

Social Media Comments of Top Athletes: A Gender Analysis

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the

Department of Communication Studies

West Chester University

West Chester, PA

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

By

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May 2024

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who made my education possible. A heartfelt thank you to my parents and grandparents—your support has been everything to me. I also extend my deepest gratitude to my boyfriend, who was always there to answer my calls, whether I needed to talk things through or simply needed a word of encouragement.

## **Acknowledgments**

This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance and support of my thesis committee. I am beyond grateful to Dr. Mahoney, Dr. Lordan, and Dr. Camilo Díaz Pino for their invaluable advice and insights in both my undergraduate and graduate journeys.

## **Abstract**

Sports are fraught with gender inequality and sexism. This research focuses on differences in public opinion regarding top athletes' personal social media. The study investigates gender differences in topic, gender differences in tone, gender differences in platform, and differences in sports. Additionally, it aims to explore the tone and topics of comments on Instagram and X. Using the methodology of content analysis, this study will examine comment tone (e.g. negative, positive, or neutral), as well as whether the topic of comments is sports-related or gender-related. Findings provide insight into gender differences in the treatment of athletes in the digital sphere.

*Keywords:* Social Media, Gender Studies, Athlete Engagement, Public Perception, Comments

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## Introduction

Social media has emerged as a public sphere for discussion and the sharing of ideas. Popular social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, X, and TikTok, have grown to be integral to shaping conversations in today's culture and society. Examining the ideas shared on social media often give an insight into societal norms and opinions.

Public sphere conversations often emerge over topics related to news, weather, sports. However, previous research points towards these conversations being fraught with gender inequality and sexism (Burton, 2015; MacPherson & Kerr, 2020; Na et.al, 2020). Understanding the differences in how male and female athletes are treated on social media helps to provide insights into stereotypes and biases that influence not just the sports industry, but overall societal perceptions of gender as well.

Specifically, prior studies have found that women are more likely to face online harassment, such as sexual harassment, cyberstalking, and nonconsensual pornography (Antunovic, 2019). The sports industry also has a history of sexism, with elements that hold "potential for sexual violence, including, heightened celebrity status, aggression, sexualization of women and traditional perspectives on roles for women in sport" (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020), leading me to believe that women will have more gender-related comments and once again, overall, more negative comments. Therefore, one can expect that female sports athletes may face an increase of online gender-based harassment.

Research has shown that the industry also reinforces hegemonic norms and masculinity (Burton, 2015). Male athletes face their own challenges of meeting gendered expectations in society. Hegemonic norms associated with masculinity include perceptions of status, toughness,

and antifemininity (Gallagher & Parrott, 2011). Male athletes who fail to meet these hegemonic norms may be more heavily scrutinized by public opinion than peers.

This study strives to examine gender differences between athletes further. Specifically, this research examines the topic, tone, platform, and sport category by looking at comments on both male and female athletes' Instagram and X posts. By examining the tone and topics of comments on Instagram and X, this study provides insights into gender differences in the treatment of athletes in the digital sphere.

## **Literature Review**

### **Social Constructionist Perspective**

Many recent studies have explored gender differences in online social media comments. This study expands on MacPherson & Kerr's (2020) study investigating the occurrence and gender differences of online public shaming directed at professional athletes. Social media plays a crucial role in athlete perception. Due to the ability for fans to comment on athletes' profiles and for athletes to interact directly with fans, social media allows athletes to build and market themselves with their personal brand. These digital spaces provide athletes the opportunity to reveal aspects of their lives, both within and outside of their sport, helping them to foster a closer, more personal bond with their fans. The ability of social media content to quickly spread through user interactions means that every post can greatly influence an athlete's brand image, whether positively or negatively (Na et.al, 2020).

A social constructionist perspective is often used when examining public opinion. This perspective explains how individuals give meaning to their surroundings based on historical, social, and cultural contexts. Society today has three themes MacPherson & Kerr (2020) highlight



differences engrained in the system. There is some form of objectification of females, promotion of hyper-masculinity, or victim blaming everywhere we look, whether it is in the news, social media, or everyday conversations. They are societal themes that individuals are introduced to from an early age, regardless of their personal beliefs. This idea can be taken and applied to the rape culture in America, especially in sports. The professional sports world has a history of sexism, with elements that hold “potential for sexual violence, including, heightened celebrity status, aggression, sexualization of women and traditional perspectives on roles for women in sport” (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020). This culture is particularly heightened by the rise of social media, which creates a public sphere for hyper-masculine and sexist comments. As such, it is important to examine the societal implications of female harassment.

### **Online Harassment of Women**

History is rooted in the mistreatment and harassment of women, and research demonstrates how it has become even more widespread with the rise of the internet, where people can easily comment and share their thoughts (Antunovic, 2019; Carlson & Witt, 2020; Shaw, 2014). Women are more likely to face sexual harassment, cyberstalking, and nonconsensual pornography (Antunovic, 2019). Misogyny and harassment affect women across various fields, but it's important to focus on the harassment experienced by women sports journalists. The 2016 #MoreThanMean campaign, started by the YouTube sports podcast Just Not Sports, aimed to address this issue. The YouTube video includes a series of mean Tweets, increasing the hostility and harshness (Antunovic, 2019). This campaign brought attention to the sexism women face and allowed women in sports journalism to share their experiences with online harassment.

While this campaign allowed women to speak out, everyday life does not provide the same opportunity. Specifically, 79% of female journalists state that online harassment has impacted their

press freedom (Carlson & Witt, 2020). If female journalists are facing hate and harassment for stories they are reporting, they are most likely going to censor their writing to avoid this backlash. This limited press freedom could lead to self-censorship. Female writers may choose to self-censor not only to avoid harassment but also to protect their well-being, careers, and reputations. One reporter even went as far as to say that she censors what she says online to prevent harassment, as they are emotionally damaging and even distract her from her writing (Chen et al., 2020).

While these are overt examples of harassment, gender differences are not always as apparent. Examining hegemonic norms portrayed on social media is crucial in media studies, as social media often reinforces society's ideologies and beliefs, such as beauty standards and gender roles. Social media serves as a public sphere, as social media platforms are a place where "private people come together as a public" (Kruse et.al, 2018). The ability for anyone to post, comment, and interact on social media creates an environment that, therefore, reflects societal public opinion and its different perspectives.

### **Hegemonic Norms**

The concept of hegemonic norms is often turned to when researchers are interested in more subtle gender differences and perceptions. Hegemonic norms can be defined as the cultural standards and values that are embedded in society and shape the expected behavior and attitudes within that society (Brule, 2008). These norms can encompass beauty, age, gender, ethnicity, and status in society. Understanding this concept is crucial in creating a more inclusive society while challenging societal norms.

While these norms give us insight into various social issues, they particularly highlight the harmful stereotypes about men, introducing the concept of hegemonic masculinity. This serves as a pertinent example of how these norms shape expectations and behaviors. Hegemonic masculinity

can be defined as, “a kind of masculinity that promotes male dominance over women” (Gallagher & Parrott, 2011). It is theorized that this concept might play a role in fostering hostility among heterosexual men towards women. Masculine stereotypes often include behaviors that emote toughness, assertiveness, dominance, and confidence. Society has a way of forcing gender norms onto individuals, often pressuring the extremes. Men may feel pressured to meet these standards, going to extremes. They may even become upset and insecure if they feel they are meeting these standards. Both sides of the spectrum can lead to hostility, specifically towards women. This hostility can even pressure women to force themselves into their gender roles. Women's efforts to achieve work-life balance are challenged by male dominance, the excessive subordination of females, and domestic, gender-based labor divisions (Adisa et.al, 2019). The prevalence of hegemonic norms and hegemonic masculinity further compounds these issues.

The sports industry not only reflects but also reinforces hegemonic norms and hegemonic masculinity. Research by Burton (2015) in "Underrepresentation of Women in Sport Leadership" highlights how the sports industry's emphasis on masculine norms marginalizes women. Women are underrepresented in sports leadership roles due to a strong inclination towards men in the field. All sports are inherently masculine, as they position male activities as privileged and endorse masculinity and masculine behaviors as the desirable leadership qualities in sports (Burton, 2015). This underrepresentation in sports leadership roles also influences women to limit themselves in these gendered environments. Because women do not expect to be granted leadership jobs, they might not push themselves to reach their goals. Research has found that compared to their male counterparts, women serving as assistant coaches often express less interest in pursuing head coaching opportunities (Burton, 2015). The gender pay gap, where women are consistently paid less than their male counterparts for similar roles, further proves the disincentive for women to

work for higher positions. This trend suggests that hegemonic masculinity in the sports industry may discourage women from seeking higher coaching roles or reaching their goals in general.

The role of media in reinforcing hegemonic masculinity is critical. Social media frequently amplifies this idea, particularly through its features of widespread availability, public nature, lasting presence, and the use of quantifiable social metrics (Manago et.al, 2023). Research indicates that ideologies of masculinity are closely linked with the social media usage motives of both girls and boys. This implies that masculinity norms impact how individuals engage with social media, how they present themselves online, the content they create or share, and how they interact with others (Manago et.al, 2023). It is important to analyze gender differences embedded in societal reactions to top athletes.

### **Through a Feminist Lens**

Feminist theory plays a key role in recognizing and addressing sexism in sports media. It provides insight into how gender stereotypes are reinforced, highlighting unequal representation and treatment of females compared to their male counterparts. Feminist theory can be defined as a theory that explains “gender inequality, power, and patriarchy, focusing on the ways gender and power influence our world, from the material to the symbolic ways gender plays a role in our lives” (Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018). The feminist theory aims to examine how gender inequality influences our world, while hegemonic masculinity specifically addresses how dominant masculinity norms reinforce gender inequalities.

The core principles of feminist theory offer a valuable perspective when evaluating gender bias in the workplace, specifically in the sports industry. While the 1960s and 1970s marked significant progress for women's rights, there is still not equal representation among both sexes.

When it comes to female athletes, they are often “underrepresented and trivialized in coverage” (Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018). Behind the scenes, women working in sports media only make up between 10 and 12 percent of the industry (Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018). The women working in this industry often face obstacles, such as leaving the industry shortly after beginning, sexual harassment, feeling forced to take on specific assignments due to their gender, and working in a misogynistic environment (Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018).

Examining gender bias in the sports industry offers a crucial perspective for understanding how media messaging impacts and shapes gender roles. In media, female athletes are often portrayed in a different way than male athletes, if they are even represented at all. The term “symbolic annihilation” has historically been used to describe how in media, women are either marginalized or typecast into stereotypical roles, such as victims, mothers, or incompetent, limiting their representation in the public sphere (Bachmann et.al, 2018). These public spheres allow people to share their thoughts and opinions by posting and commenting on social media. Due to the ability to make yourself anonymous, people often can put out racist and sexist comments without fear of any repercussions or judgment (Shaw, 2014).

Based on this understanding, it is important to examine public comments of both female and male social media accounts more carefully. While current research demonstrates that gendered differences exist (Chen et al., 2020; Shaw, 2014), a more nuanced understanding of how tone, platform, and sports category impact these conversations is less clear. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What gender differences emerge when examining topic of comments?

RQ2: What gender differences emerge when examining tone of comments?

RQ3: What gender differences emerge between social media platforms?

RQ4: What differences emerged in topic and tone of comments between social media platforms?

## **Methodology**

### **I. Chosen Social Media Platforms**

Social media is a modern public sphere space to discuss topics, such as sports communication. A 2022 survey found that social media is the second most prominent way to engage with sports comment outside of watching live sports on television (Statista, 2023).

Predecessors, Ellen MacPherson and Gretchen Kerr (2020), researched a similar topic using Instagram and X. As seen in interviews with young users such as Devin Walsh, Facebook will not be used, as younger generations are turning away from this platform.

### **II. Coding**

This study is interested in gender differences found in social media conversation. A content analysis is a useful methodology to use when interested in examining differences between variables. A content analysis is defined as a method to “a method of classifying oral or written material into categories with similar meanings” (Whiting et al., 2019). It is a useful methodology for this study because it doesn't require informed consent, given that the comments are publicly available. Additionally, it helps to avoid issues of social desirability bias (Whiting et al., 2019). Specifically, this study is interested in differences between tone, platform, and sports category. Tone was coded for negative, positive, and/or neutral comments. Additional coding will include whether the sport is in season at the time of coding, the athletes' race, and if the athletes are open about their sexuality.

Negative comments are operationally defined as views, criticisms, or opinions written on a social media post with the intent to communicate a sense of disapproval, hatred, or denial. For example, a negative comment would read as “You are ugly and bad at soccer” due to a sense of hatred and disapproval being expressed. Positive comments were operationally defined as views or opinions written on a social media post to communicate a sense of optimism, affirmation, reassurance, or encouragement. For example, a positive comment would read “You are a great person and my favorite athlete” due to a sense of affirmation and optimism being expressed. Neutral comments can be operationally defined as views or opinions written on a social media post that do not possess either a positive or negative viewpoint or opinion. For example, a neutral comment would read “You played in the basketball game last night” due to neither a positive nor negative viewpoint being expressed.

In addition, this coding will include whether or not these negative, positive, and neutral comments are gender-related. A gender-oriented comment can be operationally defined as relating to gender identity, born sex, or physical appearance. For example, a positive gender-oriented comment would read “You are the best female basketball player.” A negative gender-oriented comment would read “You are the worst female basketball player.” A neutral gender-oriented comment would read “You are a female basketball player.” A non-gender-oriented comment was operationally defined as a comment that does not mention gender identity, born sex, or physical appearance. For example, a positive non-gender-oriented comment would read, “You are the best basketball player.” A negative non-gender-oriented comment would read “You are the worst basketball player.” A neutral non-gender-oriented comment would read “You are a basketball player.”

The five most recent posts were selected on both Instagram and X, with retweets/reposts or joint posts being excluded. On each post, the five comments shown at the top were then chosen and coded for. On X, Ad comments, any comments that were flagged with “show additional replies, including those that may contain offensive content” were excluded. Posts that were pinned, collaborations, or labeled sponsored were excluded from the sample. Any comment with just a GIF was excluded unless written text was accompanying the GIF. Comments in different languages were translated with Google Translate.

Coding was also done by another researcher and an intercoder reliability test was performed to ensure that bias was minimized.

### **III. Sampling Method**

A purposive sample, defined as “sampling data sources with certain considerations” (Hia et al., 2020) was used for the analysis. This is an appropriate sample because it involves choosing the sample for their knowledge of the needed information (Hia et al., 2020).

Top professional athletes of the 2023 Olympic teams were chosen for the analysis (n=48 professional athletes, including 24 of each biological sex). These athletes were selected by examining the rosters of the U.S. 5x5 Women's Olympics Basketball team, U.S. 5x5 Men's Olympics Basketball team, U.S. Women's National Soccer team, U.S. Men's National Soccer team, U.S. Open Women, and U.S. Open Men. These sports were chosen because they possess gender-equivalent counterparts, ensuring a balanced representation of both sexes.

Each roster was investigated for how the top number of followers on Instagram and X. Athletes were excluded from the study if they did not have an account. To narrow down the four athletes from each sport and gender, teams were ranked for both Instagram and X individually.



The top 5 followed athletes on Instagram from each roster were chosen and removed from the X list. This process was continued until five athletes from each sport were identified, ensuring that no players overlapped. Brittney Griner was excluded from this sampling, as social media comments were skewed regarding her 2022 drug possession arrest in Russia. Private social media accounts were also excluded. For a complete list of the sample, please see Table 1.1

Table 1.1 - Professional Athlete Final Sample

<b>Team</b>	<b>Biological Sex</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Social Media Platform</b>	<b>Handle</b>	<b>Followers (as of October 22, 2023)</b>
5x5 Women's Olympics Basketball	Female	Skylar Diggins-Smith	Instagram	skylardigginsmith	1,000,000
5x5 Women's Olympics Basketball	Female	A'ja Wilson	Instagram	aja22wilson	755,000
5x5 Women's Olympics Basketball	Female	Sue Bird	Instagram	sbird10	731,000
5x5 Women's Olympics Basketball	Female	Breanna Stewart	Instagram	breannastewart30	342,000
5x5 Women's Olympics Basketball	Female	Diana Taurasi	X	DianaTaurasi	92,700
5x5 Women's Olympics Basketball	Female	Jewell Loyd	X	jewellloyd	49,400
5x5 Women's Olympics Basketball	Female	Tina Charles	X	tinacharles31	38,400

5x5 Women's Olympics Basketball	Female	Chelsea Gray	X	cgray209	26,200
5x5 Men's Olympics Basketball	Male	Kevin Durant	Instagram	easymoneysniper	13,300,000
5x5 Men's Olympics Basketball	Male	Damian Lillard	Instagram	damianlillard	10,100,000
5x5 Men's Olympics Basketball	Male	Jayson Tatum	Instagram	jaytatum0	6,600,000
5x5 Men's Olympics Basketball	Male	Devin Booker	Instagram	dbook	5,500,000
5x5 Men's Olympics Basketball	Male	Zach LaVine	X	ZachLaVine	599,100
5x5 Men's Olympics Basketball	Male	JaVale McGee	X	JaValeMcGee	350,700
5x5 Men's Olympics Basketball	Male	Bam Adebayo	X	Bam1of1	240,500
5x5 Men's Olympics Basketball	Male	Jrue Holiday	X	Jrue_Holiday11	198,600
U.S. Women's National Soccer	Female	Alex Morgan	Instagram	alexmorgan13	10,200,000
U.S. Women's National Soccer	Female	Megan Rapinoe	Instagram	mrapihoe	2,100,000
U.S. Women's National Soccer	Female	Julie Ertz	Instagram	julieertz	983,000

U.S. Women's National Soccer	Female	Lindsey Horan	Instagram	lindseyhoran10	370,000
U.S. Women's National Soccer	Female	Alyssa Naeher	X	AlyssaNaeher	95,800
U.S. Women's National Soccer	Female	Emily Sonnett	X	emilysonnett	73,600
U.S. Women's National Soccer	Female	Mia Fishel	X	miafishel10	29,600
U.S. Women's National Soccer	Female	Lynn Williams	X	lynnraenie	25,200
U.S. Men's National Soccer	Male	Christian Pulisic	Instagram	cmpulisic	7,900,000
U.S. Men's National Soccer	Male	Sergiño Dest	Instagram	sgd_2	2,000,000
U.S. Men's National Soccer	Male	Weston McKennie	Instagram	west.mckennie	1,500,000
U.S. Men's National Soccer	Male	Tim Weah	Instagram	timothyweah	724,000
U.S. Men's National Soccer	Male	Folarin Balogun	X	balogun	271,900
U.S. Men's National Soccer	Male	Matt Turner	X	headdturnerr	79,800

U.S. Men's National Soccer	Male	Alex (Alejandro) Zendejas	X	AlexZendejas8	47,400
U.S. Men's National Soccer	Male	Yunus Musah	X	yunusmusah8	36,600
U.S. Open Women	Female	Venus Williams	Instagram	venuswilliams	2,000,000
U.S. Open Women	Female	Coco Gauff	Instagram	cocogauff	1,600,000
U.S. Open Women	Female	Sloane Stephens	Instagram	sloanestephens	586,000
U.S. Open Women	Female	Madison Keys	Instagram	madisonkeys	244,000
U.S. Open Women	Female	Bethanie Mattek-Sands	X	matteksands	76,400
U.S. Open Women	Female	CoCo Vandeweghe	X	CoCoVandey	68,500
U.S. Open Women	Female	Taylor Townsend	X	TaylorTownsend	26,400
U.S. Open Women	Female	Lauren Davis	X	LaurenDavis93	22,800
U.S. Open Men	Male	Frances Tiafoe	Instagram	bigfoe1998	755,000
U.S. Open Men	Male	Ben Shelton	Instagram	benshelton	556,000
U.S. Open Men	Male	Taylor Fritz	Instagram	taylor_fritz	500,000

U.S. Open Men	Male	Jack Sock	Instagram	jack.sock	266,000
U.S. Open Men	Male	Ryan Harrison	X	ryanharrison92	62,000
U.S. Open Men	Male	James Blake	X	JRBlake	34,600
U.S. Open Men	Male	Christopher Eubanks	X	chris_eubanks96	28,000
U.S. Open Men	Male	Steve Johnson	X	SJohnson_89	24,000

## ***Results***

This section presents the findings of the study, which aimed to explore gender differences in topic, gender differences in tone, gender differences in platform, and whether comments show differences in sports. The data was collected using a purposive sample, and then a content analysis. Coding was then completed.

RQ 1 asks what gender differences emerge when it came to the topic of comments.

In this study, 99.33% of women's comments were Non-Gender-Related Comments (see Figure 1.1), while 98.17% of men's comments were Non-Gender-Related Comments (see Figure 2.1). In addition, 81.62% of women's comments were Non-Sports-Related Comments (see Figure 1.2), while 75.27% of men's comments were Non-Sports-Related Comments (see Figure 2.2). When examining tone, women's comments were 4.06% negative, 79.30% positive, and 16.63% neutral (see Figure 1.3), compared to their male counterparts, whose comments were 11.54% negative, 65.57% positive, and 22.89% neutral (see Figure 2.3).

Figure 1.1. RQ1: Gender Differences in Topic (Women - Gender-Related)

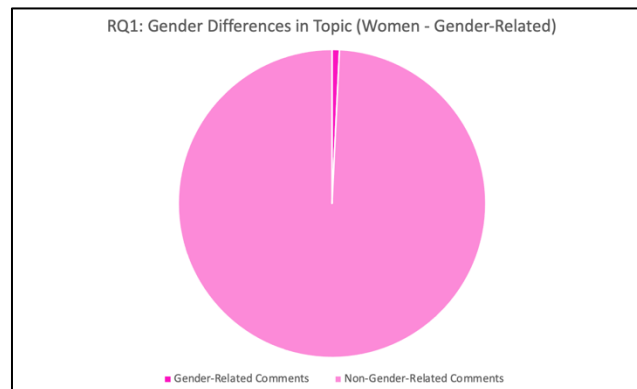


Figure 1.1 visually shows that women received more non-gender-related comments than gender-related comments on both Instagram and X combined. 99.33% of women's comments were Non-Gender-Related Comments.

Figure 2.1. RQ1: Gender Differences in Topic (Men - Gender-Related)

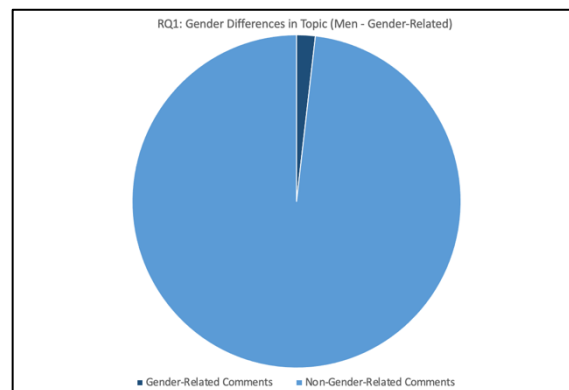


Figure 2.1 visually shows that men received more non-gender-related comments than gender-related comments on both Instagram and X combined. 98.17% of men's comments were Non-Gender-Related Comments.

Figure 1.2. RQ1: Gender Differences in Topic (Women - Sports-Related)

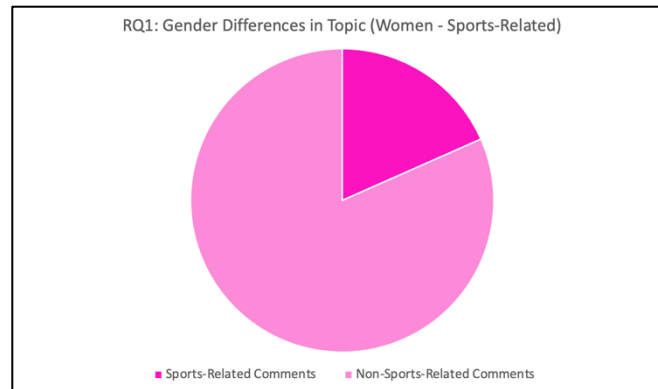


Figure 1.2 visually shows that women received more non-sports-related comments than sports-related comments on both Instagram and X combined. 81.62% of women's comments were Non-Sports-Related Comments.

Figure 2.2. RQ1: Gender Differences in Topic (Men - Sports-Related)

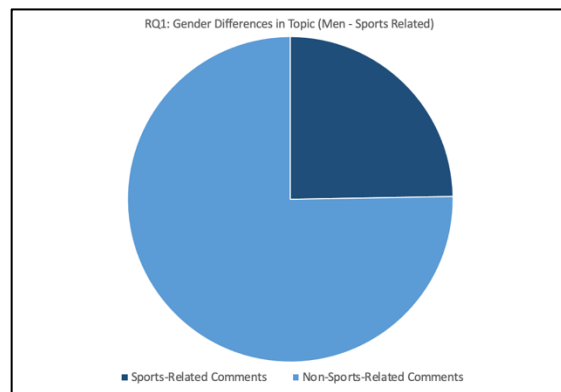


Figure 2.2 visually shows that men received more non-sports-related comments than sports-related comments on both Instagram and X combined. 75.27% of men's comments were Non-Sports-Related Comments.

Figure 1.3. RQ2: Gender Differences in Tone (Women)

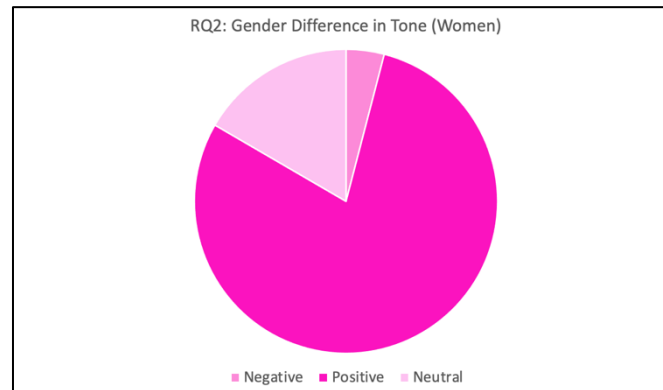


Figure 1.3 visually shows that women received more positive comments than negative or neutral comments on both Instagram and X combined. Women's comments were 4.06% negative, 79.30% positive, and 16.63% neutral.

Figure 2.3. RQ2: Gender Differences in Tone (Men)

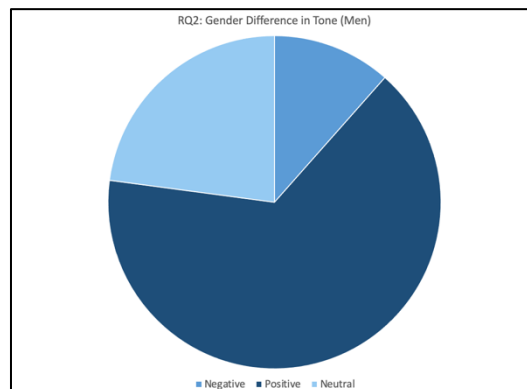


Figure 2.3 visually shows that men received more positive comments than negative or neutral comments. Men's comments were 11.54% negative, 65.57% positive, and 22.89% neutral.

RQ 2 asks what gender differences emerge when examining tone.



When breaking up the findings by social media platform, 99.33% of women's Instagram comments were Non-Gender-Related Comments (see Figure 1.4), while 97.00% of men's Instagram comments were Non-Gender-Related Comments (see Figure 2.4). 88% of women's comments were Non-Sports-Related (see Figure 1.5), while 83.33% of men's comments were Non-Sports-Related (see Figure 2.5). When examining tone, women's Instagram comments were 2.00% negative, 88.33% positive, and 9.67% neutral (see Figure 1.6), while men's Instagram comments were 7.33% negative, 75.00% positive, and 17.67% neutral (see Figure 2.6). 99.08% of women's X comments were Non-Gender-Related (see Figure 1.7), while 99.59% of men's X comments were Non-Gender-Related (see Figure 2.7). 72.81% of women's X comments were Non-Sports-Related (see Figure 1.8), while 65.45% of men's X comments were Non-Sports-Related (see Figure 2.8). Women's X comments were 6.91% negative, 66.82% positive, and 26.27% neutral (see Figure 1.9), while men's X comments were 16.67% negative, 54.07% positive, and 29.27% neutral (see Figure 2.9).

Figure 1.4. RQ3: Gender Differences in Platform (Women - Instagram - Gender-Related)

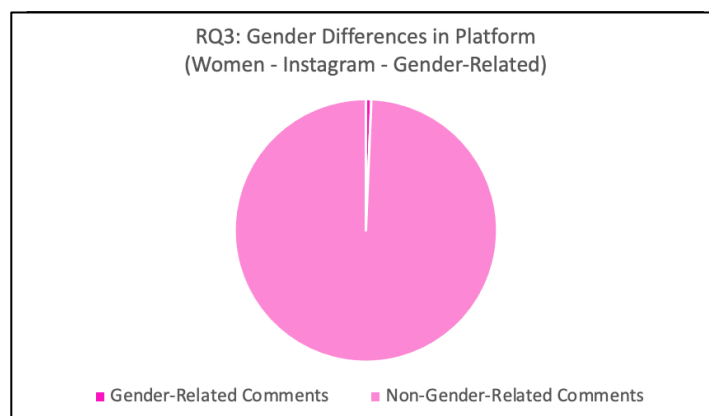


Figure 1.4 visually shows that women received more non-gender-related comments than gender-related comments on Instagram. 99.33% of women's Instagram comments were Non-Gender-Related Comments.

Figure 2.4. RQ3: Gender Differences in Platform (Men - Instagram - Gender-Related)

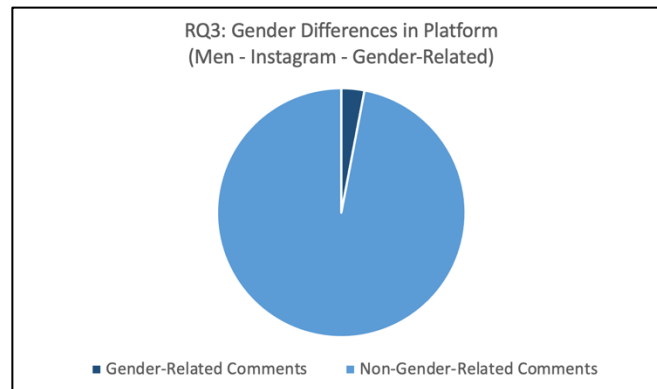


Figure 2.4 visually shows that men received more non-gender-related comments than gender-related comments on Instagram. 97.00% of men's Instagram comments were Non-Gender-Related Comments.

Figure 1.5 - RQ3: Gender Differences in Platform (Women - Instagram - Sports-Related)

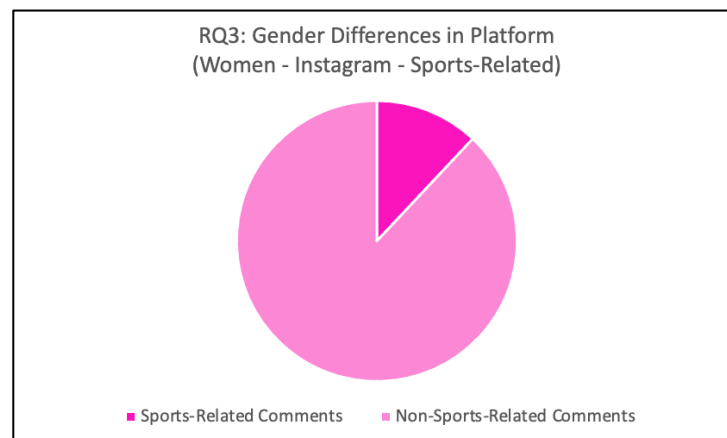


Figure 1.5 visually shows that women received more non-sports-related comments than sports-related comments on Instagram. 88% of women's comments were Non-Sports-Related.

Figure 2.5 - RQ3: Gender Differences in Platform (Men - Instagram - Sports-Related)

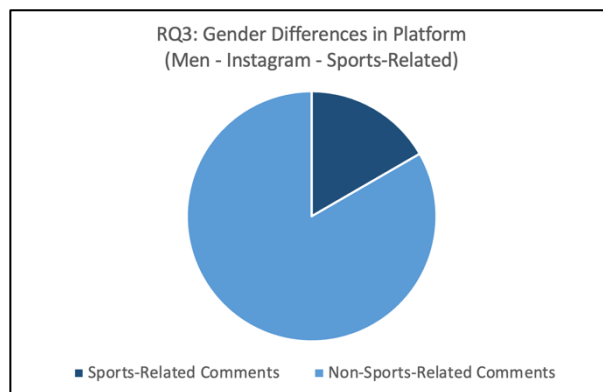


Figure 2.5 visually shows that men received more non-sports-related comments than sports-related comments on Instagram. 83.33% of men's comments were Non-Sports-Related.

Figure 1.6 - RQ3: Gender Differences in Platform (Women - Instagram – Tone)

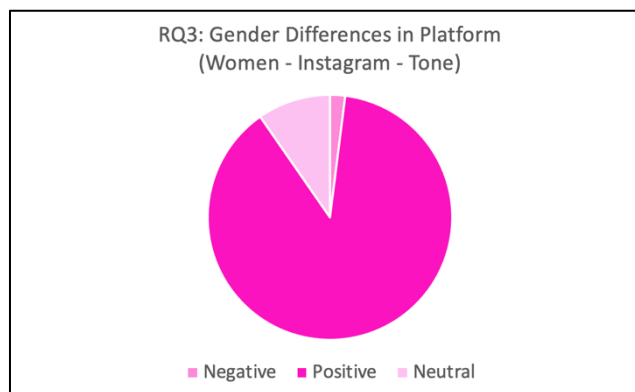


Figure 1.6 visually shows that women received more positive comments than negative or neutral comments on Instagram. Women's Instagram comments were 2.00% negative, 88.33% positive, and 9.67% neutral.

Figure 2.6 - RQ3: Gender Differences in Platform (Men - Instagram - Tone)

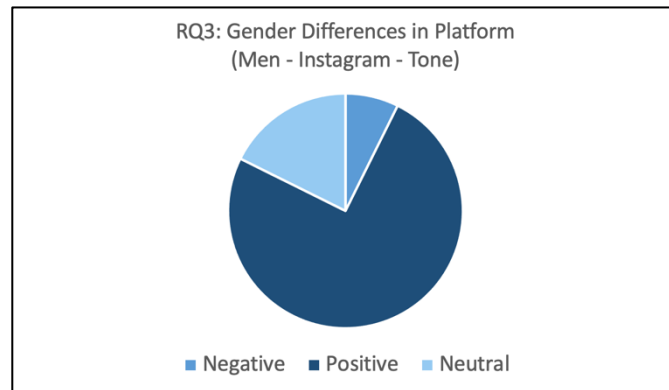


Figure 2.6 visually shows that men received more positive comments than negative or neutral comments on both Instagram. Men's Instagram comments were 7.33% negative, 75.00% positive, and 17.67% neutral.

Figure 1.7 - RQ3: Gender Differences in Platform (Women - X - Gender-Related)

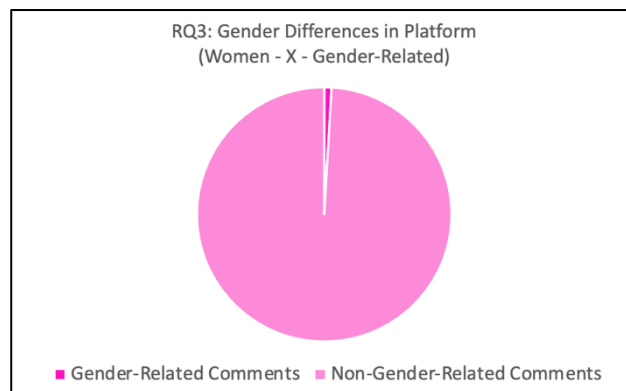


Figure 1.7 visually shows that women received more non-gender-related comments than gender-related comments on X. 99.92% of women's X comments were Non-Gender-Related.

Figure 2.7 - RQ3: Gender Differences in Platform (Men - X - Gender-Related)

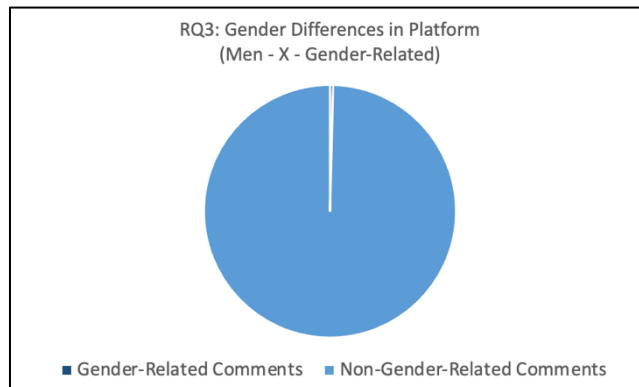


Figure 2.7 visually shows that men received more non-gender-related comments than gender-related comments on X. 99.59% of men's X comments were Non-Gender-Related.

Figure 1.8 - RQ3: Gender Differences in Platform (Women - X - Sports-Related)

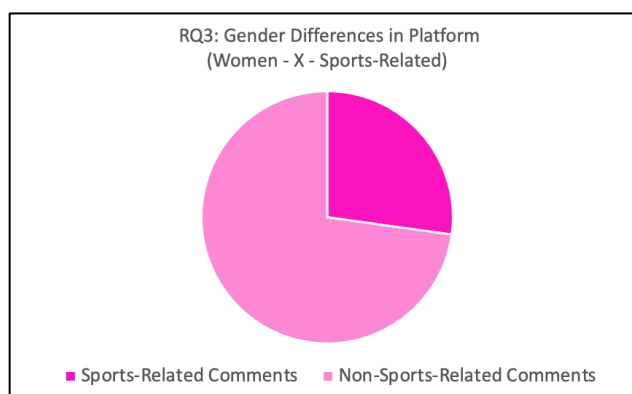


Figure 1.8 visually shows that women received more non-sports-related comments than sports-related comments on X. 72.81% of women's X comments were Non-Sports-Related.

Figure 2.8 - RQ3: Gender Differences in Platform (Men - X - Sports-Related)

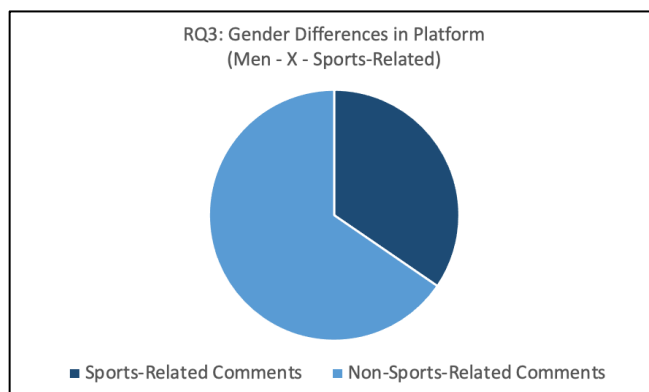


Figure 2.8 visually shows that men received more non-sports-related comments than sports-related comments on X. 65.45% of men's X comments were Non-Sports-Related.

Figure 1.9 - RQ3: Gender Differences in Platform (Women - X - Tone)

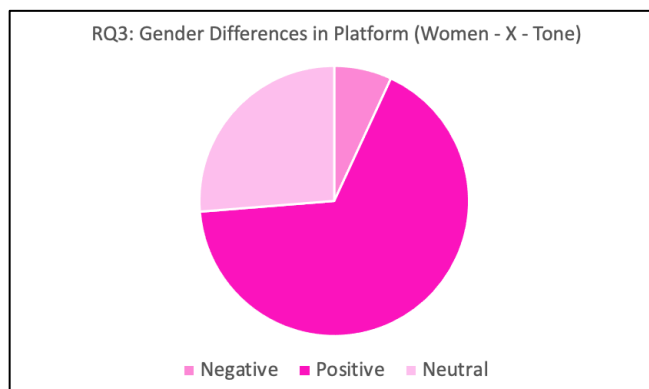


Figure 1.9 visually shows that women received more positive comments than negative or neutral comments on X. Women's X comments were 6.91% negative, 66.82% positive, and 26.27% neutral.

Figure 2.9 - RQ3: Gender Differences in Platform (Men - X - Tone)

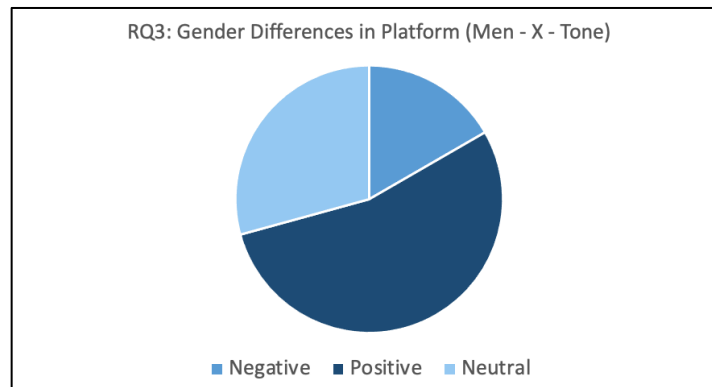


Figure 2.9 visually shows that men received more positive comments than negative or neutral on X. Men's X comments were 16.67% negative, 54.07% positive, and 29.27% neutral.

RQ 3 asks what gender differences emerge between platforms, both in topic and tone.

When breaking up the findings by sport, the comments on all basketball posts were 99.72% non-gender-related and 76.80% non-sports-related (see Figure 3.1). Regarding tone, the comments on all basketball posts were 9.94% negative, 70.99% positive, and 19.06% neutral (see Figure 3.2). The comments on all soccer posts were 98.43% non-gender-related and 78.85% non-sports-related (see Figure 3.1). Regarding tone, the comments on all soccer posts were 5.74% negative, 71.80% positive, and 22.45% neutral (see Figure 3.2). The comments on all tennis posts were 97.80% non-gender-related and 79.56% non-sports-related (see Figure 3.1). Regarding tone, the comments on all tennis posts were 8.18% negative, 74.21% positive, and 17.61% neutral (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.1 - RQ4: Differences in Sports (Topic)

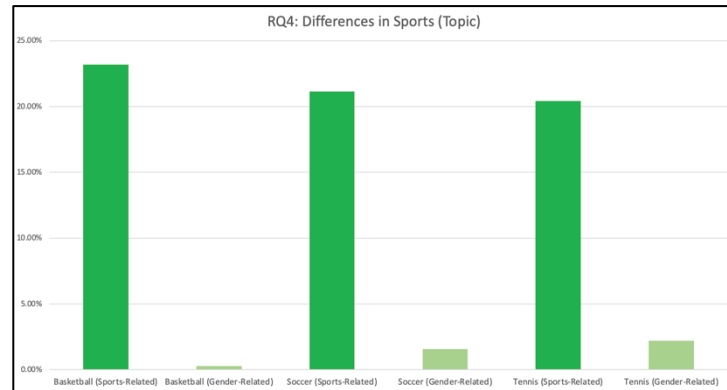


Figure 2.1 visually shows that basketball, soccer, and tennis all received more sports-related comments than gender-related comments on both Instagram and X combined. The comments on all basketball posts were 99.72% non-gender-related and 76.80% non-sports-related. The comments on all soccer posts were 98.43% non-gender-related and 78.85% non-sports-related. The comments on all tennis posts were 97.80% non-gender-related and 79.56% non-sports-related.

Figure 3.2 - RQ4: Differences in Sports (Tone)

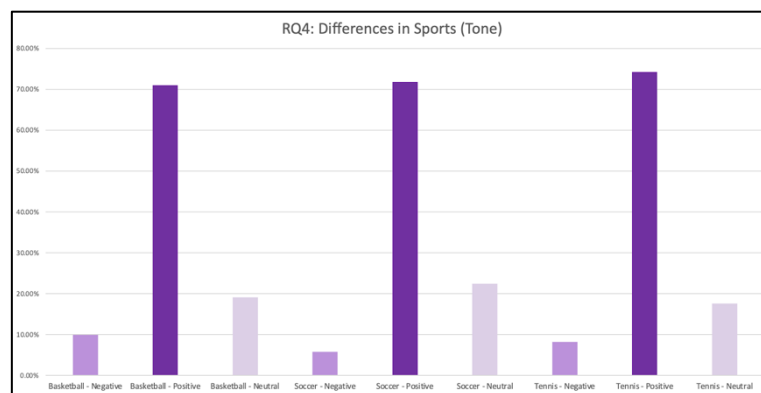


Figure 2.1 visually shows that basketball, soccer, and tennis all received more positive comments than negative or neutral comments on both Instagram and X combined. The comments



on all basketball posts were 9.94% negative, 70.99% positive, and 19.06% neutral. The comments on all soccer posts were 5.74% negative, 71.80% positive, and 22.45% neutral. The comments on all tennis posts were 8.18% negative, 74.21% positive, and 17.61% neutral.

RQ4 asks what differences emerge in topic and tone between sports.

Overall, results of this study found that men received more gender-related and sports-related comments compared to women. Men's comments were also more negative than women's comments. Results also showed that basketball posts received more sports-related comments compared to soccer and tennis posts, while tennis posts had a higher number of gender-related comments than the other sports. Basketball posts were also found to have more negative comments than both tennis and soccer.

## ***Discussion***

The results reveal that male athletes received a proportionally higher percentage of negative comments compared to their female counterparts. It was also found that the comments received by male athletes were more likely to relate to their gender and sports compared to the comments received by women. Overall, basketball posts had more sports-related comments compared to soccer and tennis. On the other hand, tennis was found to have more gender-related comments overall. Basketball posts were found to have more negative comments than both tennis and soccer.

This data was surprising, as prior research suggests that female athletes receive more negative comments than their male counterparts. Typically, it's anticipated that female athletes would face more negativity based on gender stereotypes and attitudes towards women in traditionally male-dominated areas, such as sports. These results reveal how audiences engage with athletes on social media platforms, specifically Instagram and X, using the tone and the nature of content.

Social media comments can often be seen to reflect and reinforce the hegemonic norms that dominate the sports world. Social media creates a public sphere for hyper-masculine and sexist comments, which can begin to be seen with these results. Our results reveal that male athletes receive more sports-related comments than female athletes. This could be shown to reinforce the idea of hegemonic norms, specifically masculinity. The prevalence of sports-related comments received by male athletes highlights the idea of masculinity being linked to strength and toughness, traditionally seen as male traits. Male athletes also received more gender-related comments than female athletes, which was surprising as women face more sexism in the sports industry than their female counterparts.

The results regarding the overall tone of social media comments between genders were surprising. Male athletes received more negative comments than female athletes, which was not expected, as women are more likely to face online harassment (Antunovic, 2019). This surprising finding could be explained by the changing dynamics in online spaces, where there seems to be an unspoken initiative to create a safer and more inclusive space for women. This initiative has included campaigns such as the #MeToo movement and simply holding people accountable for their behaviors online. This could therefore be the reason for the harsher and more negative tone

toward men. The negative treatment of men online could also be a result of the increased awareness of hegemonic masculinity and its effects, especially in the sports industry.

It was also found that the comments received by male athletes were more likely to relate to their gender and sports compared to the comments received by women. The fact in which men received more gender-related comments than women was surprising. The sports industry has a history of sexism, in particular relating to the sexualization of women and pushing traditional roles onto female athletes. Men may have received more gender-related comments due to the online conversations about societal norms, specifically becoming a public sphere for hyper-masculine. Men may be receiving harsh comments in relation to online discussions both affirming and challenging their sports performances and masculine attributes.

Tennis was found to have more gender-related comments overall. Tennis is played in single or doubles, making tennis often be considered an individual sports. This could explain why tennis was found to have more gender-related comments, as fans may focus more on individual attributes, such as gender.

Basketball received more negative comments overall. A possible explanation could be related to the long seasons that basketball plays, leading to more opportunities for players to fail on the court which fans can remind them of throughout the remainder of the season. Basketball plays an 82-game season, which is far above most other sports besides baseball. This alongside the opportunity that basketball's fast pace creates for funny, or "meme-able" moments could explain the negative nature of their comments.

### ***Limitations***

This study has potential limitations. Comments in different languages were coded by Google Translate, so some meanings and words may have been lost in translation. The comments that were available were heavily affected by the algorithm on these sites, which curates the comments that are made visible, therefore being another limitation. Comments with emojis are subject to several meanings. Emojis have different meanings, both literal and slang. This study relies on descriptive statistics and a small sample size, therefore limiting its generalizability. The time of year in which data was collecting could affect the results, particularly if the sport is in or out of season.

### ***Future Research***

Future research could investigate how the gender of commenters affected what they commented on. Research could investigate whether the gender or the commenters affects the topic of the comment they write and post. Future research could also examine how the sexuality of the athlete affected the comments they received and whether the topic or tone is shifted. Another continuation of this research could investigate if the race of the athlete has any effect on the comments they received. The race of the athlete would be explored, as their race could affect the topic and tone of comments they receive.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine differences in public opinion regarding top athletes' personal social media, specifically if there are gender differences in topic, gender differences in tone, gender differences in platform, and differences in sports. Overall, results of this study found that men received more gender-related and sports-related comments compared

to women. Men's comments were also more negative than women's comments. Results also showed that basketball posts received more sports-related comments compared to soccer and tennis posts, while tennis posts had a higher number of gender-related comments than the other sports. Basketball posts were also found to have more negative comments than both tennis and soccer.

By looking at athletes' social media comments, this research has shown minimal gender differences in the tone and content of comments. Despite hypotheses expecting female athletes to receive more gender-related and negative comments, the findings did not show this. Male athletes received more negative comments and gender-related comments than female athletes. This could be an indicator of changing dynamics in online spaces. One hypothesis was supported, as men did receive more sports-related comments than their male counterparts.

This study could impact the industry in the way that social media managers manage athletes' social media accounts, as it can help understand the trends in comments, allowing the marketing strategy to be adjusted to increase the desired results. Understanding how the general behavior of commenters could help in future research by providing a baseline for online behaviors.

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