

Toxicity and Parasocial Relationships Between Athletes and Fans on Instagram

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Abstract

Athletes of this generation have a job beyond their sport—the upkeep of their image. With the increased reliance and usage of social media, athletes became entities in themselves and were encouraged to engage in brand-building activities. Fans now can interact with athletes on a much more personal level. This research examines the social media platform Instagram and its potential role enabling toxic, parasocial relationships between athletes and fans. A quantitative analysis of Instagram comments was performed to learn how fans of professional tennis players Naomi Osaka and Eugenie Bouchard engaged with online content. This study is important to understand how social media opens society to a more direct and personal form of communication. Social media shifted boundaries and changed perceptions of what is accepted and appropriate between fans and athletes.

I. Introduction

Athletes are humans, and humans aren't always okay. Professional tennis player Naomi Osaka echoed these ideas after receiving a \$15,000 fine for skipping a press conference after her first-round win at the French Open in May of 2021 (Futterman, 2021). Osaka, who had a relatively positive relationship with the media, continued to miss these meetings and was warned she risked higher penalties and potential default from the tournament. Osaka sparked a long-overdue conversation about the responsibilities of athletes and their perception in the media. Fans and critics took to social media to express their opinions in any way they could.

Within days, many news outlets released pieces framing Osaka as selfish and privileged. Osaka's situation is readily applicable to other athletes of the era. When athletes transgress, social media keeps users up to date while providing them a platform to directly communicate and engage with athletes (Pegoraro, 2019). These platforms offer the ability to grow connections between athletes and fans but are fueled by toxicity and hatred (Kavanaugh, 2019).

Professional Canadian tennis player Eugenie Bouchard also varied from the traditional athlete path and chose to broaden her portfolio through modeling and broadcasting after struggles in tennis. Bouchard took her fame and used it to grow her brand, receive endorsements and cultivate an active social media presence. Unfortunately, like Osaka, her willingness to share with the public contributed to the growth of

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parasocial relationships, with both redeeming and toxic qualities. Social media forced two women from extremely different lives, cultures, and backgrounds to share a similar experience.

This research examines how the social media platform Instagram enables the existence of toxicity between athletes and fans. Through primary and secondary research, this study attempts to discover a correlation between Instagram and toxic, parasocial relationships. One-thousand Instagram comments were coded from Bouchard and Osaka's accounts to learn more about their following and how their fans engage with their online content.

Background

Eugenie Bouchard rose to fame after reaching the semifinals of three Grand Slams in 2014 (Roberts, 2021). While Bouchard's tennis success is noteworthy, her looks also earned her widespread popularity, and she was offered numerous endorsement and modeling offers. Even though her recent results aren't as competitive, she remains extremely marketable in her matches and has millions of followers on Instagram and Twitter (Roberts, 2021). Since her career peak was in 2014, fans scrutinize her for lack of ability and reliance on her physical appearance (MacPherson, 2021).

Naomi Osaka is a Japanese tennis player who gained a following after winning the 2018 U.S. Open and the 2019 Australian Open. Osaka is the highest-paid female athlete and former world No. 1 player but encountered pushback when she announced she would not participate in any after-match news conferences during the French Open (Futterman, 2021). The officials of the tournament fined her \$15,000 and threatened to suspend her. Osaka withdrew from the tournament. Osaka took to social media to share her ongoing battle with depression since 2018 and was met with a range of responses from fans (Strauss, 2021). While some fans applauded her bravery, others responded with outrage.

Osaka and Bouchard were selected for this study because of their engagement with Instagram and their large following. Additionally, both professional athletes faced controversy and received backlash from fans. This makes them appropriate for a case study to analyze toxic parasocial relationships between athletes and fans.

II. Literature Review

Athletes and Brand Building

Athletes have become entities in themselves and are encouraged to engage in brand-building activities. Their personal lives are public, and they face scrutiny and praise over social media platforms (Su, 2020). Athletes who didn't adapt with this advancement of technology missed opportunities to strengthen their brand through endorsements and sponsorships. Athletes with a strong brand identity developed the ability to influence consumers' behaviors and establish a stronger connection to their following (Kunkel, 2019). Individual athletes, like Tiger Woods and Roger Federer, achieved celebrity status through their accomplishments in their respective sports and sponsorships with well-known brands.

While not every athlete has a well-established brand, research indicates athletes with strong brand identities are of extreme value to their teams and potential partnerships (Su, 2020). This practice of branding athletes through mass-mediated channels emerged in the 1920s, with stars like Bobby Jones (golf), Bill Tilden (tennis), and Babe Ruth (baseball). These stars engaged with radio personalities and journalists to promote themselves to the public through a range of marketing tools (Sanderson, 2014).

The presence of social media emphasizes the need for athletes to have both a distinguished professional image and mainstream media persona (Parmentier, 2012). Developing a strong professional image requires athletes to both excel in their sport and properly engage with fans through the creation of an authentic persona (Sanderson, 2014). Without talent and athletic ability, the athlete is not equipped with the tools for success. Even with the athletic talent, athletes sometimes fail to develop strong professional images. David Beckham and Ryan Giggs are both recognized as phenomenal soccer players. However, Giggs' visibility was limited without a recognizable persona, whereas Beckham's brand flourished (Sanderson, 2014). The stark contrast in their brands is attributed to public, visible persona cues that created opportunities for enhanced consumer awareness (Parmentier, 2012).

Athletes and fans are not the only groups that recognize the possibility and power of social media. Sports organizations strategically use social media to launch their own campaigns to create buzz around certain events (Breves, 2021). Wimbledon tennis organizers produce content on Instagram and Snapchat as a cost-effective tool to attract sports consumers. Social media adds tremendous business value to organizations, acting as an important promotional tool that provides publicity and an interactive forum (Filo, 2015). Corporations also capitalize on social media as they build relationships and affiliations with athletes. From a business perspective, sports brands acknowledge the popularity of social media and want to partake in developing their brand to remain current and newsworthy. They devote significant resources and time to encourage athlete and fan relationships, hoping for substantial positive feedback and engagement. The Super Bowl, World Cup, and Olympics all invest notable resources to heavily integrate social media into their marketing (Filo, 2015). Using social media and building partnerships with athletes allows brands to leverage opportunities with consumers.

Growth and Repair of an Athlete's Brand

As the value of an athlete's brand grows, social media proves to be the ideal channel for creating these strong images and further developing fan, sponsorship, and endorsement relationships. Without social media, athletes lose an important ability to create, manage, and send messages directly to their target audience which allows for deeper brand association and awareness (Su, 2020). Professional athletes typically rely on three primary social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram (Frederick, 2019). These platforms are strategically used to share authentic personal content and offer their personalities to fans (Sanderson, 2014). Athletes' popularity can be measured through social media metrics, like followers and the amount of interaction with posts. Brazilian soccer player Neymar constantly interacts in an online discussion on his Twitter with his 67 million followers and frequently posts on his Instagram account (Hwang, 2017).

Athletes recognize the efficiency and ability of social media as a brand-building tool and use it for brand extension (Su, 2020). Greater media exposure is linked to accumulating a larger fan base, showing athletes how exposure and new connections can benefit their careers (Kunkel, 2019). Some athletes consider this and specifically join high-profile teams or capitalize on their breakout performances in major tournaments (Parmentier, 2012). Social media facilitates successful brand-building strategies and allows athletes to maximize their value in and out of their sport.

Collegiate athletes may take these metrics into consideration when deciding where to pursue their careers. For example, University of Mississippi football had 82,000 followers on Instagram in 2020, whereas Louisiana State football – a primary rival for recruiting high-quality athletes – had 408,000 followers (Su, 2020). Athletes are often aware of these differences and cognizant of the potential benefits down the road, especially with the NCAA's recent approval of the Name, Image, and Likeness clause. This allows college athletes to profit from their brand through endorsements, appearances, and business ventures.

It is never too early to manage social media followers and grow a fan base as an athlete. Having a greater number of followers before joining a new team is associated with gaining a larger number of followers after joining (Parmentier, 2012). Brand-building activities should therefore be at the forefront of new athletes' priorities. On Instagram, verified account status proves to yield a greater following and allows for more brand growth (Cipolletta, 2020). Sponsor brands consider metrics and view them as a tool to try to guarantee a higher return on investment (Kunkel, 2019). Athletes who join high market share teams are likely to see a greater impact and development of their brands while also receiving outside benefits and favorability amongst fans (Su, 2020).

Social media's popularity also allows athletes to occupy a greater role in pop culture, being heavily viewed as entertainers and icons (Sanderson, 2014). Not only is performance on the field important, but character and actions matter as well. Therefore, when athletes transgress, regardless of where or when, they face severe backlash (Pegoraro, 2019). These problems create reputational issues, damaging their brand and any sponsorship or partnerships. Since an athlete's brand became a valuable commodity, athletes look to social media to engage in communicative processes of repair to stop further damage to their public image.

Women athletes notably receive more mass media coverage for their transgressions compared to their athletic accomplishments (Toffoletti, 2018). In March 2016, Maria Sharapova tested positive for meldonium, a banned substance by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) in January 2016 (MacPherson, 2021). March 11, Sharapova turned to Facebook to release a statement claiming full responsibility while also defending herself (Pegoraro, 2019). This transparency and use of social media allowed her to directly communicate with a large group of people and protect her career.

Athlete and fan relationships

As athletes become more active on social media, they are subject to more attention from fans. As fans have more access to information, some develop parasocial relationships with specific athletes. The term “parasocial relationship” was first coined in the 1950s, as mass media such as television created the illusion of face-to-face relationships between performers and spectators. Interactions within these relationships are typically one-sided, incapable of mutual growth, and controlled by the performer (Horton, 1956).

Sports celebrities are a prime example of people in parasocial interactions (PSI). PSIs can be defined as, “A media user’s reaction to a media performer such that the media user perceives the performer as an intimate conversational partner” (Klimmt, 2006, p. 292). These relationships impact a fan’s thoughts, feelings, and emotions towards themselves and the athlete. For example, fans who supported and identified with Magic Johnson were more concerned about the risk of contracting AIDS. Fans who supported and identified with O.J. Simpson were more likely to believe he was innocent of murder charges (Perse, 1989). In more recent times, these bonds are strengthened by the access and availability of information on social media platforms that allow fans to see more private moments of athletes.

Athletes realize the communication potential of these platforms and willingly provide more private information in hope of developing a stronger presence and accumulating a larger following. Platforms like Twitter and Instagram have subsequently become a permanent fixture in the athletics industry (Sanderson, 2014). Fans rely on these forms of communication since they are quick and dynamic, allowing them to readily insert themselves in discussions with the desired group (Kunkel, 2019).

With this development of media, fan and athlete interactions accelerated and shifted in a way never seen before (Kunkel, 2019). This new media affords fans opportunities to engage with athletes. However, these new outlets and abilities of communication do not guarantee the civility of fans. Growing research indicates a large amount of cruel, hypermasculine, and negative commentary about athletes or fans (Toffoletti, 2018). While new media provides athletes opportunities of self-presentation and self-defense, it also allows fans the ability to give advice and provide critique or unwarranted comments. This shift in mindset from seeking advice to giving advice demonstrates how increased access to sports figures caused fans to become more brazen and direct in their interactions (Sanderson, 2014). These relationships might be marked by hateful language or any form of condemnation.

It is also important to consider the role of gender in media depictions of sport. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses reveal women’s athletics attract less coverage than male sports (Wynn, 2021). This under-representation instills ideas of female athletic inferiority and reinforces the idea that female athlete accomplishments and endeavors are of less interest than men (Toffoletti, 2018). Additionally, women’s sports media is typically focused on appearance, including sexual and aesthetic elements of the athlete, whereas men receive more focus on their more masculine qualities (Wynn, 2021). Female athletes often face unrealistic expectations to look and act in certain ways. They are expected to embrace more widely accepted views of femininity and heterosexuality to garner more attention, media coverage, and deals.

Also, when women are broadcasted, they are shown in more provocative and sexualized ways (Kavanaugh, 2019). It is not uncommon for female athletes to face severe objectification and sexualization by media and fans (MacPherson, 2021). Social media, therefore, perpetuates decade-long ideas of sexualizing female athletes. In 2016, Paige Spiranac, a golfer and sports commentator, shared her experiences in a live interview about the patterns of abuse she faced through social media sites (Kavanaugh, 2019). The hostility and abuse contributed to her depression and thoughts of taking her own life. Heather Watson, a British tennis player, shared a similar experience of death threats through social media (MacPherson, 2021).

In summary, past scholarship has established that social media can augment an individual’s brand and strengthen fan relationships. Research indicates audiences are more impacted when athletes share a deeper connection and a greater sense of duty to their fans. Consequently, athletes are held to unrealistic standards, creating constant turbulence and a greater likelihood of being shamed over minor violations.

Additionally, in previous instances of athlete transgressions, athletes engaged in communicative work to repair their images and protect their livelihoods. When an athlete’s actions do not follow social norms, athletes face severe reputational damage and fall victim to public scrutiny, especially public shaming through social platforms. These acts of public shaming involve contentious, threatening, discriminating, or vulgar comments. The current study will build upon past scholarship to examine how Instagram users use the platform to create toxic, parasocial relationships with athletes.

III. Methods

Data collection began by identifying the 10 most-recent Instagram posts by Eugenie Bouchard (2.1 million followers) and by Naomi Osaka (2.8 million followers) published between August and October of 2021. Notably during this period, Osaka faced backlash for her withdrawal from a Grand Slam event due to mental health reasons. Bouchard faced criticism because of a perceived overreliance on her beauty and lack of hard work. Then, 50 user comments were chosen for analysis from each of the 20 total posts (1,000 total comments).

This quantitative content analysis intended to observe the phenomenon of parasocial relationships without directly engaging with fans or athletes. Content analysis acts as a systematic and objective procedure in describing communication. Specifically, conceptual analysis was used to examine, quantify, and tally the presence of specific ideas. The research aimed to measure the perceptions, feelings, and emotions of fans engaging in communication via Instagram.

To analyze and interpret the collected data, a spreadsheet separated and divided five categories of comments. When coding the data, the research was quantified based on frequency. Each comment collected was thematically coded in one or more categories. Tennis Positive comments mention tennis performance or tennis-related accomplishments and behavior in a positive manner. Tennis Negative comments offer unwarranted and critical advice towards tennis performance or tennis-related behavior. Personal comments mention behavior and occurrences outside of tennis. These comments involve family, intimate issues, relationships, and possible transgressions. Vulgar comments are specifically sexual comments, mentioning and objectifying bodies. These comments are solely oriented around the physical aspects of the athlete's bodies, regardless of whether they are positive or negative. Lastly, Threats are comments meant to communicate some intent of harm, whether it is physical, emotional, or psychological.

To guarantee manageable and accurate analysis, the text was reduced into words or sets of words and phrases. Comments including emoticons were disregarded because their meanings were up for interpretation and vary cross-culturally.

IV. Findings

The research method for the study was a quantitative content analysis completed on Instagram comments from professional tennis players' accounts. There was a total collection of 1,000 comments, 500 from Bouchard's page and 500 from Osaka's. Overall results of the analysis are in Table 1.

Table 1

	% of Tennis Positive	% of Tennis Negative	% of Vulgar	% of Personal	% of Threats
Osaka	7.6%	7.6%	1%	82%	.2%
Bouchard	2.8%	14.8%	5.8%	83.2%	.8%

Osaka results

An overwhelming portion of the comments on Osaka's page (82 percent) fell into the Personal category. Many of these comments for Osaka related to a tennis-neutral topic, mental health, unsolicited advice, or her appearance. Personal comments typically indicated the commenter felt a connection or more interconnected relationship with Osaka than naturally presumed. These comments included commentary not relating to her career, and instead fixated on other aspects of her life. One comment on a post read, "My baby in Rome" while another read, "I am so grateful for your existence."

The next most common category was a tie for both Tennis Positive and Tennis Negative comments at 7.6%. Tennis Positive comments explicitly mentioned tennis performance or tennis-related actions in an uplifting and supportive manner. Some examples include, "Naomi lost a match but won hearts" and "True legend for women in sports." Tennis Negative comments typically referred to her momentary departure from tennis and how she was falling behind. A few examples include, "This is what happens when you take your

eye off the ball, you lose,” and “I thought you should have been a champion, instead you play for money, not fun or honor, its [sic] time to go home.”

Only 1% of the comments of the 500 comments were coded as Vulgar and .2% of that same sample coded as Threat. Vulgar comments objectified or sexualized Osaka’s body. It is important to note these comments were coded differently from basic and generalized comments like “Beautiful” or “Stunning.” Vulgar comments include language like, “U are sexy as fuck” and “Never wanted to be a cushion so bad,” in reference to a cushion she was sitting on.

Since Osaka was recently the center of controversy regarding tennis and mental health, a cross-evaluation between the Tennis Negative category and Threat category was also performed. Only one comment (.2%) coded as both Tennis Negative and Threat reading, “Stop throwing tantrums, stop saying poor me, and grow up. Don’t let the fans down or else.” Therefore, 7.8% of comments fell into the Tennis Negative and Threats when combined. In general, 3.2% of Osaka’s comments included Tennis Negative comments that overlapped into another category. For example, one user commented, “Focus on the game, not the glamour.” These comments generally offered unsolicited advice about an unrelated aspect of her life as well as tennis.

Bouchard results

More than 8 of 10 comments about Bouchard were Personal. These comments were similar to the contents of Osaka’s, but also included references to her newfound blossoming career in either modeling or broadcasting, her life choices, or her intelligence. A range of examples includes, “Dumb girl,” “How do brands keep hiring you” or on the other end of the spectrum, “Wonderful commentator, wonderful woman.” Tennis Negative comments were subsequently coded as next popular with 14.8% of the results. Tennis Negative comments included aggressive and direct insults about her lack of ability. Examples include, “The face you make when you can’t win any matches” and “Glad you’re away from tennis, good riddance.”

Just under 6 percent of the comments were coded as Vulgar. These comments typically made inappropriate and sexual comments about the shape, size, and position of Bouchard’s body. Some comments involved fat-shaming like, “Your figure is so fat don’t eat chocolate” while others made inappropriate references to porn like, “I guess tennis didn’t work, now you are trying to cash something. Go on OnlyFans to make good money.” Only 2.8% of comments were Tennis Positive. Outside of Threats, Tennis Positive comments were the least frequent on her page. Threats accounted for .8% of comments.

Overall, it seems both players received a similar number of comments coded as Personal (within <2%) and an extremely low percentage of comments coded Threats. Bouchard experienced a higher number of Tennis Negative comments while Osaka received an equal amount of Tennis Positive and Tennis Negative comments. Additionally, Bouchard was exposed to overall more Vulgar comments.

V. Discussion

An extremely notable finding was the high percentage of comments coded as Personal on both Bouchard and Osaka’s accounts. Osaka’s comments were more uplifting, whereas Bouchard’s typically had more negative leanings. Both athletes had over 80% of their comments fall into this category. While the Personal category varied slightly for each athlete, the results give insight into the relationships between fans and athletes. Personal comments were those that mentioned something beyond tennis. Since Osaka and Bouchard are known for their professional tennis, any comments that deviated from this main topic demonstrate fans taking interest in their personal lives. These interests and acts of engagement manifested themselves in the fan’s viewpoint of the athlete and contributed to an unrealistic feeling of familiarity.

Therefore, this study demonstrates that Instagram supports parasocial relationships. The results indicate use of Instagram heavily contributes to the creation and further development of parasocial relationships between athletes and fans. This is supported by the number of comments in the Personal category, showing how comfortable and at ease fans felt when addressing athletes’ personal lives. Fans constantly offered their input on athletes’ lives, as if they had the athletes’ best interest at heart.

The data also shows that while Vulgar, Tennis Negative, and Threat comments existed, the coded results comprised such a small percentage of the overall comments that it would be inaccurate to characterize the general trend as toxic. An argument could be made more for toxicity with Bouchard, being that a sizable

chunk of 20.6% of comments fell into the Tennis Negative category and Vulgar.

While the data does not indicate a high percentage of Vulgar or threatening comments, Personal comments contained constant attacks on both athletes' self-worth and ability. Osaka, for example, was constantly attacked for her "weak" mental state and told she needed to focus on tennis and less on money. Several comments noted how apparently willing she was to participate in ads but couldn't be bothered to play a tennis match. The tone of comments was condescending and judgmental, like, "See dear, you will never major in the future, cause [sic] you are too focused on ads now." Bouchard was also constantly ostracized from the tennis community, being labeled a fraud and a quitter.

Additionally, many people were quick to make assumptions and label the athletes. Most people in the comments talked to both athletes in a familiar tone. The comments mirrored those to be expected of close family and friends. Typically, the Personal category included comments on physical appearance, questions about life, unsolicited pieces of advice, or some form of a proclamation of love. Bouchard was not only labeled "talentless" but also had her personality attacked in multiple situations. She was called a "bimbo," "dumb," and "uneducated." Bouchard faced many more objectifying comments about her physical appearance and body than Osaka. Regardless of the content of the post, she was victimized by a stream of name-calling and sexual harassment. Some references include her being called a "porn star" and "cow with breasts." Other comments were extremely dismissive of her tennis talent and said her body was her main attraction, calling her an "attention whore" and "retarded lesbian." These comments were very direct and severe, indicating an obvious comfort level the fan feels to the athlete.

An argument could be made that the online and anonymous nature of the comments allowed fans to feel more distant and less connected with the athlete. However, regardless of the medium of communication, fans still felt comfortable enough to attack and tear down strangers, as if they were owed an explanation or deserved to be a part of their previous successes.

Osaka's comments exemplified these explored ideas of fans sounding entitled. Overall, it seemed as if Osaka's fans were very entitled about her recent break from tennis and felt as if she owed them more. Comments coded as Personal called her authentic, brave, and strong or would diminish her issues and call her weak and lazy. These comments would also refer to how unhappy and tired she looked as if fans knew Osaka personally, beyond the tennis courts. Comments exuded disappointment and a desire to get back the old version of Osaka, whom they loved and supported.

For both athletes, it is extremely important to note that the image and caption of the Instagram post impacted the type of coded comments received. Bouchard's posts about tennis had a high number of Negative Tennis, while her pictures of sponsorships and exploration of a career in broadcasting were met with much more enthusiasm. Similarly, Osaka's pictures of vacation were met with waves of encouragement, gushing about how much she deserved a break from tennis. Her pictures featuring old tennis images, however, were met with immediate pushback and judgment.

Evidence that Instagram provides an accessible platform for parasocial relationships was found in the high number of comments that fell into the Personal category. It is abundantly clear that the intimate sharing and documentation of the athletes' lives prove to act as the perfect medium for fans to engage and comment on their thoughts. Social media allows a high volume of fans to have access to more intimate details of their life, creating an illusion of closeness and friendship that would have never been possible without a similar platform. Instagram allows for these feelings of closeness to develop such strong bonds that fans comment like they have a vested interest in the athlete's life.

While Instagram has the power to enhance an athlete's brand and build stronger relationships, it also gives fans more freedom of expression. Athletes are encouraged to put their lives in the public sphere to engage fans, hoping for supportive and majority positive feedback. While the data does not support the existence of majority toxic comments, these hurtful opinions are still a prevalent issue. Despite the thousands of wide-ranging daily comments athletes receive, they potentially see and are impacted by the waves of negative comments. Beyond the toxicity, the danger of developing parasocial relationships is extremely apparent and likely leads to creating a disillusioned state of comfort for the fan and their presumed relationship with the athlete. This imagined feeling of comfort and closeness likely propels and provides them the confidence to post negative comments.

Limitations

There are a few existing limitations on this study. Most notably, only 1,000 comments were coded. While this is a seemingly large sample of comments, the results may have varied if more data were collected. These potentially varying comments could have discovered different underlying trends and therefore led to different conclusions, regarding the toxicity of parasocial relationships between athletes and fans.

In addition, since Instagram is a platform available internationally, comments written in another language were disregarded to avoid translation errors. These comments might have fit in a different category and therefore influenced the overall percentage of comments within different categories.

Finally, the content of the original post has a clear impact on the comment section. For example, Osaka included a post mentioning her birthday, and the first 50 comments were variations of "Happy Birthday." These comments, therefore, were all coded within the Personal category. The Birthday post was omitted for one calculation to confirm that its inclusion in the data had an insignificant impact on the overall results – the difference was less than one percent. Instead, the post acts as a model of how the original content directly influences user comments. Similar trends also appeared within Bouchard's posts. Posts revolving around tennis typically had higher percentages of comments coded as Vulgar and Tennis Negative. Posts about Bouchard's blossoming broadcasting career or endorsements received a much more positive response. Therefore, it is fair to presume a different sample of posts from these athletes could bring much different results in the comment analysis.

VI. Conclusion

The development of social media and accumulation of users create a strong community and push towards celebrities having a distinguished and continual online presence. This study specifically looked at Instagram as an interactive platform, offering a relevant example of one social media outcome. This study does not allow for generalizations about other platforms but is important to gain an understanding of the growing social media universe. While Instagram offers athletes brand-building opportunities that generate financial benefits, it also allows fans to take a more vested interest in the personal lives of athletes. This access to information leads to a feeling of familiarity and ease that encourages a versatile range of comments directed towards individual athletes. These feelings of familiarity can quickly escalate to an overwhelming consensus of entitlement that manifests itself in hate-fueled comments.

This research looked how toxic, parasocial relationships can develop on Instagram. While these findings did not indicate high levels of toxicity, it is important to acknowledge its presence. The level of comfort that enabled even one person to post egregious commentary revolving around physical appearance, performance, or ability is notable. Social media gives people the courage to attack athletes personally. Everyone who views these types of comments can counter the intrusion and blatant act of disrespect or add to it. Athletes give people entertainment, role models, dreams, and more. The least they can receive is respect on their platforms.

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