Twitter’s Paradoxes: A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Women’s Professional Cycling Tweets

Larena Hoeber, University of Regina
Sally Shaw, University of Otago
Katie Rowe, Deakin University

Socio-Cultural - Other (Professional Sport)  
Friday, June 8, 2018 1:45 PM  
Room: Sable D

20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Abstract 2018-218

Twitter and professional sport have developed a symbiotic relationship over Twitter’s short history. Sport, with its vocal and passionate fan bases, mega-star athletes, and insatiable desire for statistics, has become an ardent user of Twitter. For its part, Twitter, through professional sport, provides access to millions of potential viewers, customers, and fans. Twitter, unlike much of the mainstream media, engages with, and provides an outlet for, women’s professional sport. This can be considered to be positive, providing an avenue where women’s sport can be discussed without the usual gatekeeping of traditional media (Bruce & Hardin, 2014; LaVoi & Stair Calhoun, 2014). Equally, Twitter is a place where most anyone can post their values and beliefs, regardless of how extreme they may be. In the world of women’s sport, this paradox gives voice to support, advocacy, and development, but also sexist, vulgar, and demeaning commentary (Antunovic, 2014; MacKay & Dallaire, 2012).

The complex relationship between Twitter and women’s sport is therefore of significance to sport managers, fans, and athletes, many of whom use, or are the focus of, Twitter commentary. The purpose of this study is to examine that paradox within the world of women’s professional cycling. We chose cycling because it is an under-researched sport within gender scholarship, yet is rife with contested gender relations and “layers of institutional and cultural sexism exist within the sport and its governing bodies” (McLachlan, 2016, p. 266). In this sport, women have traditionally been portrayed as supporters, ‘wives and girlfriends’ of male athletes, or ‘podium girls’. Professional female cyclists are constrained by regulations which dictate shorter race distances, fewer sanctioned events, and less prize money (Cycling Independent Reform Commission, 2015; McLachlan, 2016). Very little research has been conducted on the development of women’s professional cycling itself and advocacy for inclusion into the Grand Tours, such as Le Tour de France (TDF).

We utilised critical discourse analysis (CDA; Fairclough, 2012; Lazar, 2005) as our method. Discourses, in Fairclough’s (2012) world are “semiotic ways of construing the world … that can … be identified with positions or perspectives of different groups of social actors.” (p.11). These could include advocacy for women’s cycling or sexism. Fairclough emphasizes the relational nature of language: not only is language a social construct; it also mediates other social constructs. Since most discussions of CDA, including Fairclough’s, do not specifically offer a gendered analysis, we turn to Lazar (2005) to provide a more nuanced interpretation of feminist CDA. Feminist discourse analysis aims to provide a “rich and nuanced understanding of the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse in sustaining a (hierarchically) gendered social order” (Lazar, 2005, p. 1). This approach is based on five principles: critical analysis of discourses that reinforce patriarchy, recognition of gender as an ideological structure, a focus on gender and power relations, (de)construction of gender through discourse, and critical self-reflexivity. We applied these principles to our analysis of the data.

Using Fairclough’s CDA and Lazar’s feminist CDA, we examined a purposive sample tweets from the 2013 Tour de France. These tweets were identified within a larger dataset of tweets using the #tdf hashtag for this event. Following an exploratory and interactive process (Hoeber, Hoeber, Snelgrove & Wood, 2017), we searched for tweets containing the term ‘woman’, ‘lady’, or ‘girl’ and their derivatives. This process resulted in a sample of 6176 tweets. Next, we isolated the original tweets, which resulted in a sample of 2087 tweets. In the first stage of analysis, we read through and coded the tweets to determine the range of ways in which women were discussed in this context. These tweets covered a range of topics related to women’s cycling, with the largest group of tweets (n=461) centred on an advocacy campaign for female cyclists and Le Tour de France. Given the breadth of topics discussed in our sample, we focused our analysis on this group of tweets.
The tweets reveal patterns related to patriarchy, gender as an ideological structure in sport, gendered power relations in cycling, relationality in the (de)construction of gender, and self-reflexivity. First, some tweets challenge the established patriarchy in professional cycling. Yet, other tweets, intentionally or unintentionally, sustain the current gendered hierarchy through emphasizing the inferiority of women’s abilities or the sexualization of women. Second, a more subtle debate related to the inclusion of women in the TDF or the establishment of a separate women’s race. Some questioned the use of sex as an inclusion/exclusion criteria to participate in a sport event. In contrast, many others, through their support for a women’s Tour de France, illustrated the taken-for-grantedness of sex being used to separate athletes. Third, the tweets highlighted the complexity of gendered power relations in sport. Since the Amaury Sport Organisation (ASO) runs and controls entry to Le Tour de France, the petition to allow entry for women cyclists was directed at them. The petition itself was organized by female cyclists and demonstrated the value and power associated with Twitter, whereby individuals directed comments to organizers, media personalities, media companies, and cycling organizations. Fourth, we found evidence of gender relationality (Lazar, 2005). In particular, we noted division amongst female cyclists, with some, such as Emma Pooley, advocating for the creation of a new women’s event but others such as Laura Trott concerned about undermining the women’s circuit with a new event. There was limited evidence of institutional reflexivity, with the ASO and Christian Prudhomme initially suggesting there would be no change to the TDF. However, the ASO did establish La Course, a one-day stage event for women cyclists, in 2014.

Our work highlights the complex nature of social media, specifically Twitter, in advancing the interests of female athletes and women’s sport (Bruce & Hardin, 2014; LaVoi & Stair Calhoun, 2014), but at the same time also reinforcing the patriarchal social order of sport through the use of entrenched discourses that marginalize women as athletes (Antunovic, 2014; Lisec & McDonald, 2012). In the sport management discipline, the findings of our work most directly inform the area of communication, but also contribute to the areas of management of sport, power, and gender relations.