxicity analyses, comprised of four Twitter and four Reddit analyses for each league. Upon completion of initial toxicity analyses, the overall toxicity and attribute scores were produced (Table 2.3 and 2.4), including the top-ten posts for each attribute (Gruzd et al., 2022). Below, Figures 2.1-2.4 outline the toxicity results as percentage values by attribute for the WNBA and NWSL on Twitter and Reddit.

A secondary, manual textual analysis was conducted to ensure the data records were in fact toxic and not given the attribute due to API language limitations. This processes consisted of revisiting the top-ten posts of each attribute as well as whole data sets, to determine if the

algorithm of Communalytic and Perspective API detected toxicity accurately. This process involved confirming the toxicity scores were appropriate for the context of the study. For example, the interface does not have the capacity to identify sarcasm or recognize when profanity is used as an expression of positive sentiment in certain contexts and are not negatively toxic to the conversation. For the most part, toxicity was accurately detected however, there were some instances in which some of the top-ten posts were borderline "toxic" or simply someone expressing discontent. Additionally, upon review of the entire data sets of collection periods, there were some posts that may not have been detected by the algorithm or given an accurate toxicity score. Thus, it is probable that there are higher values of toxicity for the women's sport that were not identified by Communalytic and Perspective API.

Table 2.2

Total number of posts collected from each league during the 2022 sport season cycle

	WNBA	NBA	NWSL	MLS
Period 1: Pre-Season	April 29-May 6		April 22-29	
Twitter	10,383	73,548	4,773	6,085
Reddit	621	3,626	1,378	2,521
Period 2: In-Season	July 20-27		July 20-27	
Twitter	13,927	69,713	1,454	14,641
Reddit	1,057	3,438	456	10,614
Period 3: Playoffs	September 12-19		October 4-11	
Twitter	920	34,654	13,594	5,405
Reddit	1,188	61,564	1,551	10,253
Period 4: Off-Season	October 4-11		November 1-7	
Twitter	22	48,942	480	11,409
Reddit	302	76,961	3,572	7,257
Subtotal Twitter	25,554	226,857	20,301	37,540
Subtotal Reddit	3,168	145,589	6,957	30,645
Total	28,420	372,446	27,258	68,185

Note: Season cycle periods correspond specifically to the women's leagues. Data were collected from the men's leagues during the same time period for consistency.

Table 2.3

Women's and men's professional basketball toxicity analyses results (in %)

	Overall Toxicity		Severe Toxicity		Identity Attack		Insult		Profanity		Threat	
	WNBA	NBA	WNBA	NBA	WNBA	NBA	WNBA	NBA	WNBA	NBA	WNBA	NBA
Period 1: Pre-Season												
Twitter	8	7	7	5	8	5	10	8	8	7	13	10
Reddit	8	11	5	9	7	9	10	15	7	12	11	18
Period 2: In-Season												
Twitter	8	10	8	8	9	9	11	12	10	11	15	14
Reddit	11	13	8	11	9	10	14	17	11	14	14	18
Period 3: Playoffs												
Twitter	9	8	10	9	9	10	13	12	12	11	16	16
Reddit	11	16	8	12	8	12	13	2	11	16	15	15
Period 4: Off-Season												
Twitter	3	7	4	8	6	9	6	11	4	10	11	15
Reddit	13	19	10	14	12	12	15	22	12	19	16	18

Table 2.4

Women's and men's professional soccer toxicity analyses results (in %)

|	Overall Toxicity		Severe Toxicity		Identity Attack		Insult		Profanity		Threat	
	NWSL	MLS	NWSL	MLS	NWSL	MLS	NWSL	MLS	NWSL	MLS	NWSL	MLS
Period 1: Pre-Season												
Twitter	1	0	1	0	2	1	2	1	2	0	3	1
Reddit	12	15	9	10	10	9	13	16	12	14	15	15
Period 2: In-Season												
Twitter	6	6	6	7	9	9	1	1	7	9	13	13
Reddit	10	13	7	10	10	10	12	16	9	15	10	14
Period 3: Playoffs												
Twitter	12	6	10	5	13	7	17	9	12	6	13	11
Reddit	13	13	9	5	9	5	15	8	12	7	12	7
Period 4: Off-Season												
Twitter	5	7	0	1	1	1	2	4	4	5	1	2
Reddit	10	16	1	2	2	2	6	10	7	11	1	2

To revisit RQ$_{2a}$, the study sought to understand the levels of toxicity present in the women's sport SM discourse. On average, toxicity scores across the leagues were similar. The

overall toxicity scores were generally close throughout the four periods. Toxicity in SM posts

pertaining to the WNBA consistently rose throughout the season cycle (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2).

On Twitter, toxicity peaked during the playoffs period and dropped in the off-season, which also

experienced a significant drop in posts altogether. Findings from the Reddit analyses indicated

that toxicity attributes also continued to rise throughout the season and continued into the off-

season. A striking result was that the WNBA's subreddit insult score was substantially higher

than the NBA, recording 13% of the posts compared to 2% in the NBA.

Figure 2.1

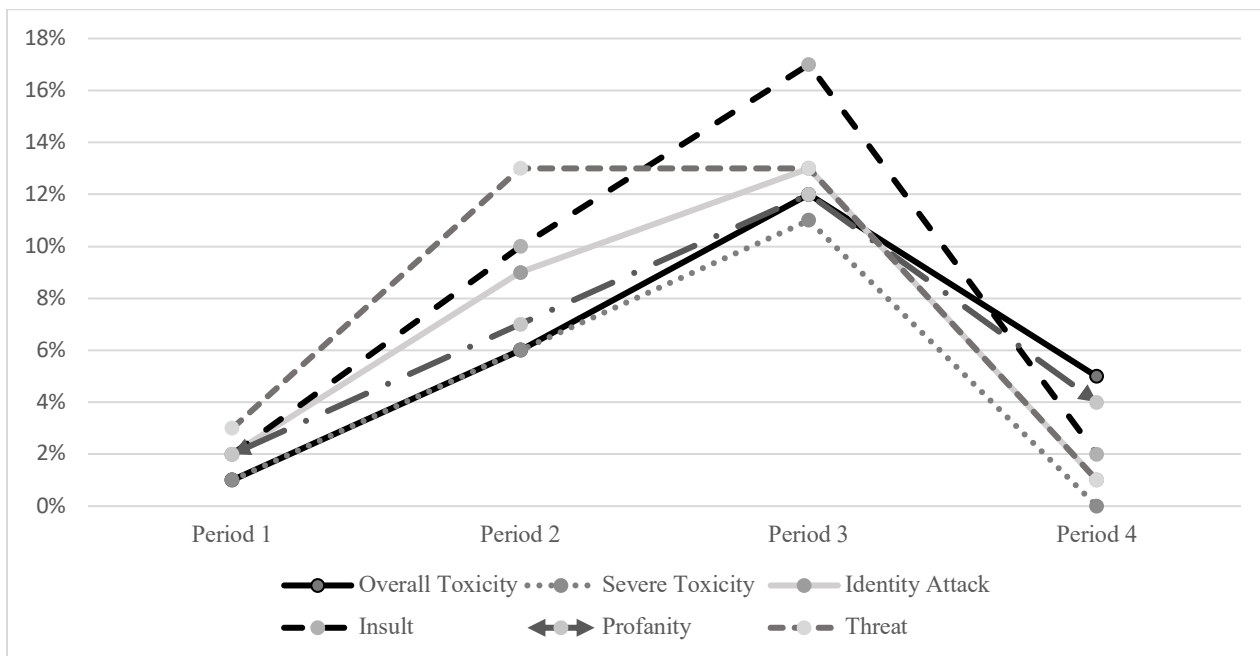*WNBA toxicity attributes on Twitter*
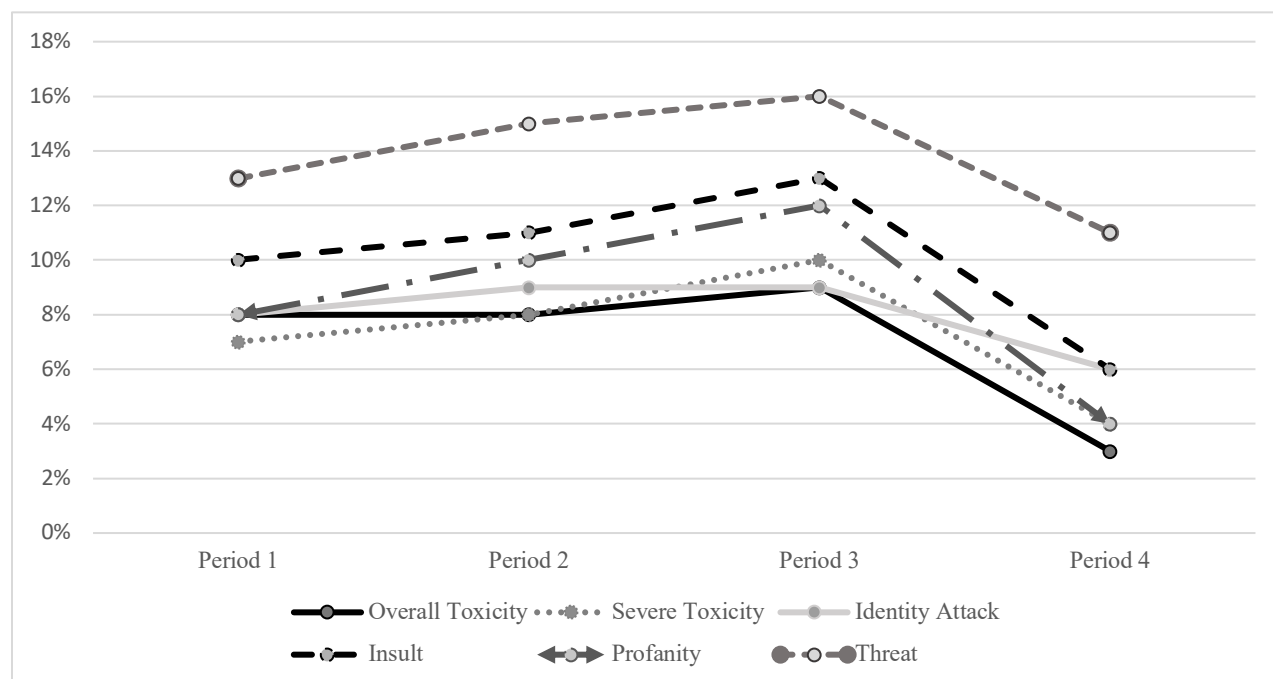
Figure 2.2

WNBA toxicity attributes on Reddit
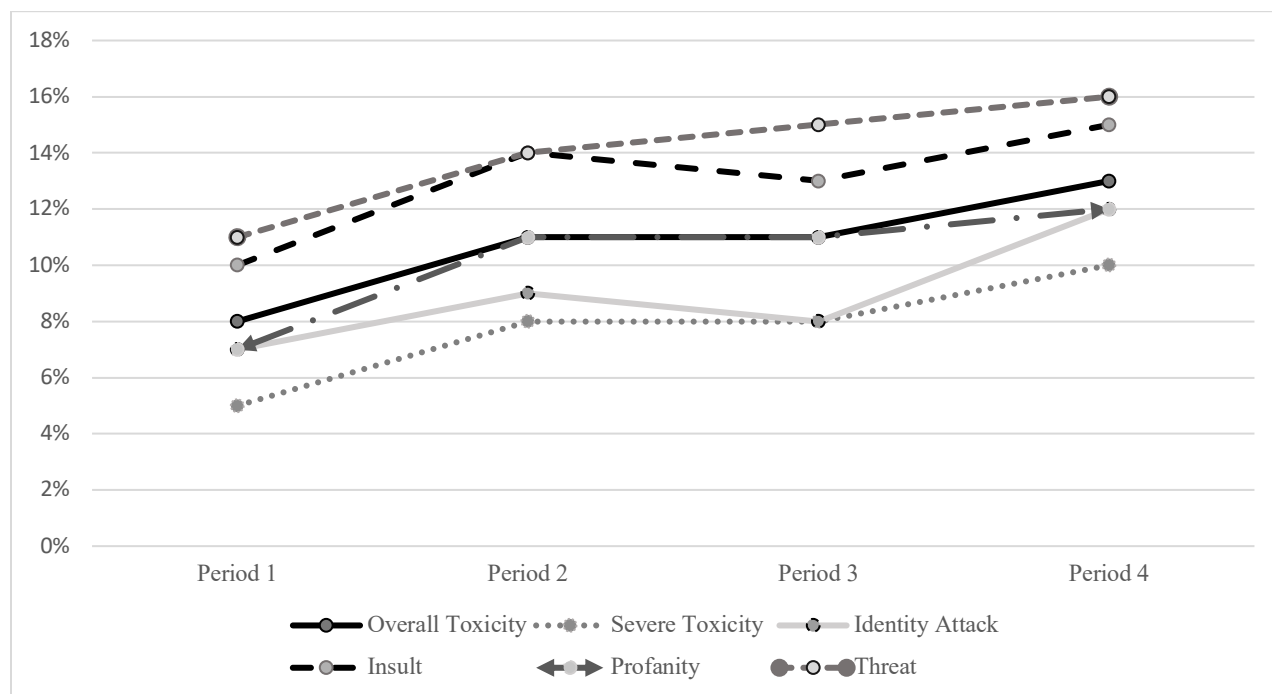
Toxicity on Twitter for the NWSL experienced a similar effect as the WNBA, rising to

peak during the playoffs and decreased following the league Championships (see Figure 2.3). On

Reddit, the NWSL had fluctuating levels of toxicity across all attributes, with higher toxicity

recorded in the pre-season and playoffs (see Figure 2.4). Similar results were produced (relative

to Reddit) in which overall toxicity were comparable across the collection periods. However,

several attributes were significantly highly for the NWSL than the MLS. In particular, the

playoff period of the NWSL recorded nearly double toxicity scores than the MLS across both
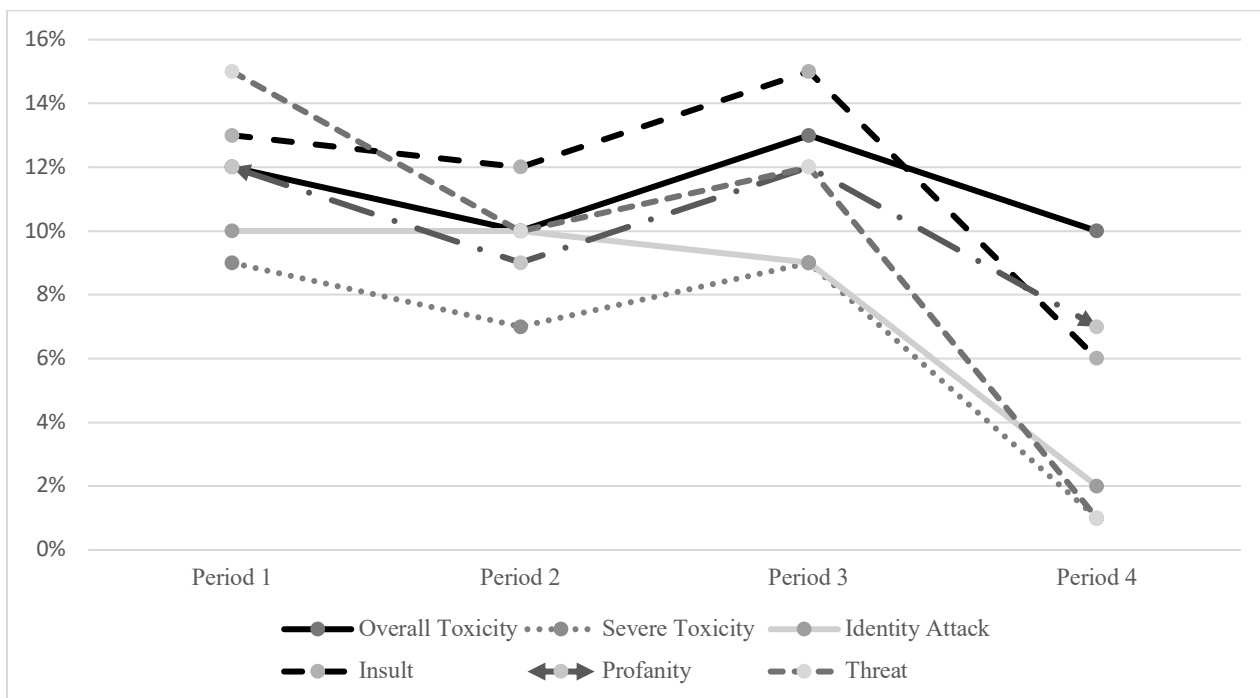
Twitter and Reddit.

Figure 2.3

NWSL toxicity attributes on Twitter

Figure 2.4

NWSL toxicity attributes on Reddit

Discussion

This study sought to examine toxicity present in online communities related to women's sport. Before unpacking the results further, it is important to highlight the contribution of this endeavor in addressing the gap that exists in women's sport and SM research. Scholarship has progressed in terms of social networking research since Hambrick and Pegoraro's (2014) advancement in the connectivity of individuals by using hashtags and engaging in discussion groups. Yan et al. (2019) furthered this notion and illuminated what conversations look like in these spaces, offering new insights on how discourse evolves. Along this vein, rather than providing a brief snapshot of one given time period, such as during an Olympic Games 4-week cycle (e.g., Pegoraro et al., 2014), the robustness of this study exploring the discourse over several professional leagues' season cycles gives this discussion the heft needed to assert its significance.

There are some key takeaways from findings here that offer insights for women's sport and the network paradigm's application in this area of research. First, it was encouraging for women's sport that people were increasingly using SM to discuss topics related to this industry. Over the data collection period, the number of posts rose over the season cycles; the WNBA's highest number of posts on Twitter was approximately 14,000 and the NWSL's peaked at approximately 14,000 posts on Reddit, both during the playoff periods. This finding is telling given that social networking sites can promote women's sport in alternative ways to overcome the barriers of modest broadcasting (Piché & Naraine, 2022). SM data suggested that there is growth in the women's sport discourse, however, the numbers are still only a fraction of those of the men's leagues. Over the four periods of data collection and the number of posts were consistently greater than the women's leagues across each period and overall, recorded

approximately 8 times more posts. Thus, given that women's sport, specifically the WNBA and NWSL hashtags and keywords were notably talked about less on SM, the toxicity analyses offer significant results on the state of the discourse by the proportion of toxicity for the volume of posts. The findings here confirmed Antunovic's (2019) work that indeed dark elements of SM exist in the women's sport space. Although more people are engaging in conversations in women's sport, digital networks may not be as efficacious or optimistic as literature hopes they would be.

To understand the levels of toxicity present in women's sport discourse, it was necessary to contextualize the results. Existing literature that has employed toxicity analyses for other contentious topics as well as the present study additionally conducting analyses for the analogous men's professional leagues provide benchmarks for toxicity in women's sport conversations. Pascual-Ferrá et al.'s (2021) exploration on Twitter related to COVID-19 public health measures found that anti-mask toxicity scores ranged from 27-37% of the data collected. These scores were significantly higher than those of pro-mask sentiment, ranging from 19-23%. Depicted in Figures 2.1 and 2.2, toxicity in SM posts pertaining to the WNBA rose throughout the season cycle. On Twitter, toxicity peaked during the playoffs period and dropped in the off-season, which also experienced a significant drop in posts altogether. Findings from the Reddit analyses indicated that all toxicity attributes continued to rise throughout the season and continued into the off-season. Toxicity on Twitter for the NWSL (Figure 2.3) experienced a similar effect as the WNBA, rising to peak during the playoffs and decreased following the league Championships. On Reddit, the NWSL had fluctuating levels of toxicity across all attributes, with higher toxicity recorded in the pre-season and playoffs (Figure 2.4). Across both women's leagues, toxicity scores were the highest during key periods within their respective seasons, notably when high

visibility events were happening like the lead up to the playoffs when fans were more likely to be actively involved on SM to show team support or discuss pertinent news stories.

These findings were consistent with those of Pascual-Ferrá et al. (2021), who found that toxicity related to mask-wearing grew over the four-month collection period. A possible reason for the growth in toxicity in both studies is that over time, individuals may become more comfortable in their networks to discuss contentious topics or gain confidence to share authentic views, which may be toxic. Moore-Berg et al. (2020) opined that disagreement and some toxicity from opposing views is not always a bad thing and this notion is particularly relevant for the present study. In some instances, having respectful debate or constructive conversation online can be productive, but becomes problematic if most of the discourse is highly toxic. Thus, the findings demonstrated that toxicity is present in women's sport SM and the scores are enough to raise concern over how viable these spaces can be to alternatively promote women's sport and bring fans together.

Tables 2.3 and 2.4 provide the toxicity scores as percent values comparing the WNBA with the NBA, and the NSWL with the MLS. On average, toxicity scores across both genders and sports were similar. The overall toxicity scores were generally close between the WNBA/NBA and NWSL/MLS. Some women's sports' individual attributes were higher than the men's and vice versa. The NWSL in particular recorded several higher scores in toxicity attributes than the MLS over various collection periods and SM platforms. It is important to remember however, that given the drastically lower number of posts pertaining to women's sport, toxicity is perhaps therefore proportionally more influential in the conversation. Additionally, men's sport in general, is discussed more normatively and perhaps toxic discussion is not considered as big of a problem (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). However, this is not to say

that toxic discourse in men's sport is acceptable either. The key takeaway here is that less people are talking about women's sport and the discourse is considerably as or more toxic. Thus, it can be inferred that there is a large negative presence in SM networks and if sustained, could be detrimental to the growth of fan communities and hinder user engagement.

A trend worth noting among the findings was that toxicity was consistently greater for the women's leagues than the men's at certain times in the season cycles. Toxicity was highest in the WNBA and in fact, surpassed the NBA during the pre-season and playoff periods. In the NWSL, it is even more egregious that overall toxicity and each attribute were significantly higher during the playoffs than for the MLS. At momentous times, such as the build-up to the beginning of the season and during the playoffs, it would be expected that the leagues would receive more coverage or attention in the media. But, when women's leagues have greater exposure and more people are engaging online, the discourse is the most toxic. So, it is necessary to further explore toxicity given it has the potential to derail the growth efforts of an already disadvantaged vertical.

The greatest number of posts for the WNBA and NWSL were during the playoff periods, indicating that at more "exciting" times, an increased amount of people weree engaging in the discourse. Thus, we would expect that people to be excited or positive about women's sport in online conversations. However, toxicity was actually consistently higher than the men's at these times and further, the discourse was related to insults, profanity, and threats. If the public sphere discourse contains language where users are insulting and threatening each other, then this increase in exposure is not helpful to women's sport. Instead, some fans may seek other spaces to engage, taking them away from any mainstream SM exposure that could expand leagues' reach to potential new fans.

At face value, the high scores for insult and profanity would be cause for serious concern. Upon further examination of the most toxic posts of each attribute, profane language and insults were primarily related to topics like the sport events themselves, criticism over the referee decisions, and league-associated news. Many of the highest toxicity scores' posts appeared to be mostly related to the expression of language in which toxicity was not necessarily about users attacking each other in the space. Rather, it was more of a mechanism to express opinions and openly discuss them with others. In this specific context, there appeared to be less targeted hate which is an improvement from previous works (Antunovic, 2019). This finding strengthens the assertion of the study that although toxicity is present in the women's sport discourse, it may not be as dominant or harmful as it could be (Fenton et al., 2021). Nevertheless, inappropriate content of any kind that is disrespectful to others or counterproductive to constructive conversation, does not assist in creating supportive discourse for women's sport and their fans.

The findings from this study do warrant some optimism for the future of women's sport in the digital space. Although toxicity is still there and perpetuated by existing hegemonic culture (Hindman & Walker, 2022), compared to highly contentious topics, it may not be as bad as it could be. The highly toxic activity related to women's sport may not occur in such open spaces like using a women's league-affiliated hashtag to identify oneself as a fan. Therefore, results from the toxicity analyses suggest that the discourse pertaining to women's sport is getting better. If the opposite occurred and toxicity scores were significantly higher than the current scores or other contentious topics, the outlook on the future would be quite different. Given that the overall toxicity present in women's sport networks is noticeably lower than those of the benchmark scores, we can see that when women's leagues are publicly discussed, toxicity is not as high as it potentially could be.

In O'Hallarn et al.'s (2018, 2019) terms, town-hall like public sphere activity appears to be occurring in the women's sport context. Perhaps highly toxic individuals who in the past have been more direct in their behaviours now engage in closed spaces to avoid excoriation from those who are supportive of women's sport. Given this study specifically employed league-affiliated hashtags (#WNBA and #NWSL) and subreddit groups (r/WNBA and r/NWSL), it is likely that toxic users seek hidden locales in the dark web, much like under-ground channels to share attitudes unwanted for public consumption (O'Hallarn et al., 2018). The findings tell us that although women's sport SM discourse is toxic, it could be significantly worse when considering the results found by Pascual-Ferrá et al. (2021). Public networks such as these do provide enjoyment and a degree of protection against toxicity when league hashtags or specific subreddits are used. Discourse containing official names may offer fans the opportunity to openly converse about women's sport without the fear of toxic interaction or harassment as individuals with those extreme attitudes operate in more hidden, fringe spaces.

Generally, toxicity scores were higher on Reddit than Twitter for both women's leagues. It is intriguing that the toxicity attributes scores were so much greater on Reddit as the total number of posts were significantly lower compared to the data collected from Twitter. Users must search for specific subreddit forums and request to join the space so this would explain the lower number of posts collected. Thus, these results indicate that perhaps due to Reddit's platform being less public, it could lead to members in these networks to feel more comfortable in sharing their authentic thoughts that may be more contentious or passionate which was detected as toxic. Hashtag threads on Twitter are more publicly accessible and would likely receive higher viewership which may influence the degree of toxicity in posts if users know that their content will be consumed by more people. The greater toxicity in WNBA and NWSL

subreddits can be interpreted that members are more intentional in their contribution to the conversations and appear to display more unfiltered opinions that are considered more toxic.

Theoretical Implications

This research builds upon past literature exploring toxicity within the women's sport discourse and offers additional context to the application of the network paradigm in sport marketing. First, the present study adds to the growing literature on women's sport (e.g., Cooky et al., 2021), including its discourse. It also intersects with work on digital communities, such as the work of Fenton et al. (2021) and Naraine (2019). Specifically, this study shows that engagement may not always be positive and toxic discourse occurs regularly in digital spaces when there are topics in which people can debate, heeding Moore-Berg et al.'s (2020) identification of online hostility.

Second, the present study builds on the work of Hambrick and Pegoraro (2014) and Yan et al. (2019) in demonstrating connective mechanisms through a network paradigm lens. Conversation is not always positive, and although most sport marketing research endeavors in the network paradigm highlight positive associations (e.g., Katz et al., 2020), highlighting the "dark side" within networks is important, too. This element is critical given the increased polarization of debate spurred by the intersection of sport and other popular topics (e.g., politics; Frederick et al., 2021). Third, this study builds upon Naraine et al.'s (2021) work, underscoring the power of subcommunities (through hashtags or subreddits) to anchor networked conversation. Indeed, hashtags are effective in connecting individuals on SM, but this feature can also facilitate toxic discourse and, this research illustrated that networks may not be as face value as they seem as there appears to be an underlying dark system engaging within this context. To this extent, the present work provides insights to what conversations in women's sport SM look

like and the apparent role toxicity plays in perpetuating traditional hegemonic narratives inhibiting the growth of this sport vertical.

Similarly, the present study affirmed that networks in the women's sport SM context operate much like the public-sphere (O'Hallarn et al., 2018, 2019). With the potential for positive and negative discourse occurring in these public spaces, the present study revealed that women's sport serves as a catalyst for toxicity to enter, fester, and, potentially, influence the conversation akin to Hambrick and Pegoraro's (2014) examination of how network conversation can be created, evolve, and degrade. Related, as more is known about this context, particularly from a digital perspective (e.g., Piché & Naraine, 2022), it is critical to consider the present study's findings and the potential for SM to contribute to the attention deficit in women's sport as characterized by Vann (2014). This work advances scholarship's understanding of the existence of toxic discourses and their composing dark elements in SM networks (Baccarella et al., 2018), so intentionality is crucial to the digital experience. And further, in the women's sport context, it is even more critical that fans and sport entities make worthy endeavours to attempt to minimize the effects of toxicity to create positive discourse that promotes it.

Practical Implications

This research outlined the prevalence of toxicity in women's sport fan discourse on SM. However, findings illustrate that these spaces should not be written off as a wasteland of negative conversation. Indeed, toxicity rates were similar to those of the men's professional leagues, but it is encouraging that they are not higher in such open, public spaces. This offers key insights for managerial practice. Public league-affiliated hashtags and networks to engage in women's sport discourse provide a degree of protection against highly toxic individuals who may not directly name the sports they intend to demean. Therefore, an advantageous step for organizations may

be to take a proactive role in these spaces to engage with fans and promote positive conversation. Rather than being reactionary, SM managers and individual public-figure accounts have the opportunity to become more involved in mitigating toxic activity before it happens. For instance, to pre-emptively reduce toxicity manifesting, SM coordinators may adopt active roles by more frequently engaging with fans rather than operating at a bird's eye view of the discourse, to post interactive content that can direct discourse. For women's sport fans to continue engaging on SM and in networked conversations, environments must be cultivated to support these users and organizations can assist in making these spaces inclusive to reduce toxic influence.

Conclusion

Women's sport has historically faced discrimination in various facets of the industry, such as deficient broadcasting, pay inequity and disparate opportunities for growth, amongst others (Lebel et al., 2021; O'Shea & Maxwell, 2021). SM offers this marginalized vertical and its fan base with a space to enhance exposure, build brand image, and promote positive discourse (Piché & Naraine, 2022). However, toxicity and negative attitudes exist in these spaces and inhibit such growth (Antunovic, 2019; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016). Utilizing a season cycle of two North American professional women's sport leagues' fan commentary on SM, analyses revealed the prevalence of toxic rhetoric in the networks of considerable significance. Results highlight that toxicity in women's sport digital spaces is problematic. The present study occupies an important gap in women's sport research related to SM, especially regarding opportunities to engage fans, and lays the groundwork for future work in the area.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is not without its (de)limitations. First, this work was exploratory. As such, the SM data collected from the NBA and MLS coincided with the WNBA and NWSL time periods

of pre-, in-, playoff, and off-season of the respective league cycles. To contextualize toxicity in women's sport discourse, the same data collection dates were used for the men's to provide a cursory overview of the SM space during the specific periods of the women's season cycles. However, these collection dates did not align with the same season cycle periods of the men's leagues. Thus, future research should look to collect data for the men's sports respective season cycle periods to provide a more precise comparison with the women's leagues.

Next, this study used official WNBA and NWSL league hashtags and subreddits. It is possible that due to the public nature of these hashtags, toxic discourse does not occur in such open spaces. Toxic content may not necessarily use specified keywords or official hashtags when negatively discussing women's sport. On Reddit, Communalytic does not have the capacity to collect data from general platform searches. Instead, data must be collected from discussions within specified subreddit groups. Subreddits are moderated for negative content by both computer-generated auto-moderators and individuals designated as the community moderators. Because these spaces are consistently regulated, toxic content could have been removed from the subreddits, thus affecting the toxicity analyses if highly toxic content was already removed prior to data collection. Therefore, it is very probable that the analyses did not provide an accurate description of toxicity within subreddits if more extreme content has been moderated/deleted. Additional examinations should be conducted to identify if other hashtags or subreddit groups that are not league-specified are more toxic than those openly affiliated, as well as exploring the moderation practices of the platforms in more depth.

This study also acknowledges the reliance of Communalytic and the limitation of the researcher's lack of access to or information about the program design and technologies to conduct toxicity analyses, nor alter the attribute detection criteria. For instance, when reporting

toxicity percentages, raw scores are not provided for each subcategory (e.g., insults, threats) to offer additional context. Thus, although this SNA software tool offered new insights on the prevalence of toxic activity on SM, future work could employ Communalytic complementarily to other technologies to enhance the robustness of the results.

Further research should explore SM environments that are not affiliated to leagues in order to identify if other spaces perpetuate highly toxic discourse that harms the fan experience and influences their intentions to engage within them. This study has identified that toxicity exists in women's sport SM fan discussions and future research should continue to explore the factors that contribute to the prevalence of negative discourse in these spaces.

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Chapter 2b: Exploring women's sport fans' experiences with toxicity in online communities

The rise in the use of social media (SM) has enabled the transformation of relationships and communication between individuals (Abeza et al., 2019). To date, 58% of the world's population is active on SM (or 4.62 billion users globally), and the number of SM accounts have grown 10% since 2021 (Business Wire, 2022). Alongside this growth, one of the most discussed topics on SM continues to be sport (Fenton & Helleu, 2019). Consequently, sport organizations have embraced this form of communication as a way to engage with their fans around the world to build their brands (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). As the integration of SM in marketing and communication strategy increases among sport organizations so does the efficacy for fans to connect with one another to share in their interests (Clavio & Walsh, 2014; Mastromartino et al., 2020).

Women's sport has also seen surges in popularity over the last decade, recording significant increases in viewership and investment (Adgate, 2022; Piché & Naraine, 2022). As women's sport programs continue to grow, so do their fan bases (Sherry & Taylor, 2019; Wear et al., 2022). Despite these positive developments, gender inequalities continue to persist within the industry and among fans on SM (Abushahla, 2021; Antunovic, 2019). Along with historical underrepresentation, women's sport and their fans are also challenged with the dark sides of SM such as sexism, harassment and misogyny (Razack & Joseph, 2020).

Related, the negative sides of social networking increases as more users engage in online spaces (Sheth et al., 2021). Toxicity on SM is seen across various contexts, such as political division (Frederick et al., 2021), health policy (Pascual-Ferrá et al., 2021), and sport (Fenton et al., 2021). Division over topics is not necessarily bad, but becomes problematic when opposing views and opinions become extreme (Moore-Berg et al., 2020). When these behaviours do

become disruptive, SM users have begun to create other networked structures with the hope of avoiding such negativity and creating welcoming spaces (i.e., Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013). Specifically in the women's sport context, few studies have explored how toxicity influences the fan experience and the repercussions of toxicity on future engagement.

This study responded to calls for research on the distinctiveness of women's sport and the experiences of their fans (Lebel et al., 2021). Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to understand the influence of toxicity on women's sport fans and their engagement within online communities. Given the focus of this study was to explore how SM users experience interactions and the potential negative ones, theoretical knowledge was advanced through uncovering how these connections affect women's sport fans' intentions to engage in online discourse. This work adopted an exploratory phenomenological approach, guided by the following research question:

RQ₂b: How do fans experience interactions in women's sport online communities and is their continued expression of fan identity or behaviours affected by toxicity?

In addressing these questions, this research provided two key contributions. First, this study extended previous works done in the women's sport context with respect to fan engagement by exploring how interactivity, and specifically toxicity, in digitally mediated spaces influence user behaviours (Fenton et al., 2021; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013). Second, theoretical advancements were made with respect to DICs, in which fans and their connections in online spaces play a role in their involvement, particularly when there is toxic activity present.

Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

Motivational Use of Social Media

Individuals seeking connection have the convenience of today's digital age to use virtual methods, like SM, to actively engage with others ranging beyond physical bounds (Hambrick &

Pegoraro, 2014; Piché & Naraine, 2022). Similarly, organizations also seek to interact with their consumer base so they may create content that their consumers want for information and entertainment purposes (Abeza et al., 2019; Watanabe et al., 2015). The connective mechanisms of SM promote users to engage in discussion over shared interests and build relationships with each other and public figure accounts (Hambrick & Pegoraro, 2014). Further, new media has been identified as a very effective tool for communication and marketing, and has been examined from several business-related contexts (i.e., Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Naraine et al., 2021). In the digital space, users are brought to the center of interaction (O'Hallarn et al., 2018), and thus increasing the need for brands to build more intimate relationships with their consumers on SM as well as continue to understand how to better service them (Mastromartino & Naraine, 2021).

The unique characteristics of SM facilitate greater communication and information sharing efficiency, as well as enhanced entertainment for users (Billings et al., 2017). These features of SM platforms contribute to the ease of connectivity among users and assist with the creation and growth of online communities to share common interests. Digital media creates an environment in which organizations can more closely connect with their consumers in these communities to foster long-lasting and quality conversation (Abeza et al., 2020). Communities centered around certain topics such as shared interest in organizations are beneficial in promoting the brand and stimulating engaging activity that satisfies users' desires of interaction. Brands have the potential to tap into these online networked groups to engage more effectively with their base and strengthen relationships with consumers.

In the last decade, sport organizations have begun to more strategically adapt their communication methods in order to reach their fans and audiences where they frequent most, SM

being a locale of increasing popularity (Abeza et al., 2019; Naraine et al., 2021). The benefits of being flexible and innovative in communication and marketing increases brand awareness, loyalty, and equity (Naraine & Parent, 2017). SM additionally can be a transformative tool to connect to and cultivate relationships among organizations and their fans, but also the fans to each other (Hambrick & Pegoraro, 2014).

Because of its growth in use, SM has risen in popularity among sport management scholars to better understand how it is used by many individuals for various purposes (i.e., Stavros et al., 2014) . For instance, research on international soccer leagues have found that organizations made improvements to their SM platforms which enhanced fan engagement and relationship-building by placing more attention in cultivating two-way communication with their fans through more interactive content (Miranda et al., 2014). This strategic shift in communication as noted by Miranda et al. (2014) boosted the level of engagement with current fans on the Facebook pages of these teams and created an influx of new users interacting with the content, suggesting an increase of new fans.

For the individual user, a hedonistic factor to use SM is the ability to connect with favorite sport organizations and athletes. The use of the hashtag on Twitter allows for fans to self-identify and connect with others in the digital network (e.g., Hambrick & Pegoraro, 2014; Yan et al., 2019). Further, this self-identification serves as a membership ticket for users into an online community connecting to others who are also using the hashtag (Smith & Smith, 2012). This unique feature on Twitter allows fans to create custom hashtags to engage in discussion, share encouragement and express fandom by creating communities in which members feel welcome and able to discuss topics of interest (Smith & Smith, 2012). Along the same vein, these motivations identified the need for sport organizations to leverage this hashtag feature by

creating new opportunities to interact with fans and maintain relationships (Stavros et al., 2014). Sport organizations and athletes can therefore capitalize on fans' desire to engage within these hashtag-driven communities by creating and delivering relevant content to them that encourages interactivity (Hambrick & Pegoraro, 2014; O'Hallarn et al., 2018).

Dark Social Media

Although SM provides opportunities for sport fans to connect with each other and their favorite teams or athletes, there is also the potential for negative interactions to occur in these spaces. Toxic behaviours manifest in various forms online, and have the primary goal and intent to disrupt discussion or harm others (Gruzd et al., 2022). Toxicity is defined as "threats, obscenity, insults, and identity-based hate" as well as the inclusion of "harassment and socially disruptive persuasion, such as misinformation, radicalization, and gender-based violence" (Sheth et al., 2021, p.312). SM is particularly susceptible to toxic activity because platform structures are open and public, allowing greater access and ease of use to individuals to spread toxic content (Gruzd et al., 2022). Because of its openness, individuals have the ability to participate in disruptive acts online with little to no repercussions thus, the possibility of toxicity to spread rapidly increases (Baccarella et al., 2018; Gruzd & Attarwala, 2021).

Generally, toxic behaviours in digital spaces are characterized as cyber-attacks and dominant profiles causing the spread of negative attitudes with the goal to gain control of the discourse (Vallesteros et al., 2020). Toxic activities in digital spaces can have substantial consequences on individuals within the online community. Social networking sites have profound effects on how users interact with their community, and if negative interactions are targeted towards an individual or group of users, they are at an increased risk of harm (Vallesteros et al., 2020). Toxic behaviours have the potential to influence users and their digital

habits, which counteracts the positive characteristics of online spaces (Kavanagh & Jones, 2017).

Because abusers have the ability to capitalize on the dark characteristics of SM and gain control

of their virtual communities, toxic activity has proliferated into a much larger problem than ever

before (Baccarella et al., 2018).

Communities formed in online settings are susceptible to homogeneity among fans thus,

alienating certain groups of users (Yan et al., 2019). Networks of this nature have high

homophilic density, which Yan et al. (2019) explained facilitates the emergence of dominant

individuals and their potentially extreme views. The homophily effect in social networks occurs

because "people tend to form ties with others who are similar to them" (Ma et al., 2015, p.454),

and therefore hold social influence within these groups. Digital networks like SM sport fan

groups have the potential to create such environments in which certain individuals have the

ability to dominate online communities and the conversations within them (Katz et al., 2020).

Power dynamics and imbalances can be negative in these spaces as users with this level of

influence can steer the conversation and discriminate or gatekeep against other users (Gruzd &

Attarwala, 2021; Yan et al., 2019).

In the business context, toxic activity in digital spaces can have negative effects on

consumer behaviours. The virtual environment has the potential to enable toxic behaviours and

abuse which can influence individuals' continued use of certain SM platforms (Sheth et al.,

2021). As few moderation strategies are in place to prevent and/or control toxicity, there is

growing concern for both individuals engaging in these spaces as well as sport organizations

looking to use these methods of communication to grow their fan bases (Kavanagh & Jones,

2017). Toxic behaviour exhibited by fans and followers of sport-related accounts has become an

increasingly significant social problem that researchers have called for more scholarly attention (Litchfield et al., 2018).

Women's Sport, Fan Engagement, and Toxicity

SM permits female athletes to challenge low brand exposure and gender-framed narratives, while also offering the opportunity to authentically represent themselves (Li et al., 2021; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Increased visibility and viewership growth of women's sport have opened more avenues for athletes to connect with their fan base and grow their personal brand. Recent research has examined female athletes' use of Instagram and its unique features to present themselves to control and shape how they are viewed by their consumers, rather than the objectified narratives traditional media has imposed (Li et al., 2021). The ability for female athletes to promote themselves on SM and cultivate more interactive ties with their followers creates more opportunities to strengthen brand image and fan loyalty (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012).

SM also affords the same capability to fans of sport to self-present (Toffoletti et al., 2021). New media is not just for women's sport entities to gain exposure from traditional underrepresentation; Fenton et al. (2021) also demonstrated that platforms open connections among fans to share their fandom. Online communities provide many benefits to women's sport, including the ability to promote inclusive discussion (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013). Digital spaces are highly valuable for fans to engage in collective social interactions and share fandom experiences extending beyond geographical boundaries (Abeza et al., 2019; Stavros et al., 2014).

But the enhanced interactivity also comes with the risk for toxicity. In addition to the negative consequences on one's personal well-being, toxicity online has a trickledown effect on these users' consumer behaviours in sport, which is particularly salient in the women's sport

space. Beyond the impact on sportswomen and their ability to build their digital image, online trolling and abuse have broader effects on consumers and fans in women's sport (Kavanagh & Jones, 2017). Individuals in these spaces that are exposed to, and experience negative interactions may be less inclined to engage and/or participate due to the emotional risk of harassment (O'Shea & Maxwell, 2021). If dominant conversations and sentiments on SM in women's sport contexts are negative, fans may choose to leave these spaces thus, harming the positive features of DICs.

An early study in this space revealed that women participants in online discussion forums often conform to male-dominated notions of fandom to fit in as well as hiding their gender identify and/or gendered sport fan identity in fear of being harassed (Hynes & Cook, 2013). Sexual harassment and toxicity towards female users may additionally cause them to hide their identity and/or leave these groups entirely (Fenton et al., 2021). In Toffoletti (2017) and Toffoletti et al.'s (2021) investigations, women described that in their experiences of fandom, activities often excluded or marginalized those who did not meet male-defined measures of fandom. These exclusionary practices are not uncommon and are experienced beyond virtual bounds, reinforcing Hynes and Cook's (2013) notion that gendered fan identities should be hidden to reduce the risk of harassment. Socialized norms such as these are problematic in the women's sport space as it prevents fans from authentically expressing themselves.

With the rise of dark SM in women's sport, scholarship has also shifted in focus to include how fans have developed strategies to overcome toxic and sexist behaviours prevalent in online spaces. Women's sport fans have turned to creating inclusive communities outside of public sphere threads to avoid the negative and misogynistic discourses prevalent in public sport fan groups (e.g., Antunovic, 2019; Fenton et al., 2021). Thus, constructing inclusive digital

spaces allow individuals to make connections with others sharing the same interest (O'Shea & Maxwell, 2021). This practice is useful for women's sport and its fans to engage in communities designed to promote the growth and success of this sector, while leaving exclusionary spaces that do not share similar sentiments.

Fenton et al.'s (2021) findings revealed that over half of fans reported not engaging in discussions on SM where the threat of sexism existed, or passively engaged in these groups to avoid negative interactions. Instead, these fans decided to form micro-communities as a result of their disdain of sexism present in public sphere sport discourse to create their own content discussing fandom without being as fearful of harassment. These spaces are highly valuable to women's sport fans as DICs are used as a means of self-protection. Online communities have the ability to counter the toxic hegemony dominating most professional sport fan forums so that women's sport fans may express themselves authentically (Fenton et al., 2021; Veletsianos et al., 2018). Similarly, scholarship has explored the use of women's sport fan communities to frame conversations and sport in empowering and inclusive ways to facilitate relationship-building and positive well-being (Antunovic & Hardin, 2015). These spaces, as described by Toffoletti et al. (2021), are designed to share user-generated and interactive content, by, for, and about women in sport to provide the opportunity for fans to bypass traditional marginalization and toxic behaviours in online media discussions, allowing for alternative expressions and practices of fandom.

Increased SM popularity and its features that connect users effectively further contribute to digitally-enabled spaces where women's sport fans may gather to feel part of a community of like-minded individuals and form more intimate relationships with each other and female sports figures (Maurice, 2019). Traditionally neglected female athletes and women's sport fan voices

gain agency by creating their own groups to interact, as well as shift the narrative of sport

fandom away from being a homogeneous group of primarily White, adult men, toward a

collective of individuals from various intersectional identities (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016). DICs

dedicated to safe expression and interaction related to women's sport have the potential to

positively contribute to the growth of this sector as well as challenge dominant narratives that

exist in sport media. The emergence of these groups has created the need to further explore

conversations and experiences in these spaces to better understand how interactivity influences

user engagement.

(Digital) Imagined Communities

Initially developed by Benedict Anderson, ICs are constructed for common social

identities to create connections (Bergholz, 2018). Although Anderson focused on nationalism,

his sociological underpinnings provided an avenue for research to move away from political

research and toward cognitive processes and conceptually imagined factors that bring individuals

together based on similarities like common social identity (Phillips, 2002). Collective identity

through commonalities, interaction frequency and interconnections within the communities build

a sense of belonging and therefore self-attachment to the IC (Heere et al., 2011). Phillips' (2002)

quantitative work explored how Anderson's idea of personal attachment within ICs is

multidimensional as well as heavily shaped by social contexts and factors most salient to

members.

With the rise in popularity of SM, came the digitization of ICs into DICs. Digital media

has allowed for individuals to gather without geographic bounds and facilitates the formation of

communities with a common purpose to engage in shared interest discussion (Norman, 2014).

DICs promote greater connection for individuals looking for social groups that provide them a

sense of belonging, shared emotional connection and ability to present themselves in authentic ways that celebrate their multiple identities (Gruzd et al., 2011; Heere et al., 2011).

In sport, DICs afford a sense of connectedness among fans to engage in shared discussion of topics most pertinent to the members. The formation of online communities related to sport fandom satisfy individuals' desires to connect with others and cultivate relationships based on self-identities related to their spectatorial affiliations (Kalman-Lamb, 2021). Through quantitative methods, Kalman-Lamb (2021) highlighted that DICs provide fans an environment where they feel safety and stability of their identity shared with others in the community. Digital spaces that facilitate the development of DICs promote social trust, authentic self-expression and extends the opportunities for marginalized groups to engage. Self-presentation is particularly salient in gendered research to interpret how members of the women's sport fan community experience interactions and "perform" in different ways to elicit certain discussions (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012).

From a gendered context, characteristics of DICs offer the opportunity for intersectional identities to gather and create a space that is empowering for a group that has faced historical underrepresentation (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013). In women's sport, DICs have been formed as a way for fans to gather together to share a common fandom, promote inclusivity and avoid toxicity (Fenton et al., 2021). In Pavlidis and Fullagar's (2013) investigation, social networking groups dedicated to producing and circulating inclusive content supporting both individual and collective identities in women's sport are growing in numbers. These communities formed in digital environments present an opportunity for virtual gender equity movements in sport to proliferate, such that fans may share and celebrate their multiple intersectional identities (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013).

In this research context, DICs promote the understanding of how connections in online spaces can promote engagement and affect future consumer behaviours. Exploring the experiences of fans of women's sport through this perspective advances our theoretical knowledge regarding how interactivity influences an individual's intention to engage in these spaces, the way in which they present themselves in the spaces, and the potential consequences of toxicity on these behaviours.

Method

Participants

This phenomenological study looked to understand women's sport fan perceptions related to toxicity present in online communities. To achieve a diverse range of participants, intersectional women's sport fans were invited to participate, attempting to answer the call to challenge the lack of diversity in sport consumer behaviour research (Delia et al., 2022). Upon obtaining institutional research ethics clearance (Appendix A), recruitment occurred through SM platforms (i.e., Twitter, Reddit, LinkedIn, Instagram) to reach fans in spaces where they frequent most (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). A purposive sampling strategy was employed, seeking an intersectional group of active fans of North American women's sport leagues, specifically the WNBA and the NWSL. Inclusion criteria consisted of individuals who self-identified as women's sport fans and engaged in Twitter and/or Reddit fan groups pertaining to the WNBA and/or NWSL at least three times per week (including likes, comments, and shares) (see Appendix B). Adhering to qualitative SM research, the researcher gained access to the subreddits of the WNBA and NWSL through the moderators before posting recruitment flyers (Kozinets & Gambetti, 2020).

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews. Altogether, a total of twelve interviews were conducted, ranging from 40-60 minutes. Participants represented several intersectional backgrounds to align with Delia et al.'s (2022) assertion. Four men and seven women were interviewed (one participant did not disclose their gender), with their ages ranging between 19 and 50; six self-identified as White, two as Black, one as Hispanic, one as Asian, and two did not disclose their race (Table 2.5 below). The purpose of semi-structured interviews was to create an open discussion that allowed for participants to share their experiences and perspectives as they related to toxicity online in women's sport fan communities.

Table 2.5

Participant Profiles

Name	Gender	Age	Race	Country of Residence	Education	Current Occupation	Household Income (USD)
Anna	Female	34	ND	USA	PhD/T	Consultant	ND
Anneliese	Female	19	White	Canada	SCU	Student	ND
Arnelle	Female	21	Black	USA	C/UG	Student	<25,000
Ashley	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND
Clint	Male	42	White	USA	MD/PD	Director of Digital Education Innovation	100,000-190,000
Hayley	Female	26	White	Canada	MD/PD	Sportswriter	50,000-99,000
John	Male	30	Black	USA	MD/PD	Converged Infrastructure Engineer & Adjunct Professor	100,000-199,000
Laura	Female	24	White	Canada	C/UG	Master's Student, Newsletter Writer	ND
Mackenzie	Female	34	Hispanic	USA	SCU	Service Work	25,000-49,000
Marg	Female	28	Asian	Canada	C/UG	Programs Coordinator	100,000-199,000
Peter	Male	34	White	USA	C/UG	Professional Writing Tutor	100,000-199,000
Rob	Male	50	White	Canada	C/UG	Vice President, Sportsnet & NHL Production	>200,000

Note. ND = Not Disclosed, SCU = Some College/University, C/UG = College/University graduate, MD/PD = Master's/Postgraduate degree, PhD/T = PhD or terminal degree

All interviews were conducted over a synchronous video-conferencing platform (Zoom or Microsoft Teams). Using an online platform allowed for a greater access to and range in participants not constrained by geographical proximity. Consistent with the informed consent, participants had the option to turn the camera on or off, as well as choose a pseudonym.

Data Analysis

The data were interpreted using Braun and Clarke's (2019) guidelines of reflexive thematic analysis (more extensively discussed in Chapter 1). Transcription occurred alongside data collection; the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim following the interview and written transcripts were emailed to participants for review. Transcripts were dissected thoroughly and data was familiarized (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Open coding began upon completion of all interviews, where line-by-line codes were completed for each question. Once all interviews were given codes, initial themes were generated, cross-referencing them with the transcripts to ensure consistency across participant experiences. A deductive analysis informed by DICs was performed to understand the codes and initial themes through this theoretical underpinning.

As new themes were created and adjusted, Braun and Clarke (2019) recommended revisiting previously coded transcripts as the process is iterative and may require recursive coding. In this step, several new codes were created that fit within the deductive lens. For instance, when exploring the transcripts and codes through the theoretical perspective, more codes were produced or reorganized to align with the themes. For instance, the code of "community" occurred frequently and upon creation of the themes, the recursive process allowed to go back to the context of the code in order to place it in the most suitable theme and re-name some of those codes to better fit in other groupings. Themes were then reviewed and named to be reflective of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Again, the deductive process aided in naming the

themes that fit within DIC constructs. An example of this was the naming of the fourth theme in which the underpinnings of DICs such as community-building, shared beliefs or interests, and relationship formation were reflected amongst participant responses in the interviews. Next, the findings are presented.

Findings and Discussion

The findings outline four main themes related to toxicity and women's sport DICs. First, they described their initial <u>reasons for engaging</u> in these spaces. Next, participants summarized how <u>toxicity manifests</u> in the online women's sport space as they experienced negative behaviours. Strategies that individuals employed to <u>manage and respond to toxic activity</u> were discussed. Finally, overall impressions of interaction within women's sport DICs were that fans expressed <u>continued use</u> of the spaces and that toxicity was for the most part outweighed by the positive engagement they experienced. For continuity with post-positivism, frequency values of the themes and more examples of their quotations are provided in Appendix G. Table further highlights the salience of the themes across the data and the inclusion of each participant's perspective within each generated theme.

Reasons for Engaging

Developing and fostering fandom through SM

All participants acknowledged that some degree of fandom to women's sport has contributed to their engagement in online discussions. Hayley described that "I've been a fan pretty much you know, my whole life", which stemmed from her participation in youth sports and having female role models like Christine Sinclair, who has served as a positive inspiration throughout her life. Kenzie expressed her gratitude of being exposed to women's sport from an early age by her proximity to local professional and collegiate teams, stating she's been a fan for

"pretty much as long as I can remember." For others, women's sport fandom came later in life. Clint explained "I found myself being pulled into it just by wanting to support a variety of awesome players across the league [WNBA]." He was drawn in by both the increased access to women's sport and his shared values with leagues: "it is important to me mostly because they built a community around the sports and around the equity of the sport, both which are priorities for me and happy to see a sport that allows that to be kind of at the front." Participants acknowledged that being engaged on SM has played a role in their fandom and that having online communities to interact with other fans has increased their interest in women's sport.

The benefits of being involved

Upon joining women's sport discussions, many participants described that the main reason they stayed in the space was because of the community built around shared beliefs and principles to support the sport (Kalman-Lamb, 2021). Arnelle said, "being a women's sports fan is just about being in a community," and it is an important space for her to connect with other fans where she feels encouraged to share her thoughts. "The community building is there, a sense of belonging is there, and all those aspects are great," Rob noted when describing SM platforms as tools that can provide tremendous benefits to increase women's sport exposure. Laura explained, "really, why I got involved in an online space at all, was to support and follow women's sports." To these fans, dedicated spaces to express and share their fandom while feeling welcome within them were some of the main reasons to engage (Heere et al., 2011).

Concomitantly, relationship-building was also at the forefront of why fans chose to enter and engage in women's sport DICs. Anneliese mentioned "everybody kind of got a sense that they're all in it together… there's a lot of people who have made friends through being online." Connection is salient among individuals in women's sport communities as spaces are created

where individuals feel they can form genuine relationships to share in mutual fandom (Fenton et al., 2021). Laura said, "I think it is a great space to connect with like women's sports fans and pages and things like that and that's definitely the purpose I have for having it [SM]." For her, it was about finding dedicated coverage of women's sports as well as a place that promotes support for both the athletes and fans. Hayley furthered this notion that "having that dedicated community of people who are supportive and accepting… and if you want to learn, they're so educational… it's just such a great community to be a part of," these unique networks of women's sports fans allow for authentic connections to be made. DICs also facilitate instant opportunities to interact to discuss women's sport, enhancing user experiences: "it's so easy and quick to interact with people there" (Marga). Women's sport fans seek spaces in which they feel welcomed and accepted to share and discuss their love of sport. Participants asserted that being involved in women's sport communities is of value to their experience and a main reason for using SM as they are able to enjoy the unique conversation tailored to their interests.

Methods of interaction

Women's sport DICs built and cultivated by fans promote activity on SM for the purpose of engaging on mutual interests. Individuals who previously may not have used SM often were brought to platforms specifically to discuss women's sport and be a part of these supportive groups. Kenzie remarked, "I'm actually a premium Reddit user but am only that because I put my support to the WNBA." Rather than engaging with mainstream discussions, it is more valuable to women's sport fans to find specific content to feel more connected to their teams and to each other. "I really like being able to know that information because it makes me feel more dialed into my team… it helps me out as a fan, so it helps me feel more engaged" (Ashley). Here, communities are advantageous for women's sport as they are created for fans to receive and

consume specialized and specific content that mainstream media coverage lacks, resulting in increased interaction among members.

Additionally, these spaces make fans feel comfortable to share their thoughts without the fear of judgement as others are in the space seeking the same discussion. Arnelle acknowledged that "the little communities are just good in general for women's sports because it encourages a lot more conversation," Hayley added "I've definitely become more active in those spaces just as I am always trying to learn and grow." Having supportive spaces to engage and talk about women's sports with others sharing the same interests motivates these users to stay involved. Peter affirmed this notion: "that makes it easy in a way to build community cause that's a shared experience… 'we're us, we're a community'… it's just, you have to find different sources of motivation for staying involved." Participants outlined their desires to join and engaged in communities for connection, shared fandom, and to support the growth of women's sport (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013). DICs have been a positive place for participants to express their affinity for women's sport and to converse with like-minded individuals who are enthusiastic about the same topics.

The Influence of Toxicity on Engagement

Manifestations of toxic activity online

Although online communities offer members enjoyment and connection, each noted the presence of toxicity within these spaces. Participants characterized toxicity within women's sport discourse as an overall negative tone that intends to harm others in the space. Anna explained that "a lot of toxicity either sort of trying to invalidate it [women's sports] or centered around sort of umm identity issues of sexism, racism, and homophobia." Marga added "like it's just a lot of bad energy… people who just want to bring other people down. It's trying to influence people

negatively and ruins everyone's experience." Several participants acknowledged that female athletes and journalists received targeted hate more than fans in the space. Rob discussed that, "in particular, the female talent get some really inappropriate stuff… threatening violence or sexual stuff or you know, shots at their character or their knowledge of sports, completely unwarranted and strictly just because they are female." Marga further remarked that "it's the language I think is really what I think is the most toxic of like in social media, just the way people try to spin things." Toxicity in women's sport online communities sometimes presents as trolls who hate simply on the basis of sex and perceived lesser quality than men's sports. Toxic language spreads rapidly, especially when others are quick to follow suit and the narrative can become very negative.

Further, participants highlighted that a large issue is the ability for toxic attitudes to be spread anonymously and individuals can hide behind their screens without repercussions of their behaviours (Baccarella et al., 2018; Vallesteros et al., 2020). Several individuals in the study explained that often times, many of the toxic individuals within the discourse did not have a very "human" or authentic outward projection, but rather hid their identity or where not a real person altogether. John explained that he would see accounts with no-followers, very few followers or very bot-like that was created by someone simply to interject and spread toxic comments. Ashley added, "that was like one of the most toxic things I've ever seen. I was just like for somebody to sit there, find that event somehow get into it, make themselves anonymous, and then sit there and just repeatedly say that [toxic comments] over and over and over again." This issue is not singular to one SM platform and due to the public sphere, deliberative democratic structures, there are little moderating systems or filters to govern what people say. Hayley described that she has observed extreme toxicity towards other users in the women's sport space in which, "it's just

ridiculous how much [people] are told to die or go kill themselves or whatever, just because they support women's sports. It's insane and it's always these burner accounts who have 5 followers and are just searching up words to go hate on people. They [platforms] have like basically no filters for it it's like you can pretty much say whatever you want." Anonymous accounts, or those appearing to exist solely to express dislike of women's sport were discussed as very serious issues in the discourse that causes the most frustration among participants.

Fans in this study additionally described toxicity as a product of socialization (Sheth et al., 2021). John thinks "there's underlying social and cultural norms that are actually at play." Toxic discourse and culture are not unique to women's sport but when directed at female figures in these spaces, they are much more potent:

> There is a nasty undertone that happens a lot. And look, let's be honest, generally
> it's nasty on any topic, right? But there's some real ugliness that's come out over
> the years on a consistent basis and towards female athletes and women's sports and
> that's disappointing to see (Rob).

The persistence of toxicity in the wider virtual space has created an environment in which individuals are emboldened to spread negative attitudes more than they have perhaps in the past (Gruzd et al., 2022). Laura explained that "this is actually a systemic thing, it's not this kind of happenchance," and, "because there's not a lot of safety parameters… the internet culture has become a cesspool. It's really disappointing" (Hayley). Without measures in place to control or moderate platforms, toxicity perpetuates and can pose detrimental effects on individuals' emotional wellbeing and their behaviours online.

Emotional and behavioural effects

Participants cited frustration, irritation, and disappointment in seeing toxic content in women's sport digital spaces. John described, "it can draining, it can be exhausting, and it could be tiring to have to try to defend your existence," and the emotional attacks on both fans and female athletes have much longer lasting effects. Peter mentioned "the problem is they're negative about the sport existing and that's, like I said, unsurprising." Due to the normalization of toxicity on SM, users have become accustomed to seeing these attitudes which is just as harmful to women's sport fans' community building. But for some, seeing how intense toxic rhetoric can influence how they behave: "I see the hate people get from that and how personal that is and that does scare me a bit to be honest" (Laura). Toxicity online is problematic as it can derail efforts of communities meant for positive engagement. The negative feelings users experience when seeing or experiencing toxicity influence the ways in which they interact in DICs (Kavanagh & Jones, 2017). For women's sport that benefits heavily from online groups, negative changes in behaviours are detrimental to its growth.

Of the minimal negative changes in behaviours, the most common form among participants was disengagement: "anytime I see kind of mean-spirited or directly harmful comments, it makes me think about just not engaging with social media at all around women's sports" (Anna). This comment was particularly meaningful as toxic types of comments within women's sport discourse would actually change her behaviour, causing her to leave an online community, the very thing that connects her to others in the first place. Along the same vein, participants described their other changes in behaviours as engaging less frequently to avoid toxicity or seeking other spaces (O'Shea & Maxwell, 2021), opting to interact in more personally with others. For some users, particularly higher profile females like athletes or journalists, the toxicity can so intense they leave SM altogether (Antunovic, 2019).

An interesting finding among the male participants was the sense of exemption from the emotional and/or direct impact from toxicity. This notion was highlighted when the men noted seeing toxicity occur towards many women in the space rather than describing personal past experiences. For instance, Rob explained that he observed some platforms to be more negative than others and he's "seen that the impact on them [female users/journalists] and to some degree where some don't wanna do it anymore... there's a few who have just stopped using a certain platform. I'd say Twitter's the worst." In other cases, toxicity may not be as intense towards an individual but still influences their activity in women's sport spaces. John commented that he has turned to using more private messaging features to engage with others because "women and queer folks I interact with don't feel comfortable posting" in larger SM community discussions for fear of toxicity. Anneliese felt similarly and expressed hesitation to post in women's sport discussions because of past experiences with toxicity, "there are different spaces where I feel more comfortable to share my thoughts, so I feel like that kind of sucks." Some participants expressed disappointment that toxicity has caused disruptions in their online activities and harmed their experiences. Findings affirm that highly toxic discourse negatively influence consumer behaviours however, these participants demonstrated a shift in attitudes towards toxicity that is encouraging for women's sport DICs.

Managing Toxicity in Women's Sport Communities

Reacting to toxicity

While toxicity may pose significant influence on individuals' behaviours in the digital space and within women's sport DICs, others may not be as affected by these attitudes. Several participants explained that although they see toxicity in women's sport discourse, they are for the most part unbothered by it. These individuals have not changed their digital behaviours as they

did not engage in toxic activity to begin with. Ashley stated, "there's no point in wasting energy and responding to people who just want to create drama." Passive engagement strategies employed by most participants included ignoring and avoiding toxicity. Many expressed that reacting and engaging with the toxicity was not worth the energy and instead, ignored the negative content or moderated the discussion themselves. When dealing with toxicity, Peter said, "I don't think they [toxic individuals] have affected it much at all, honestly. I still participate, I'm still a moderator;" his primary role as a WNBA subreddit moderator is to remove toxic content and ensure users in the space adhere to the platform code of conduct. Others moderated discussion in non-official capacities by deleting and reporting toxicity for the platform or moderators to remove from the space.

When individuals did choose to engage with toxicity, they opted to show their support of women's sport to shift the conversation and amplify the positive discourse. Marga described that when encountering toxicity online, she chooses to "just ignore it and then try to amplify the comments on the other side of the equation." Laura highlighted that she engages in a way "to share the voices I want to elevate," by posting the positive content to shift the focus of the discussion back to community-building. "I've seen a lot more pushback from other male or masculine-presenting folks, even if they aren't specifically fans of women's sports" (John). What is salient here is that women's sport is receiving more support from these participants and individuals are actively engaging to promote it rather than allowing toxicity to overly dominate discourse. Previous literature has suggested that SM users pull back in the presence of toxicity and change their behaviours to hide their fan identity (O'Shea & Maxwell, 2021). These new findings suggest this notion is evolving and the fans in this study are becoming more empowered to show their support for women's sport despite the potential for toxic activity.

Emergence of reflection

In addition to ignoring or not responding to toxicity, participants acknowledged the importance of intentionality in their engagement behaviours in women's sport discourse. In a similar way as posting to shift the toxic discourse, it is equally important that users reflect on what content they are sharing in women's sport DICs. Anneliese said, "I think it's made me more thoughtful about what I post," appreciating that engaging in supportive ways is valuable. Participants also chose to seek out positive spaces that share in fandom to mitigate toxicity: "I think if you can seek them out and if you're intentional about finding the communities, there is an active sense of trying to uplift the sport and players" (Anna). Participants agreed that it was important to them to find positive spaces that were purposeful in supporting women's sport and chose certain platforms in order to do so. Marga explained, "since I am in these more supportive spaces, it's a lot more positive language and those types of interactions."

Increased awareness of self-representation was also identified among participants engaged in women's sport DICs. Clint recognized that he is "always trying to keep my privilege and perspective in check." In a similar way, Peter added that "I'm a white male… I don't have to worry about my own representation… the thing I try to do and be cognizant and aware of is butting in where it's not needed. I try not to overrepresent myself." Intersectionality and individual experiences are important considerations within the women's sport discourse, and users are reflective in the ways they represent themselves within their communities. All female participants outlined they did not change the ways they represented themselves online and stated no behavioural adjustments to their profiles in response to toxicity. Hayley explained that "I'm very authentically me," and despite toxicity is more frequently directed at females, she intentionally chose to continue representing herself genuinely. A common theme among

participants was they were each intentional about how they present themselves to digital spaces as well as what they shared within them.

Past works found that women would hide their identity or adapt the way they represent themselves online when encountered with toxicity (i.e., Hynes & Cook, 2013; Toffoletti et al., 2021). Here, many of the female participants described their attitudes towards self-representation within women's sport DICs as valuing authenticity and not being personally affected by toxicity. These findings provide new understandings about some women's sport fans, highlighting they are empowered to be genuine and remaining themselves even if they experience toxicity because of it. Women in the present study, are gaining agency and becoming more confident to uphold their principles in virtual spaces.

Continued Engagement in Digital Settings

Motivation to continue supporting women's sport

Despite the presence of toxicity in women's sport discourse, many participants felt compelled to continue supporting the space and sports. For some, the negativity served as motivation to increase their visibility and show more support through elevated engagement. Women's sport DICs serve as a space for authentic fans to interact and share freely which has contributed to Anna's experience: "I think what has increased my activity online is the kind of network of social media among female sports figures." Kenzie expressed similar thoughts that,

> I do try to comment more and make more conversation to discuss more things than
> I would have before… I have pushed myself to start more conversations in women's
> sport sections because I have always supported it so why shouldn't I push more for
> something that I love?

DICs fostered by fans and athletes alike create a sense of belonging for members (Kalman-Lamb, 2021). Fans have more opportunities to engage with others they may not traditionally have access to. "That's part of that organic interaction which is why I am more involved. It leads me to follow more accounts and defend the sport when I'm in online social forums… it really is about community building for me" (Clint). As a whole, participants acknowledged their increase in online activity specifically in women's sport discourse to make their support more visible. Arnelle explained that she's "been inspired by a lot of what I've seen, and I think the positives have inspired me to share things that are inspiring and impactful and are important for people to read or to hear or to see." She continued that this inspiration has served as motivation to "share more and speak out more. Just the little things that eventually become big things."

Although toxicity exists in the space, "I'm still there. I'm not leaving the community" (Peter). Participants recognized the importance of continuing to support women's sport and "it's beyond just 'this is fun content'. This is actually changing peoples' lives and it helps women be valued in a way they should inherently be" (Laura). The experiences and perspectives of participants are interesting as fans have intentionally chosen to increase their engagement, contrary to literature suggesting otherwise (O'Shea & Maxwell, 2021; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013). These new findings highlight that fans are using toxicity as a source of motivation to participate more in supportive discourse to overshadow the negative, gaining power in collective engagement. Toxicity is still a problem in these spaces; however, these fans are becoming more emboldened to speak against such behaviours, presenting encouraging results for the women's sport discourse.

Choosing to focus on the positive

Overall, women's sport DICs were found to be very positive and supportive. Even with some degree of toxicity that enters the space, fans in this study actively choose to look past the negative to share and interact with the content they came there for. The positive experiences have greater influence on their intentions to remain in women's sport communities and "the majority of people rise above it [toxicity]" (Rob). Hayley explained "as these spaces grow, there's so much community and education and positivity. I don't see people gatekeeping… they [communities] are becoming more healthy and accepting… I feel like the good outnumbers the bad in these situations," and has noticed significant improvements over the years of her involvement in women's sport spaces.

Several participants discussed that they have developed relationships with others they may never have been connected to without being involved in women's sport discussions (Gruzd et al., 2011). Anneliese mentioned that "there's a lot of good community in there, people make really good friends." Hayley personally has "friends who are beyond Internet friends at this point that I hang out with in real life that I've met through these spaces." Participants conveyed the community-building that the women's sport discourse facilitates has positively influenced their engagement and desires to remain in these spaces. "It is definitely toxic, but there's a lot of positive things so that's exciting and just trying to celebrate that more" (Laura).

These findings highlight that these fans are intentional in their engagement within women's sport DICs. Participants continue to choose interacting in these spaces because of the positive experiences and benefits they get from being involved in supportive environments. Although fans outlined that the positives outweigh the negatives, it is important to acknowledge that toxicity is still present. By managing this activity by ignoring, avoiding, or hiding the

negative discourse, the issue of toxicity existing in the space is not being addressed. While it is good that fans are choosing to focus on the positive experiences, this strategy is problematic as the toxic behaviours are not actually being dealt with or reprimanded. Women's sport DICs are seeing improvement in the discourse that is worth recognizing, but further work must be undertaken to diminish toxicity in these spaces.

Theoretical Implications

The present study extended past literature by further understanding how toxicity manifests and is experienced by members in DICs. In this research context, women's sport DICs were formed and sought out by fans to share common interests and promote inclusive discussion. These online spaces allow fans of all intersectional backgrounds to engage in meaningful discussion, the purpose for which some participants explicitly outlined joining DICs. This work affirmed the constructs of DICs in which individuals seeking connection based on sport fan identities (Kalman-Lamb, 2021), and in this context, women's sport fandom, would create digital spaces to engage. These online communities offer members in this study, the capacity to feel welcomed and included to share their thoughts without as large of a fear of judgement or negative response as in the public sphere. However, this does not negate the potential for disagreement or toxicity to occur that could influence users' behaviours or intentions to engage in the future.

Previous works by Pavlidis and Fullagar (2013) and Fenton et al. (2021) discussed that DICs were created in sport, and particularly by women, to avoid toxicity in mainstream SM channels and when it did emerge in the discourse, it would negatively affect their digital behaviours. This study advanced such research by illustrating that although women's sport DICs are more inclusive and positive, toxicity is still capable of entering these spaces and disrupting

member experiences. However, the findings here highlighted that instead of leaving these spaces, participants made the intentional effort to remain engaged in the women's sport discourse. Thus, we have provided a greater understanding of women's sport fan attitudes towards toxicity and found that previous responses are now shifting from disengagement to increased support. This work demonstrated that some women's sport fans are much more resilient to toxicity and their intentions to engage in DICs remain unchanged. To this extent, as fan attitudes and behaviours evolve over time, it is therefore valuable that scholarship continue research in this area to understand the complexities of women's sport DIC fan engagement as it relates to managing toxicity.

Practical Implications

This work outlined fan responses to toxicity in women's sport DICs and findings were encouraging for managerial practice. Indeed, participants acknowledged the prevalence of toxicity in the women's sport discourse, but these negative behaviours do not deter them from engaging in online communities. The findings revealed that these women's sport fans are much more resilient than past literature suggests, indicating they have a desire to continue supporting sport despite the potential for negative interactions in digital spaces. This offers key insights for organizations and athletes to consider the efficacy and efficiency of their SM relations with their consumers. Participants were motivated to continue engaging in women's sport discourse because of community building and sharing in fandom, organizations can leverage these factors to maintain and strengthen the bonds with their fans by more effectively managing their SM accounts. As reported in the findings, some women's sport fans find value in unique content and more personal access to sports figures they admire. Here, there is an opportunity in these DICs for teams and athletes to personally connect with their fans which may translate into a larger fan

base if people feel they can connect to their role models. From a media and journalism standpoint, participants outlined that a purpose for seeking DICs were for more focused and specific content related to women's sport that is not accessible in mainstream discourse. Thus, journalists can capitalize on this desire and build their platforms by creating stories tailored to these fans.

Conclusion

Historically, women's sport has been marginalized by mainstream media (Cooky et al., 2021), to which SM has provided opportunities to overcome such challenges (Piché & Naraine, 2022). In recent years, SM has been a useful tool for women's sport to increase exposure and enhance marketing efforts. However, toxicity within the women's sport discourse remains prevalent in the public sphere (Razack & Joseph, 2020). To avoid toxicity, women's sport fans have begun to create DICs to facilitate positive engagement and share in common support (cf. Fenton et al., 2021; Hynes & Cook, 2013). Despite these efforts, toxicity has been able to enter these spaces, disrupt interactions, and negatively affect members' experiences. Interviews conducted with self-identified fans of women's sport active in DICs revealed that although toxic discourse exists in these spaces, fans choose to continue supporting each other and their sports of interest. Findings highlight that toxicity in these spaces are problematic, but fans in this study are steadfast in their intentions to engage within DICs. The present study occupies an important gap in women's sport literature regarding the evolution of fan engagement in digital spaces and lays the groundwork for future work in this area.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are some limitations worth noting from the study. First, there is the possibility of selection bias. The criteria for participation included self-identified women's sport fans active on

Twitter or Reddit discussions at least three times per week. Because of this, the sample population may be missing experiences of individuals who are women's sport fans but have left the online discourse as a result of toxicity or simply do not want to engage in online spaces. Future work should consider how to recruit and include those perspectives in women's sport research.

Second, the present study adopted cross-sectional data collection rather than longitudinal. As participants noted their experiences had changed over the period of time they were engaged within women's sport discourse, the same could be inferred for their future use. Interviewing fans over time may demonstrate an even greater evolution of toxicity present within women's sport fan communities. Next, although participants represented diverse personal backgrounds, many identities were not part of the sample, such as those who are not cis-gendered and other racial backgrounds. In addition, the sampling questionnaire did not report sexual orientation. This is also an important consideration in intersectionality in sport management research and this was a limitation of the present study but should be a focus for the future. Thus, future exploration should consider how other gender expressions and intersectional backgrounds also affect the fan experience in these spaces (Delia et al., 2022). Further consideration should include how the perspectives of those who do not identify as cis-gendered fans affect their level of engagement in sport discourse. The current research focused only on the experiences of some identified women's sport fans. It would therefore be worth examining the motivations of those who may be less interested in women's sport, or individuals who do not support women's sport to understand the reasons why that may be the case. Finally, future work should also consider the fan experience related to men's sport discourse and whether the women's discourse is substantially different with respect to toxicity.

Chapter III

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to uncover the prevalence of toxicity within the women's sport SM discourse as well as to understand how these behaviours within online communities influenced the fan experience. Through a multidimensional approach, this thesis was structured in a sequential article-based format to address each question inductively and separately. Chapter 2a used the network paradigm to uncover toxicity present in women's sport SM discourse. Chapter 2b explored how fans in women's sport DICs experience toxicity and its influence on their intentions to engage in those spaces. Two data analyses were performed to understand each study individually, followed by an interpretation of the findings together to address the overall research question. Several contributions were made from this research, advancing our understanding of the women's sport fans' attitudes and behaviours towards toxicity on SM.

Summary of Findings

Chapter 2a: Network theory approach to toxicity in women's sport social media discourse

Chapter 2a outlined the degree of toxicity present within the women's sport SM discourse. First, data collection displayed encouraging results for women's sports and found that the number of posts containing league hashtags and keywords rose as the season cycles progressed. Findings from toxicity analyses for the WNBA and NWSL on Twitter and Reddit revealed that toxic activity is very much present in the networks. Toxicity scores increased throughout both leagues' season cycles, suggesting that as more individuals were interacting in the hashtag or subreddit threads, more of the content was of negative nature. The WNBA and NBA toxicity scores were similar across the four data collection periods whereas the NWSL recorded some higher scores than the MLS. In a secondary, textual analysis of the top-ten posts

for each toxicity attribute, profanity, and expression of language were most predominant. Toxic discourse present in women's sport networks pose risks to the overall efforts of organizations to use SM to overcome historical barriers.

Chapter 2b: Exploring women's sport fans' experiences with toxicity in online communities

Chapter 2b sought to understand the lived experiences of women's sport fans as they relate to toxic activity within SM communities. Semi-structured interviews with twelve participants revealed the presence of toxicity within women's sport DICs. Fans highlighted their desire to engage in supportive spaces and joined DICs to interact with likeminded individuals who shared in women's sport fandom. Although online spaces were created with the intent of being inclusive and supportive, toxicity was able to enter the communities. Participants acknowledged varying degrees of the influence of toxicity on their digital behaviours. Some degree of disengagement was reported in which individuals decreased their involvement in discussions or took breaks away from SM platforms. However, most participants noted annoyance and that toxicity had a minimal negative effect on their experience. An interesting finding emerged that the fans in this study chose to continue supporting women's sport despite toxicity in the DIC and made conscious efforts to elevate the positive messaging rather than allowing negative attitudes to dominate the space. Participants recognized the importance of making their support of gender equity visible were thus more intentional in their engagement.

Toxicity and its Influence on the Fan Experience

Women's sport discourse and the dark side of social media

To revisit the overall research question, this thesis intended to explore how digital conversations and toxicity within them influenced sentiments and behaviours in women's sport online communities. Chapter 2a specifically addressed RQ_{2a} in identifying the degree of toxicity

present in online public sphere discourse related to women's sport. Analyses revealed that toxicity scores rose over both the WNBA and NWSL season cycles, indicating this activity fluctuates throughout the year according to certain periods of time. Overall toxicity and most of the attribute scores peaked during the playoff periods of both women's sport leagues, which suggest that toxicity is more likely to occur when women's sport is considerably "high-profile" in terms of viewership or potential media coverage. Public sphere activity related to women's sports at the pinnacles of season play drew both increased toxicity as more posts were shared to SM threads related to the leagues.

Although toxicity within the men's and women's discourse were of the same proportion, the volume of posts ranged significantly (Table 2.2). The total number of posts analyzed for the NBA and MLS were nearly eight times greater than the total posts collected for the WNBA and NWSL. The concern with these findings is twofold; first, past work has identified that men's sport is discussed in ways where more critical or toxic attitudes are normalized (Browning & Sanderson, 2012), so toxicity rates may not be as problematic for an already dominant industry. Second, given what Cooky et al. (2021) among other scholars have found, women's sport is already disadvantaged by low coverage rates in traditional media. Therefore, it is problematic that less people are engaging in women's sport discourse and toxicity scores are proportionally similar to the men's leagues. Toxicity and its composing characteristics of SM appear to pose an increased threat to disrupt engagement within networked discourse.

This work built upon past research exploring the dark characteristics of SM. While most dimensions of Baccarella et al.'s (2018) dark side of social media functionality honeycomb were present in the findings (Figure 1.1), this thesis also provided new contributions to the framework. Following completion of the data analyses and interpretation of Chapter 2a and 2b's results,

Baccarella et al.'s (2018) framework was revisited and some new areas of consideration for the model were highlighted from the overall findings of the research. Specifically, the manifestations of toxicity theme generated two major findings regarding the ways in which toxic behaviours emerge in the online discourse. First, language forms, communicative interactions, and the contexts of them were most prominent when participants defined toxicity and explained their previous experiences with it. Second, an additional composing element of toxicity discussed was the issue of anonymity and that "burner accounts" were often the main sources of toxicity within the women's sport discourse. The themes generated offered new insights to the dark side of SM in the women's sport context and raised the need to revise Baccarella et al.'s (2018) honeycomb framework. The changes made in a revisit of this framework include the extension of conversations' definition to include profane and inappropriate language (Figure 3.1), and the enlargement of the identity comb to include the hiding of one's online self, known as anonymity.

Figure 3.1

A revised version of Baccarella et al.'s (2018) Dark Side of Social Media Framework
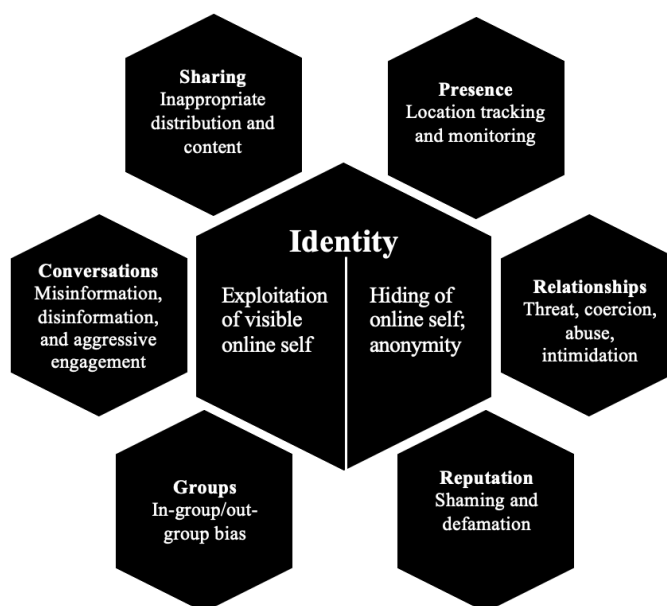
First, the dark conversations dimension created by Baccarella et al. (2018) was defined as the extent to which users communicate online, including aggressive, excessive, and inaccurate engagement. Chapters 2a and 2b found that the most toxic posts in the women's sport discourse contained inappropriate engagement in which the language used included profanity, negative expressions of emotion and microaggressions. Toxicity analyses revealed that the toxic attribute with the highest scores across both women's leagues was profanity. Upon further examination of the top-ten posts of each attribute and the analyses' full data sets, most of the higher toxicity posts contained exclamatory language that used profanity and other inappropriate verbiage to demean women's sports.

Chapter 2a identified that a large source of toxicity within the women's sport discourse was the use of language in discriminatory ways to target female athletes and fans in online spaces (Kavanagh & Jones, 2017; Matz & Bowes, 2021). Findings in Chapter 2b also indicated that the use of aggressive or discriminatory language dominated the toxic discourse in women's sport discussion. Toxicity, as interpreted from participants' experiences, most often manifested as misogynistic, sexist, and oppressive narratives. Dark conversations further included spreading inaccurate or disinformation, fueling users' strong ideologies and increased aggressive behaviours through the use of vulgar language (Baccarella et al., 2018). In this work, it was found that toxic users employed expletives to spread toxic content and mistreat others within DICs though these behaviours are not distinctive to only women's sport. Similar types of toxic interactions and language in other SM discourses were discussed by participants, supporting this contribution to Baccarella et al.'s (2018) framework and extending our understanding of dark conversations. Thus, it is proposed that the definition of conversations is amended to include exclamatory and antagonistic language that marginalizes other users on SM.

Next, the findings outline the enlargement of the framework's core comb (identity) to include the element of anonymity, or the hiding of one's identity. Initially, the identity comb was conceptualized as the exploitation of oneself to which anonymity should belong but is not included in the original definition. Baccarella et al. (2018) described identity as SM users providing personal information to create their digital profiles including gender, race, age, most platforms encouraging the sharing of as much personal information possible. Other publicly available information provided by users include the accounts they follow or are followed by, groups they belong to, and topics of interest such as conversation threads on the SM platform. The dark side to identity was that users online can exploit any of the above factors of others in the network (Baccarella et al., 2018). But a large piece of the framework's core of identity is the lack thereof, and the intentional hiding of oneself to engage in toxic activities more easily.

Baccarella et al.'s (2018) delineation of the identity comb does not include the other dark side of this element where one becomes anonymous to spread toxic content and thus, this work contributed to the framework. Anonymity in this context refers to the false or lack of expression of a SM profile to spread toxic content. Participants described that a considerable amount of toxicity they witnessed in the women's sport discourse were from anonymous profiles with no personal identifiers and following or followed by very few accounts. As interpreted from the interviews, these types of SM profiles were most often created to "troll" or harass others within public sphere discourse. This form of dark SM provides individuals to share toxic content easily as there are no methods of tracking down the user. According to participants, most of the toxic content was produced by troll accounts that had very low-profile accounts and only responded in DIC interactions with hateful comments. They further explained that it seemed easier to be toxic when no one knows who the anonymous accounts are and there are no repercussions. Fan

experiences with toxicity illustrated that most of the negative interactions were with anonymous accounts as these users could hide behind screens and spread discriminatory or demeaning language into the public sphere with little risk of being caught. This assertion was affirmed in Chapter 2a where the manual, textual analysis of the toxicity score data sets found a relatively large amount of toxic content was published by unidentifiable or anonymous accounts.

Although some platforms have safety systems in place to moderate toxicity, these attitudes can persist as it is difficult to remove all toxic content in every space that it occurs. On Reddit specifically, a large amount of toxicity is regularly removed by auto-moderation technologies before being published, but human moderators must manage what is missed. The nuance of language is salient in this context as auto-moderators may not recognize toxic content whereas a human moderator may more effectively identify toxicity. With these strategies in place, toxicity is less likely to pose a notable threat to online communities. But a limitation is that there are not enough moderators or disposable time for these individuals to completely remove and manage toxic content from every space on the platform. From a professional perspective, some organizations have safety protocols in place to assist individuals who are negatively affected by toxicity. It was discussed with a participant that the human resource department at a major Canadian sport broadcasting outlet works with SM platforms to remove toxic content, report and/or suspend accounts. However, a problem with this system is that often there is little the organization or SM platforms can do if the accounts are anonymous and there are no methods in contacting the toxic individual.

Therefore, anonymity was a significant feature of dark SM and deserved to be included at the core of Baccarella et al.'s (2018) honeycomb framework because of its influence on the rest of the elements. The anonymity comb was placed as an extension and enlargement of the central

comb as it has a large influence on the rest of the dark characteristics of SM as they relate to discourse in the digital sphere. Presence refers to location, whether online or as a method to track individuals and monitor their whereabouts. In terms of sharing, when SM users chose to remain anonymous, toxic content can be disseminated which harms conversations. Anonymity's relationship to identity and the effect of this behaviour to the surrounding combs is salient as users intentionally hide themselves to engage in toxic discourse with little to no repercussions, causing broader effects to the rest of the elements in the model. For instance, when SM users chose to remain anonymous, toxic content can be disseminated through conversations and shared content which harm the overall discourse. Anonymity may also play a large role in relationships as threats and abuse can proliferate when the account doing such toxic activity does not have any identifiers that could lead to reprimand by the SM platform. Thus, the presence of anonymous toxicity poses a threat to the women's sport discourse and has the potential to influence fan behaviours in both the public sphere and DICs.

Nevertheless, this work also highlighted the duality of SM in which there is simultaneously light (Kietzmann et al., 2011) and dark (Baccarella et al., 2018) sides of discourse. Many SM platforms are designed with the function of facilitating democratic discourse in which individuals can (and should) have disagreements to some extent (Moore-Berg et al., 2020). This dark side is not fundamentally bad as some do enjoy the drama and entertainment of watching "Twitter fights" unfold where participants discussed this comedic element of entertainment to read exchanges between people online. This is inherently a feature of SM that can escalate into toxicity when the discourse becomes so polarizing that individuals feel threatened, offended, or very loyal to their beliefs that it harms others (Simons & Green, 2018). As public sphere structures like SM platforms become more open and welcoming of deliberative

debates (O'Hallarn et al., 2018), it is unrealistic that toxicity could be completed removed from these spaces. There will always be individuals who do not agree on a given topic based on their personal opinions so, conflict is inevitable (Pascual-Ferrá et al., 2021). In this sense, toxicity may not be a "bug" or poison to SM if disagreement allows for individuals to engage in constructive conversation. It becomes problematic however, when respectful deliberative discourse can no longer occur and exchanges between individuals becomes aggressive, offensive, and harmful. The public sphere structure of SM allows for this disillusionment to occur where individuals may choose to withdraw from networked discourse.

Yet, the light can co-exist with the dark and as SM also serves as a site for resilience. Users may also adapt to the challenging and toxic environments online as well as make intentional efforts to remain steadfast in their support of topics. This idea of resilience and underdog mentality is seen within women's sport where despite historical marginalization, this vertical and its fans are still trying to shift narratives, or at least attempt to even the discourse with more positive discussion (O'Shea & Maxwell, 2021; Vann, 2014). In this particular study, most participants discussed toxicity in the women's sport discourse as a catalyst for motivation to be more active on SM to show their support. Despite little coverage and oppressive narratives, some fans still want to uplift the positive stories of women's sport to show that it is deserving of attention. While it may not seem consequential that one person engages with a tweet, the more people share messages of encouragement, the sooner the discourse can evolve and improve. The ability to overcome the negative discourse in the networked structures through the collective support and belonging within women's sport communities demonstrates that although it is possible for disenchantment to occur online, the fans in this study chose to stay involved.

Fans' intentions to engage

While toxicity on SM was collectively expressed as frustrating, participants described that this activity did not extremely influence their behaviours in women's sport DICs in a negative way. Few detrimental effects of toxicity were discussed which included disengagement for a given length of time. For some participants, either witnessing or experiencing extreme toxicity in more public hashtag networks influenced their desire to remove their SM presence altogether. Be that as it may, most participants in Chapter 2b outlined that toxicity had a very minimal adverse effect on their online activity. Toxic activity was mostly regarded as a nuisance but not harmful to overall engagement or intentions to continue interacting within the women's sport discourse. By seeking specific spaces such as women's sport DICs, fans felt compelled to show their support more visibly there than in public sphere discussion.

Increased engagement in online communities was a trend among participants even with the presence of toxic discourse. This finding was interesting as previous works have found that when toxicity occurs, individuals decrease engagement and change how they represent themselves (i.e., Kavanagh & Jones, 2017; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013). Past research has also outlined that women's sport fans, and particularly those who identify as female, come into contact with toxic attitudes disproportionately and are more likely to retreat from online spaces as well as be more emotionally affected (Hynes & Cook, 2013). The potential for extreme toxicity was noted as a threat as participants did express a degree of trepidation regarding their mental well-being. However, this fear was outweighed by the positive interactions that participants have experienced by being in women's sport DICs. Earlier reactions to toxicity like disengagement appear to begin shifting towards increased interaction as participants became more empowered to support women's sport. As social conditions evolve, women's sport fans are

changing their behaviours, which is an auspicious result of Chapter 2b. In response to toxicity, some fans appear to continue supporting women's sport and have become more intentional in their use of SM to highlight the positive discourse within DICs. This work has therefore provided a greater understanding of women's sport fans, answering the first part of RQ$_{2b}$.

Self-presentation. Expression of identity was central to participants' use of SM and engagement in women's sport DICs. This element was salient for the interpretation of findings in the thesis as it provided a greater understanding of individuals' capacity to alter their expression of identity to conform to their social settings, especially in the digital world. In the sport landscape, gender norms are quite rigid and thus, self-presentation online is often adapted to best suit the discourse as well as avoid toxicity (Smith & Smith, 2012). Historically in women's sport, athletes and fans often present "frontstage" identities in which they may be more guarded or scripted based on the environments the individual is situated in, in order to adhere to social norms and reduce the risk of toxicity (Hynes & Cook, 2013; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). "Frontstage" identities in this context include superficial information about the individual and very few personal details. When toxicity entered digital spaces, Hynes and Cook (2013) explained that self-presentation of women's sport fans would be affected, and individuals further hid parts of their identity or modified certain aspects of their digital activity to protect themselves.

Interestingly, Chapter 2b found some women's sport fans' intentional use of "backstage" performances where users are more authentic in their interactions and show more personal aspects of themselves to others (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). Participants described the importance of being authentic within DICs to create genuine connections with other members. In the women's sport discourse, online communities promoted inclusivity and thus, fans felt

comfortable in being themselves and expressing their multiple intersectional identities. When asked if participants have changed their self-presentation after experiencing toxicity, most said they did not alter their profiles in any way. Female participants explained that experiencing toxicity had no influence on the way they chose to represent themselves online and would not change who they are to conform to social norms. They did not feel fearful of toxic behaviours or believe it has or would influence their personal representation. The fans in this study intentionally continued to express themselves authentically even if toxicity arose, in part due to the supportive environment that was fostered in DICs which members valued highly. Chapter 2b both addressed the second part of RQ_{2b} and advanced scholarly understanding of self-presentation as it relates to women's sport in the digital sphere. As spaces are created to promote a culture of support and inclusion, previous behaviours towards toxicity are evolving and some members will increasingly feel comfortable to engage in discourse.

DICs foster a sense of collective empowerment among members. Many participants explained that they believed their involvement or visible support of women's sport was for a cause much larger than themselves. Both male and female fans recognized the importance of promoting women's sport and assisting equality movements to improve a historically marginalized industry. Participants who identified as female expressed their delight over the growth of the male fan contingent within the women's sport discourse. Although it is likely men were part of past discourse, in recent years, more male fans have become more actively part of the conversation to support the growth of women's sport. Male participants acknowledged that their newfound fandom has been a product of SM as these platforms offer the coverage of women's sport that traditional media does not. DICs have provided opportunities for these fans to learn about and enjoy women's sport in a space accessible to anyone. Given the historical

hegemonic imbalance within the sport discourse, the men interviewed highlighted that displaying their fandom of women's sport was important to increase its exposure. This outward support did make meaningful contribution to participants' social networks as they explained it encouraged many of their connections to educate themselves of the inaccuracies that exist within the toxic discourse. As fans in this study became empowered through social movements, their online behaviours began to reflect these attitudinal changes despite the potential for negative reactions.

Increased Activity. Fans in this study experienced toxicity in the women's sport online discourse but it did not have an egregious effect on their continued behaviours. Some women's sport fans are increasingly resilient towards toxic activity and hold their beliefs strong that supporting women's sport is important. DICs provided value to women's sport in creating spaces for inclusive language and promoting positive discussion. When toxicity does enter online communities, the women's sport fans in Chapter 2b explained that they were more galvanized to moderate and respond to these attitudes, which are behaviours previously unreported in past research. Intentionality in SM engagement was particularly salient in this context as fans continued to celebrate and highlight the achievement of women's sport regardless of toxicity.

Figure 3.2 represents how the women's sport fans in this work behaved as they interacted with toxicity on SM. Informed by NT, hashtags and subreddit threads connected users together in the public sphere to engage in discussion on women's sport, and specifically the WNBA and NWSL in this study. Significant rates of toxicity were found in these more public or "mainstream" networks. To avoid the toxic discourse present in larger threads containing the public hashtag, participants intentionally sought out more private spaces to engage. The creation of DICs promoted inclusive discourse and provided the space for anyone to feel welcomed, contribute to the conversation, and form relationships with other members. These communities

are increasingly important to SM users to form connections, learn about, and celebrate women's sport with less fear of judgement or harassment.

Although meant for positive discussion, toxic discourse can and does occur in DICs but to a lesser extent given the stronger moderation efforts by both designated moderators and community members. When toxicity has occurred in these spaces, most fans in this study became invigorated to stand up against it and often respond to it in support of women's sport. Online communities have created conditions that many fans feel capable of supporting each other and women's sport to combat toxic discourse. Findings revealed that most participants increased their engagement to promote the inclusive discourse within DICs and dampen toxicity. In the past, fans may not have had many spaces (or any at all) such as these to engage in discussion to express their interest or support of women's sport with likeminded individuals. As such, DICs are incredibly valuable to individuals' continued fandom of women's sport and members in this study are much more active because of these spaces. Participants continued to interact and were intentional in the digital spaces they frequent most, choosing DICs for specific content and discussion.

Figure 3.2

Women's Sport Fan Behaviour Model
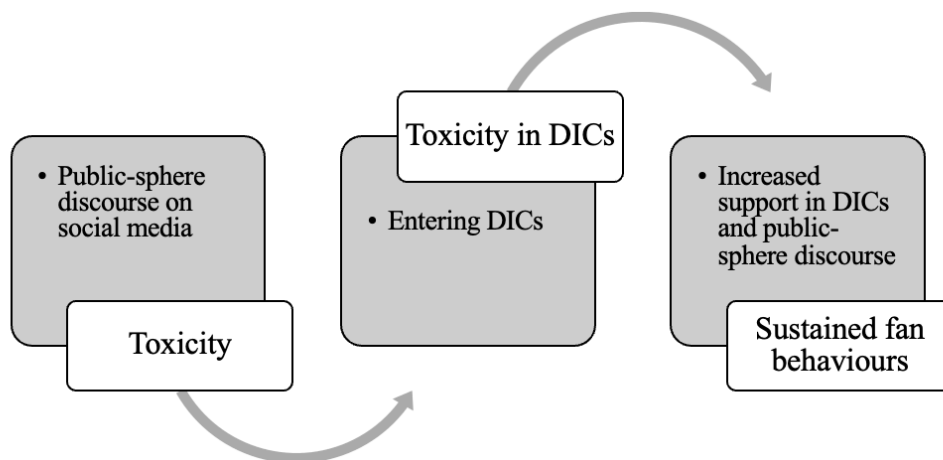
Altogether, the multidimensional approach of this thesis worked to answer RQ_1, addressing how the women's sport online discourse related to toxicity influenced both fans' experiences and behaviours. While acknowledging the presence of toxicity within networked discussions, the present sample of fans continued to engage in digital spaces to share their fandom. Consequently, Chapters 2a and 2b advanced our understanding of women's sport fan behaviours as they continue to evolve.

Theoretical and Conceptual Implications

Independently, each research article advanced the ability to apply each theoretical framework in sport management: (1) by exploring the connective mechanisms of hashtags in SM networks, and (2) by understanding fans' experiences within DICs created for women's sport discourse. Returning to the theoretical lenses of this work, NT was used in this context to understand how structured systems on SM facilitate discourse on women's sport and how dark aspects of discussion may manifest within the public sphere. Coinciding those networks are DICs in which users create smaller groups to engage more specifically a topic, in this case women's sport, and how interactions in these spaces may influence members' behaviours. Altogether, this thesis advanced our knowledge on NT and DICs and specifically how they can be used complementarily to add context to consumer behaviour research.

This study built upon Hambrick and Pegoraro's (2014) contributions to NT by exploring the function of hashtags to connect users together and engage in conversation over shared interests. Although toxicity may be present within these networks, this work reaffirmed Naraine et al.'s (2021) assertion that hashtags are valuable for sport fans, and in this case, women's sport fans to interact and strengthen relationships both with other fans and professional sport entities. This work has revealed that networks are beneficial in the women's sport context to promote

connections among fans to interact and share content that is neglected by public sphere discourse. In addition, our understanding of NT's applicability in sport management research is advanced specifically as it relates to toxicity and its manifestations within SM discourse.

This work contributed to Baccarella et al.'s (2018) framework of the dark characteristics of SM and highlighted elements of toxicity as they relate to networks. Toxicity and anonymity can affect networked structures and discourse, causing changes in behaviours within them. Hashtags are effective in connecting individuals together on SM, but this feature can also facilitate toxic discourse. This thesis illustrated that networks may not be as face value as they seem and there is an underlying dark system that engages in toxic activity. The elements of dark SM that persist in online networked spaces affect user behaviours. First, the use of toxic language by individuals in conversations and through shared content carries considerable influence in both public and private discourse. Another particularly concerning element of dark networks is anonymity as users can target others and stir up quarrels that negatively alter the conversation within these spaces. With little to no consequence due to the lack of personal identifying information available from anonymous accounts, toxic activity therefore has the capacity to continue disrupting social networks. As networks are created and evolve, this work adds new value to the application of the NT perspective in the context of dark undercurrents operating in structured systems that harms discourse and the formation of connections.

Chapter 2b utilized DICs to understand how fans' experience interactions in such spaces and how toxicity may influence self-expression and engagement. DICs in sport promote connection and shared expression of fandom for members, substantiating its utility for women's sport and its fans. Demonstrated by Fenton et al. (2021), online communities promote inclusive interaction and avoid toxic discourse that persists in public sphere SM. Previous findings by

Pavlidis and Fullagar (2013) indicated that when toxicity entered women's sport spaces, some fans disengaged. This work provided new insights of evolving fan attitudes and behaviours with respect to toxicity. Rather than leaving digital spaces, many fans are continuing to support women's sport and are increasingly active. Previous understandings of DICs are advanced as they relate to women's sport in which when dark elements of SM exist within them, members' behaviours deviated from past findings. The examination of toxicity's influence within DICs revealed new information regarding fans' attitudes towards these behaviours, reinforcing the purpose of inclusive discourse for which the groups were originally formed.

Together, Figure 3.2 demonstrates the relationship between NT and DICs as they relate to fan behaviours in the women's sport online discourse, addressing the overall research question. Networked discussions through public sphere connective hashtags facilitate user engagement (Hambrick & Pegoraro, 2014). However, when toxicity persists in these public sphere spaces, users seek out more private spaces to engage in positive discourse. This desire for supportive interaction causes some women's sport fans to enter DICs where they feel a sense of belonging such as subreddits, hashtags with less user traffic, and private messaging groups. Although toxicity has the potential to enter these communities, the fans in this work were empowered by the accepting environment that was fostered and thus, continued to engage albeit the negative attitudes. The positive discourse within DICs promote greater support of women's sport as fans may bring forth their support into the public sphere. Online communities of women's sport fans have advantageous effects on sustained fan behaviours whereby these individuals increase their digital activity and visible support.

It is further encouraging that despite the current inherent toxic or contentious nature of SM, some women's sport fans are still trying to make these digital spaces work to have positive

discussion to share their interests. In the early years internet, there was this utopian vision that it would provide connection and enhance social activity, and thus brought forth the creation of "connective media" which would later be coined SM (van Dijck, 2013). What started out as a space created for organic and positive connection and interaction among users is not really what SM has become in modern use (O'Hallarn et al., 2018). In spite of toxicity within the SM discourse, users in this research are still putting forth effort to find spaces that are inclusive and supportive over topics to enjoy discourse with likeminded individuals.

Substantive Implications

It is also important to consider the contribution of this work to the understanding of social life and/or the given phenomenon studied (Kerwin & Hoeber, 2015). This integrated article thesis offers an extension of literature pertaining to the topics of toxicity and more specifically within women's sport. The sequential mixed methods design provided the opportunity to unpack toxicity by first, exploring its prevalence in the women's sport SM discourse and second, understanding how fans perceive this activity and its influence on their behaviours online.

This research both affirmed past works (cf. Baccarella et al., 2018; Gruzd et al., 2022), and evolved several features of dark elements on SM (see Figure 3.1) as they applied in the context of women in sport. Women's sport literature has broadly examined the presence of negative activity related to existing hegemonic and hypersexualized narratives towards women athletes and fans (cf. Cooky, 2018; Kavanagh et al., 2019; Matz & Bowes, 2021; Sveinson et al., 2019). Without explicitly naming toxicity in the research, harassment and sexism online has led to the decline in public sphere sport discourse participation among women. For instance, Hynes and Cook (2013) discussed the online belongings of women in sport fan discourse and highlighted that when more negative interactions occurred, these women would withdraw from

those spaces. Similarly, to create more inclusive and supportive discourse that avoids toxic behaviours, Fenton and colleagues (2021) explored how micro-communities have been created by women fans to find alternative ways of engagement outside of public threads. Past literature has identified that when hegemonic norms in sport dominate the discourse, those who are women or women's sports fans are marginalized and seek more private spaces to interact (i.e., Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013).

However, few studies have explored the perspectives of fans of women's sport specifically as they pertain to toxicity's effect on their intentions to engage online. To that extent, this thesis substantively contributed to this topic. The present work explored the women's sport SM discourse differently by looking at toxicity from a multidimensional lens. Chapter 2a provided quantitative measures of toxicity present within the discourse in which Chapter 2b offered insights on how individuals active in online spaces perceived that activity.

A novel approach was undertaken to understand the influence of toxicity within women's sport and specifically, the perspectives of both male and female fans which produced new knowledge about their evolving motivations and intentions. The inclusion of male voices in this work highlighted some meaningful findings that there is growing support of women's sport that is not solely comprised of women and more individuals are being brought into the discourse to develop their fandom. A key contribution of the thesis is that online communities are helpful for women's sport as they offer inclusive spaces for fans to gather, share mutual interests, and develop relationships. Further, these groups facilitate belonging and collective empowerment among fans. Thus, DICs and resilient fans can help this sport vertical continue to challenge hegemonic norms and toxic discourse as well as continue working towards overcoming historical barriers.

Practical Implications

SM has become an increasingly integrated marketing and communications tool for sport organizations to connect with their fans (Abeza et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2018). In the public sphere, Chapter 2a found that toxicity rates were of concern in the women's sport discourse when momentous occasions like the playoffs. However, the toxicity scores were encouraging as they were not as high as other contentious topics, like public health and political discourse (Pascual-Ferrá et al., 2021). Thus, women's sport organizations should increase their use of both official and more specific hashtags to create connective networks and promote engagement among their fans. By facilitating such online discourse, both fans and sport entities may interact authentically to form and strengthen relationships.

There are also women's sport fans who exist in the digital sphere that seek specialized content that is not available in public networks. This group of fans are thus intentionally creating online communities to share fandom in higher concentration and satisfy their desire for increased discussion and information on women's sport. Here, organizations and athletes have an opportunity to connect more personally with their fans in DICs. However, knowing that these communities are inherently toxic, if athletes are to become more involved in online communities to enhance their brand image and connect with their fans more personally, organizations need to have supports in place to assist them. Adequate training and access to resources should then be provided to deal with toxicity such as mental health support services in the event of toxic interactions becoming very harmful to the individual. Similarly, findings from this thesis offer insights for sport journalists that more attention should be given to producing women's sport focused content and sharing it in the communities built for that purpose. As such, media and broadcasting outlets should also increasingly implement training and other support systems in

human resource departments to provide journalists with resources to manage toxicity in online discourses.

In both larger network and DIC environments on SM, women's sport organizations should adopt a proactive role to manage toxicity more effectively or at the least, promote positive discourse to a greater extent to keeps fans in the space. This research demonstrated that toxicity rose over both the WNBA and NWSL season cycles when competitions were at their peak in terms of more "higher profile" activity such as playoffs. This thesis provided multi-dimensional implications for sport organizations in which all levels of management should be aware of the presence of toxicity within the women's sport discourse. In traditional organizational hierarchy, directors oversee operations and for that reason, they must be cognizant of toxic engagement within online networks. Communalytic could be a useful tool for executives such as Commissioners, Chief Executive Officers, and Marketing and Communication Directors, to gain an understanding of the current SM climate with respect to their organization. From a market research standpoint, it would be beneficial to use SNA technologies to explore the SM discourse related to the sport the organization operates within. If toxicity occurs in patterned sequences over several seasons, this finding offers information for executives to create strategy for operations practitioners to implement; targeting SM communication efforts throughout season cycles to address toxic activity.

Understanding toxicity in the SM discourse is particularly valuable to Marketing and Communications departments within women's sport organizations. Once strategies are created at the Executive level in terms of the role the organization should take on SM, managers and coordinators have the capacity to engage in the digital sphere. If the organization chooses to adopt a more proactive role on SM to reduce or mitigate the effects of toxicity,

SM/Communications managers should create a platform and content sharing strategy that attempts to post and engage more with their consumers, directing the discourse in more positive or encouraging ways. Examples of this in practice could include sharing highlights of previous games to get fans excited for upcoming events, or creating content that provides a more personal dimension of athletes that users may feel more connected to. By assuming a more engaged role online, SM/Communications managers can interact more intimately with the discourse and work to shift the conversation if the tone appears to become more toxic. If, and when more toxic posts emerge, these managers and content creators for the organization could respond to the negative posts in a number of different ways. They may choose to engage with the toxic individual to understand their perspectives and have a constructive conversation. Recent trends have also seen the rise in brands posting humorous content in response to toxicity to change the tone of the discourse (e.g., Brennan et al., 2020). Posting more specialized content on SM for fans to consume as well as being more interactive in the digital sphere may help in reducing toxicity by elevating the positive discourse.

Other areas of management may also want to consider the role of toxicity in their operations, such as human resources (HR). Similar to the above, if women's sport organizations Executives wish to implement more proactive and engaged roles on SM, HR practices and protocols should be designed and implemented to assist those dealing with toxicity. This notion also applies to the fans engaged in these digital spaces. If HR practitioners are already involved in online monitoring to some capacity to provide support for athletes or journalists/broadcasting personnel, they have the opportunity to also provide some assistance to fans. If the resources allow, organizations could monitor SM discourse and reach out to individuals they see are being subjected to toxicity. Here, HR can provide these individuals with resources and support

materials through private messaging, which also shows goodwill and demonstrates the organization's care for their fans. To continue developing the women's sport modern narrative as growing, inclusive, and welcoming, organizations could be more involved online with their fans and support them when toxicity becomes a problem.

Conclusion

Two research studies were completed to ascertain fans' experiences in the women's sport discourse by: (a) exploring the presence of toxicity in SM networks, and (b) understanding the influence of toxicity on digital behaviours. Toxicity analyses using Communalytic and Perspective API were employed to examine the current state of the women's sport discourse on Twitter and Reddit. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with twelve self-identified WNBA and/or NWSL fans that produced rich descriptions of their experiences in online communities and the effects of toxicity on their motivations to engage. Data from each study were thematically analyzed separately and then together to form a cumulative discussion (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

Chapter 2a investigated the degree of toxicity within women's sport SM networks. Results indicated that toxicity rates were substantial in relation to the volume of total posts collected. To understand the fan perspective, Chapter 2b interviewed twelve women's sport fans about the influence of toxicity on their experience and behaviours in the women's sport discourse. Most participants described an increase in support of women's sport when toxic activity was present in DICs as they placed more value in the positive discourse cultivated in these spaces. Fans described their conscious decisions to engage to uplift and elevate both content and other users they believed to be important or meaningful. Chapter 3 discussed the findings cumulatively, recognizing that toxicity poses a threat to the women's sport discourse but

it does not jeopardize the fan experience as much as previous literature has found (Toffoletti et al., 2021). Participants expressed the value of collective solidarity and sense of belonging within DICs that overpower the negative effects of toxicity in these spaces. Some women's sport fans were deliberate in their support and acknowledged that their allyship of this sport vertical was worth the potential of toxicity.

The present work supported the use of hashtags to connect networks of users (Hambrick & Pegoraro, 2014) and their utility to enhance women's sport discourse in the digital sphere. Once individuals were connected by shared interests, DICs were then able to facilitate supportive spaces that encourage discussion (Kalman-Lamb, 2021). In the women's sport context, theoretical progress is made from this research as fan attitudes and behaviours in this study have evolved from previous work (Fenton et al., 2021; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013), highlighting the improvement of the women's sport discourse over the last decade. By understanding how toxicity manifests in the digital space, sport organizations can adopt a proactive role within digital networks to mitigate, manage, and moderate toxic discourse. Participants expressed their desire for unique specialized content and explained the value of DICs to engage in personal communication with sport organizations and athletes. Here, these entities have the opportunity to cultivate meaningful relationships with their fans to elevate their platforms and strengthen brand loyalty. Despite toxicity in the online discourse, fans in this study continue to support women's sport within their online communities so, organizations and athletes should prioritize their engagement efforts to DICs.

As women's sport continues to grow in popularity, social attitudes are also evolving as more fans begin to engage in online spaces. This thesis provided insights to the current state of toxicity in women's sport discourse as well as how it is experienced by fans. The present work

revealed encouraging findings that conditions are improving in the digital sphere as well as fans'
continued support of women's sport. Albeit toxic activity, some women's sport fans are resilient
and have created strong communities to share fandom. The future of women's sport looks
auspicious with a loyal consumer base willing to support gender equity.

Limitations and Future Directions

As with all research, there were some limitations to this work. Both Chapters 2a and 2b
adopted a cross-sectional approach. Although Chapter 2a's findings provided toxicity analysis
results for four time periods throughout the WNBA and NWSL season cycle, the study only
explored toxicity across one season. Toxicity rates from previous seasons as well as in coming
years are missing from the data, which would present a greater picture of the state of toxic
discourse with respect to women's sport. Participants in Chapter 2b were interviewed once and
provided their experiences of being a women's sport fan on SM and spoke of their interactions
leading up to that point in time of the interview. Thus, both studies provided a snapshot of
toxicity and fan experiences at those given times, which could both evolve longitudinally. For
instance, several participants discussed their behaviours in women's sport DICs presently were
much different than in previous years as they have become greater supporters and increased their
activity online. This finding suggests that there is the potential for the experiences of these
women's sport fans to change in the future that differ from these results.

Chapter 2a relied heavily on Communalytic. Due to the sole use of Communalytic, there
is potential that the data collection and analyses were not as robust as other SNA programs
available. A limitation of Communalytic Pro was that the researchers did not create the program,
nor had access to or knowledge of the back-end systems of the software. Twitter and Reddit
posts from the women's sports discussions were collected by Communalytic and directly

inputted into the toxicity analyses. The toxicity analysis function did not allow for any other programming or data cleaning and thus, the research was only capable of interpreting findings from the analyses produced by Communalytic and Perspective API. Further, the research was constrained by the lack of customization in the design of the toxicity analyses which meant that there may be additional data or results missing.

Along with the toxicity analyses, Communalytic offers other techniques to explore discourse on SM such as sentiment analysis, bot detection, and network analysis. Further examination could employ this program and its other features to gather a deeper understanding of women's sport online discussion. It would be valuable to use Communalytic more extensively as well as coupling this program with other SNA technologies to explore toxicity on SM with respect to women's sport from various angles in the network.

Another limitation was that the quantitative data collected from the men's professional sports (NBA and MLS) were largely exploratory in order to contextualize the women's toxicity. The findings demonstrated that women's toxicity was considerably similar to the men's at the same time collection points. Here, the men's data were collected over the same dates in the year which corresponded to the women's pre-season, in-season, playoffs, and off-season. However, data from the men's respective season cycle periods (pre-season, in-season, playoffs, and off-season) were missing. Further exploration in the men's discourse would be helpful to determine whether it is substantially more or less toxic to provide a greater understanding of toxicity in women's sport.

Twelve interviews were conducted in Chapter 2b. Thus, the scope of this research was limited to only twelve perspectives and some experiences or opinions may be missing from the data. Although participants represented diverse intersectional backgrounds, some identities were

not represented. First, this work does not include those who do not identify as cis-gendered. Next, the background questionnaire for participant demographics did not ask to identify sexual orientation but, should in future work. Given the already delicate nature of the research topic (toxicity) and online interactions, this research did not want to inflict further harm to participants if they had extremely distressing experiences because related to their identities. Therefore, a limitation of this study was the lack of representation of individuals belonging to LGBTQ+ communities. It would be worthwhile that future research includes more diverse perspectives to understand how toxicity and DICs may influence fan behaviours.

Similarly, it is critical that scholarship continues to work towards reconciliation although it was unfortunate that no participant self-identified as indigenous in Chapter 2b. Delia et al. (2022) outlined that individuals with diverse intersectional identities have different perspectives and thus, may interpret interactions or discourse in unique ways. It is important to recognize the privilege of engaging in this research due to the lands and resources of indigenous peoples. This acknowledgement serves as a reminder to include those voices within research to the best of the researcher's abilities. As such, a limitation of the recruitment process and completed work is the absence of those perspectives and, further emphasis should be given to those individuals in the future.

Chapters 2a and 2b demonstrated that the women's sport discourse continues to shift over time as this industry grows in popularity and investment. These studies highlighted that toxicity has improved since earlier research in the space (e.g., Hynes & Cook, 2013; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013) and thus, further longitudinal considerations should be made as the discourse may look different in several years. Participants alluded their changes in behaviours as SM becomes a space for empowerment, suggesting that in the coming years, the discourse may become less

toxic. The findings of this thesis revealed the applicability of continued research in this area to understand the evolving complexities of the women's sport discourse and fan behaviours in digital spaces.

A North American context was utilized, selecting only the WNBA and NWSL as well as invited only individuals who reside in Canada or the United States of America to participate. Given that other global contexts, such as Australia, have increased national support for women's sport (Sherry & Taylor, 2019), toxicity and fan experiences may vary between the North American perspective and other geographical regions or sports. It would be interesting to compare how these findings to other countries and sports that may have different cultural or social norms with respect to toxicity and public sphere activity. Adopting similar research using other global contexts may increase our understanding of SM discourse related to women's sport and how other fans engage in online spaces.

Further exploration on the intent of toxicity within the women's sport SM discourse would be valuable. This work was primarily exploratory and as such, the concept of toxicity as a moderating factor to the frequency and/or intensity of behaviours was not unpacked. It would be worthwhile to understand the intention and effect of toxicity with respect to online activity pertaining to democratic deliberative discourse in the sport context. Further, understanding the intention that guides toxic behaviours and their outcomes towards others in the network would be quite interesting. This could be a fascinating area of future research to examine how intentions to engage in toxicity online are acted upon and the outcomes/effects on others in the discourse.

Finally, this multidimensional research uncovered how toxic the women's sport public sphere discourse is at present and the influence of such activity on the fan experience. Managerial implications suggest that organizations and other public figures engaged in digital

spaces should take proactive roles in order to help mitigate the proliferation of toxicity. Future

exploration should consider toxicity on SM from a brand management or digital communications

and marketing perspective to examine the strategies that are being adopted to respond to this

activity. There is the potential that women's sport organizations have strategies in place to assist

with managing toxicity. Thus, subsequent research could benefit from analyzing these SM

management practices to determine their efficacy with regulating toxic discourse in women's

sport.

Chapter IV

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Appendix A

Brock Research Ethics Board Clearance

Brock University
Office of Research Ethics
Tel: 905-688-5550 ext. 3035
Email: reb@brocku.ca

Health Science Research Ethics Board

Certificate of Ethics Clearance for Human Participant Research

DATE: 10/25/2022

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: NARAINE, Michael - Sport Management

FILE: 22-078 - NARAINE

TYPE: Masters Thesis/Project   STUDENT: Megan Piché
                                                              SUPERVISOR: Michael Naraine

TITLE: Toxicity on social media within the women's sport discourse

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ETHICS CLEARANCE GRANTED

Type of Clearance: NEW   Expiry Date: 10/1/2023

The Brock University Health Science Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above named research proposal and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the University's ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement. Clearance granted from **10/25/2022** to **10/1/2023**.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored by, at a minimum, an annual report. Should your project extend beyond the expiry date, you are required to submit a Renewal form before 10/1/2023. Continued clearance is contingent on timely submission of reports.

To comply with the Tri-Council Policy Statement, you must also submit a final report upon completion of your project. All report forms can be found on the Office of Research Ethics web page at
https://brocku.ca/research-at-brock/office-of-research-services/research-ethics-office/#application-forms

In addition, throughout your research, you must report promptly to the REB:
   a)   Changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;
   b)   All adverse and/or unanticipated experiences or events that may have real or potential unfavourable
        implications for participants;
   c)   New information that may adversely affect the safety of the participants or the conduct of the study;
   d)   Any changes in your source of funding or new funding to a previously unfunded project.

We wish you success with your research.

Approved:

_____
Stephen Cheung, Chair
Health Science Research Ethics Board

Note: Brock University is accountable for the research carried out in its own jurisdiction or under its auspices
            and may refuse certain research even though the REB has found it ethically acceptable.

            If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community
            organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and
            clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of
            research at that site.

Appendix B

Recruitment Poster

RECRUITING ALL FANS OF WOMEN'S SPORTS

WHO:

- Would like to take part in a study on the fan experience related to women's sport fan groups
- Are currently active (likes, shares, comments at least 3 times per week) in North American (WNBA and/or NWSL) social media (Twitter, Reddit)
- Are 18 years of age or older
- Any background and gender identity is welcomed to participate

COMMITMENT:

- One 45-minute interview (via video conferencing platform of choice)
- 15-minute review of the written transcript of the interview

BENEFITS:

- The opportunity to share your story about being a fan of women's sport and your experiences related to online toxicity
- Ability to use your voice that may help improve the women's sport digital landscape into one that is equitable for an intersectional group of fans
- Chance to win one of three gift cards

Interested? Contact Megan Piché (Principal Student Researcher), email mp16uw@brocku.ca or private message megan_piche99 (Twitter), for more information or to sign up!

All data will be kept confidential.

This research is conducted under the supervision of Dr. Michael Naraine (mnaraine@brocku.ca) and cleared by the Brock Univesity Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the HREB at 905-688-5550 ext. 3035 or at reb@brocku.ca

Brock University

Appendix C

Letter of Invitation

Subject: Invitation to participate in a research project on women's sport fans on social media

(date)
Hello,

My name is Megan Piché, and I am a Master's student in the Faculty of Applied Health Sciences at Brock University. I am working on a research project under the supervision of Dr. Michael Naraine.

I am writing to you today to invite you to participate in a study entitled "Uncovering how toxicity on social media influences women's sport fans and their online communities". This study aims to examine the current state of the digital environment related to women's sport fan networks and uncover how fans' experiences and interactions in these online communities affect their intention to engage within them.

To be eligible, you must be an active fan in North American women's professional sports (WNBA and/or NWSL), including likes, comments and/or shares at least 3 times per week on Twitter, Reddit, or both. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate, and reside in either Canada or the United States of America.

This study involves one 45–minute interview that will take place via video conferencing platform (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams) With your consent, will be audio-recorded and/or video-recorded. If you do not wish to be digitally recorded, hand-written notes will be taken in place, and typed for your review. Upon completion of the interview transcription, you will receive the transcribed document and will have 10 days to review and request any changes. If there is no correspondence following 10 days, it will be assumed the researcher can proceed as is. Once the recording has been transcribed and verified, the audio/videorecording will be destroyed.

While this project does involve some emotional risks, care will be taken to protect your identity. All data will be kept confidential. This will be done by providing participants with pseudonyms and allowing you to request that certain responses not be included in the final project. You will have the right to end your participation in the study at any time, for any reason, up until the end of the 10-day member checking period. If you choose to withdraw, all the information you have provided will be destroyed.

As a token of appreciation, if you so choose, participants will have the opportunity to win one of three $10 gift cards to the email provided. This email will not be included in any data collection used in the study. The compensation is yours to keep, even if you choose to withdraw.

All research data, including audio/video-recordings and any notes, etc. will be encrypted/password-protected in a secure digital file. Any hard copies of data including any handwritten notes or USB keys will be kept in a secure location at Brock University. Research

data will only be accessible by the student researcher and the research supervisor.

This research has been cleared by Brock University Research Ethics Board. Clearance # 22-078 - NARAINE

Should you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics (by email: reb@brocku.ca). For all other questions about the study, please contact the researcher.

If you would like to participate in this research project, or have any questions about the research, please contact me at mp16uw@brocku.ca.

Sincerely,

Megan Piché, BSM.
MA Candidate, Principal Student Researcher

Appendix D

Consent Form

Study Name: Uncovering how toxicity on social media influences women's sport fans and their online communities

Researchers: Megan Piché, BSM (MA Candidate, Principal Student Researcher), email: mp16uw@brocku.ca, Dr. Michael Naraine (Faculty Supervisor), telephone: (905)688-5550 ext.5189, email: mnaraine@brocku.ca

Purpose of the Research: The purpose of this thesis is to examine the current state of the digital environment related to women's sport fan networks and uncover how fans' experiences and interactions in these online communities affect their intention to engage within them.

Eligibility: To be eligible, you must be an active fan in North American women's professional sports (WNBA and/or NWSL), including likes, comments and/or shares at least 3 times per week on Twitter, Reddit, or both. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate and reside in either Canada or the United States of America.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research: The estimated time commitment for this study is approximately 60-minutes total: 45-minutes for the interview and a 15-minute revision of the written transcript to ensure the researcher has captured their experience accurately. The interview will be conducted via video conferencing on either Zoom or Microsoft Teams. A copy of the written transcript will be emailed to you, and you will have 10 days to review the document and request changes. If the student researcher does not receive any requests for changes after 10 days, it will be assumed the researcher can proceed as is.

Risks and Discomforts: This research does not intend to cause you distress or harm your emotional well-being. There is potential risk given the nature of the study that you may recall distressing experiences related to social media and toxic behaviours such as harassment. If at any point, you do feel emotionally distressed, you may stop the interview and appropriate resources are provided to seek additional assistance if needed. **Canadian Services:** call 1-866-585-0445 or text WELLNESS to 741741. **United States Services:** Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration National Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357) or Crisis Text Line: Text "HELLO" to 741741.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You: The potential direct benefits from your involvement in the project are to contribute to the growth of academic knowledge related to the fan experience and social media in women's sport. You will have the opportunity to share your experiences and opinions that may assist in the growth of academic knowledge of how interactions on social media can influence behaviours. You will have the opportunity to use your voice to help improve the women's sport digital landscape into one that is equitable for an intersectional group of fans. However, it is possible that you may not receive any direct personal benefits. To thank you for your time, you will have the chance to be entered in a draw to win one of three $10 gift cards.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer will not influence the nature of the ongoing relationship you may have with the researcher or faculty supervisor, or the nature of your relationship with Brock University either now, or in the future.

Withdrawal from the Study: You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. Data will not be used in analysis after withdrawal. If you decide to stop participating, you will still be eligible to enter the draw for the gift card. You may choose to withdraw from the study up to the end of the 10-day member-checking period. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researchers, Brock University, or any other group associated with this project. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed.

Confidentiality: All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. The data collected in the interview will be recorded via audio tapes and video conferencing platforms (Zoom or Microsoft Teams) and transcribed verbatim, and any identifying information will be removed. You may choose to keep your camera on or turn it off at any point during the interview. If you do not consent to be digitally recorded (either audio or video), hand-written notes will be taken by the student researcher and will be destroyed upon research completion. Your data will be safely stored in a secured digital file accessible to the principal student researcher, Megan Piché and research supervisor, Dr. Michael Naraine. The data will be stored in a secure cloud file for 6 months and deleted from this file thereafter. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law. Privacy policies for both video conferencing platforms are provided: https://explore.zoom.us/en/privacy/ and https://privacy.microsoft.com/en-ca/privacystatement.

Accessing Results: Upon completion of the research study, results will be available for participants to view. If you wish and have expressed interest to the principal student researcher for information upon completion of this study, an executive summary will be emailed to you. The completed Thesis document will be accessible via Brock's Thesis Repository upon successful defense of the project. Additional research papers may also be published following the completion of this study in sport management field-related academic journals.

Questions About the Research? If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact Megan Piché (MA Candidate) by e-mail (mp16uw@brocku.ca) or Dr. Michael Naraine (Faculty Supervisor, mnaraine@brocku.ca). This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, Brock University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics, Brock University (e-mail reb@brocku.ca).

Please retain a copy of the consent form for your records.

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I_____, consent to participate in *"Uncovering how toxicity on social media influences women's sport fans and their online communities"* conducted by Megan Piché. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

_____   **Date**_____
Participant

Megan Piché
_____   **Date 10/25/2022**_____
Principal Student Researcher

Appendix E

Participant Demographic Survey

Communication:
I hope you are doing well! Thank you again for participating in the interview, I am very much looking forward to hearing your story! Ahead of the interview, I am attaching a link to a demographic survey if you feel comfortable completing any of the sections. This should only take a few minutes to complete. In sport management research, recent studies have identified that there is a lack of diversity (Delia et al., 2022) and so, the hope with this demographic survey is that my study can answer the call to represent individuals from many different backgrounds.

https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=FRGudvwe8kqlNuKyRDrxoLw-mCgw_tJGrkDRkdxqy2FUOEU5UDI4NktBTEhZWVdMOUk4RDcyT1NWMS4u

Women's Sport Research Participant Demographics

To assess intersectionality as called for by Delia et al. (2022), please enter any demographic in which you feel comfortable with sharing.

1. Please enter your first name

2. Age (you may choose not to answer)

3. Ethnicity

4. Gender Expression

- ◯ Woman
- ◯ Man
- ◯ Prefer not to answer
- ◯ Other

5. Country of Residence

- ◯ Canada
- ◯ United States of America
- ◯ Prefer not to answer

6. Level of Education Attained

- [ ] Some High/Secondary School
- [ ] High/Secondary School
- [ ] Some College/University
- [ ] College/University Graduate
- [ ] Master's Degree
- [ ] PhD or higher
- [ ] Trade School
- [ ] Professional Designation
- [ ] Prefer not to answer

7. Household Income

- ( ) <$25,000
- ( ) $25,000-49,000
- ( ) $50,000-99,000
- ( ) $100,000-199,000
- ( ) >$200,000
- ( ) Prefer not to answer

8. Current Occupation (you may choose not to answer)

[   ]

Appendix F

Interview Guide and Script

Thank you for agreeing to be involved in this research study and I look forward to discussing your experiences on social media related to women's sport. Before we begin, I want to remind you that you have the right to not answer any question as well as withdraw from this study at any point. If you do choose to withdraw, please let me know if you also want your data removed from the study. I will be audio-recording our interview if you are comfortable with that. You may choose to turn your camera off if you are more comfortable with that option. If you would like me to stop recording or the interview at any time, please let me know. Do you have any questions?

If you are not comfortable with your first name being included in the reported findings, what would you like your pseudonym to be?

If you have no questions, let us begin:
Section 1: Introduction/Background social media use and fan behaviours
1. First, I would like to start off getting to know your fan behaviours, so can you tell me how long you have been a fan of women's sport?
   a. Which sport(s)/athlete(s) are you a fan of?
2. How would you describe your involvement on social media and digital chat rooms?
   a. How important is it to you to be engaged in these spaces?
3. How active would you say you are in women's sport specific social media?
   a. Which accounts do you follow?
   b. What are your thoughts about social media threads focused on women's sport?
4. Do you think or feel that these online platforms create a community of support?
   a. Why or why not?
   b. Probe based on response… can you tell me more about this?
   c. What do you think is the dominant feeling or conversation in these spaces?

Section 2: Toxicity on social media
5. Have you experienced negative sentiments/feelings while engaged in these online chat forums?
   a. Probe based on initial response
   b. Can you tell me a little bit more about it?
   c. How have those experiences made you feel?
   d. Have these negative interactions impacted the way you chose to continue using social media?
6. Can you define toxicity?
7. Have you been involved in or witnessed toxic behaviours on social media specifically related to women's sport?
   a. Can you tell me more about this?
   b. Probe based on initial responses

Section 3: Influence of toxicity on social media use/women's sport involvement

8. In what ways have interactions on social media in women's sport groups, whether positive or negative, affected your overall online activity?
    a. Have you changed your digital behaviours?
    b. Are you more or less involved?
    c. Have you changed the way in which you represent yourself in these groups?
9. In what ways have you or would you cope with toxic behaviours?
    a. How would you or have you reacted to these behaviours online?
    b. How do you respond to toxicity?
10. Are there any other aspects you would want to expand on or feel that you would like to discuss?

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me about your experience in women's sport social media groups and the meaning it holds to you. If you should choose to withdraw, please notify me what you would like to be done with this conversation. I will transcribe this interview recording and send you the written copy for your review. Once you receive the written transcript, you will have 10 days to review the content and inform me if you feel there are any changes needed. You may choose to withdraw from the study at any point up until the end of the 10-day member checking period. If at any point, you have felt distress during the interview or begin to feel distress, here are some resources to seek assistance: Canadian Government Services, Call 1-866-585-0445 or text "WELLNESS" to 741741. For American Services, call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration National Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357) or the crisis text line "HELLO" to 741741.

Thank you again, and I hope you have a great day.

Appendix G

Chapter 2b Themes: Example Quotations, Frequency, and Extensiveness

Category and sub-themes	Representative quotations	Frequency theme appears in data
Reasons for engagement		71
Developing fandom	• I've been a fan of women's sports for over 10 years. • I've been a fan pretty much you know, my whole life.	15
Benefits of involvement	• Having that like dedicated community of people who are supportive and accepting… and if you want to learn, they're so educational… there's a lot of times where I think being a woman in sports especially, you get imposter syndrome and having that community online is amazing… It's just such a great community to be a part of.	36
Behaviours within DICs	• It's kind of a networking tool in a sense which I think is why it's really important to put yourself out there to engage with people. • I love being able to follow them on Twitter or TikTok and kind of get that like conversation and community that you're not going to get through regular coverage just because it doesn't exist as much.	22
Manifestations of toxicity		125
Characteristics	• Toxicity is subjective. I think in today's society, for an individual, toxicity at the heart of it is when it's an attack based on a belief that is different than yours and it could be an opinion that is different than yours. • I think it really is something that would make someone change their behaviour in a negative way… they feel the need to put someone else down for enjoying it or demean someone's humanity in a sense and to me, that's toxic.	97
Emotional effects	• That angers me because it's like you're just telling someone they're not valuable… really is what it comes down to and you just don't deem them worthy or a career or worthy of not being taken advantage of… I think it's just wrong and like why are you so happy to see people be so hurt, it's exploitative… It's just frustrating.	19
Behavioural influence	• But any time I see kind of mean-spirited or directly harmful comments, it makes me think about just like not engaging with social media at all around women's sports.	15

Managing toxicity		117
Behaviours towards toxicity	• So, those negative vibes that come in really just encouraged me to be a bigger supporter and to hit that like button a little more often and it engage a little bit more because now I see it, not that it has a cause behind it, but I wanna make sure that my support is seen as equally as those who are opposed.	94
Attitudes	• I think it kind of fires me up a little bit to be like "this is important" and I think sometimes just seeing that there's negative backlash to people having equal rights and like this is important cause like if there's that much of a fight against it then there needs to be a stronger fight for it.	26
Continued engagement		93
Motivational factors	• Since I am in these more supportive spaces, like it's a lot more positive language and those types of interactions; I think we're in this age of feminism and we're in this new age of like knowing that you know, being a woman is powerful, too, and that you know it's really important to showcase that there are accounts and there's athletes who are fighting for equal rights, equal pay… We see just a lot of things that are reflecting what's happening in the world today just like, just people using their voices to advocate for things that are bigger than themselves.	62
Positives outweigh the negatives	• It [toxicity] doesn't really stick out. I mean, everyone's really there with an appreciation for the sport and the fun of the sport. • Overall, there's a lot of good community in there. Like I said, people make like really good friends. I think especially for women, it allows people to see like role models in their sports.	33