

Strength in Social Media: Exploring the Influence of Instagram in Canadian Powerlifting

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Introduction

This major research project explores the increasing engagement of Instagram in the niche sport, powerlifting. Powerlifting is a strength sport which consists of competitors lifting the heaviest possible weight in the back squat, bench press, and deadlift disciplines. The sport differs in this way from the more popularly seen Olympic weightlifting, strongman, or even bodybuilding, all considered barbells sports in their own right. Since the first powerlifting competitions began around the mid 1950s in both the United Kingdom and the United States, the sport has grown into an international activity with its communities and participation increasing all over the world (O'g'li, 2022). In Canada alone, there were roughly 1,400 registered powerlifters in 2020 whereas in 2023, a total of 4,700 lifters in Canada were registered (openpowerlifting.org, 2024). The evident increase in participation within the sport can be attributed to various factors, notably social media. Powerlifting has a complex relationship with the large social media platform, Instagram. This platform allows for community members of a niche sport to connect, share knowledge, entertain each other and more.

Traditional Media and Popular Sports vs. Social Media and Niche Sports

Since the age of the Internet and Web, sports engagement and participation are dynamically different than ever before (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). Hutchins & Rowe highlight this factor of new media that hold such an important role in the critiques, ownership and labor related to that of popular sports such as baseball and football. However, this paper looks to diverge and explore the idea that there is another dimension added to digital media and its implications in sport. Social media can be a flexible and capable branch stemming from the influence of digital media, offering different indications than traditional mass media, between

both popular and niche sports. New media “allows the people to act as both the transmitters as well as the producers”, providing more opportunities online to those who engage with extensions of new media like social media (Rajendran & Thesinghraj, 2014, pg. 609). According to Hutchins & Rowe (2009), traditional mass media like television has been the most significant and impactful medium to transmit popular sports. Through subscription-based services, live broadcasting, streaming events, and more, popular sports have a mutually beneficial relationship with television to promote, market, present and make large sports accessible. On the other hand, we have more niche sports such as rock climbing, ultimate frisbee, and powerlifting. These sports can be seen with smaller communities that operate within spheres that have less resources and less of a platform than popular sports (Greenhalgh et al. 2021). According to Greenhalgh (2021), niche sports have different classifications, however, the main overarching characteristic is their reliance upon corporate sponsorship due to their inability to generate adequate revenue to operate from tickets sales and mass broadcasting. With this definition of niche sports, this paper looks towards the capability of social media, specifically Instagram, to mobilize, present and maintain these small sports and their communities. Although the strength of traditional mass mediums like television are efficacious for popular sports, niche sports are marginalized in the visible sports entertainment industry (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012).

This paper looks to explore this relationship of niche sports and social media, primarily through investigating the role of Instagram within the growing powerlifting community in Ontario, Canada. As of the past 3-4 years, the powerlifting community in Ontario has increased in size, participation and engagement, blossoming into an internationally recognizable cohort of the larger powerlifting sphere. Thus, the work done within this community and this study's

findings likely have implications for the greater powerlifting community, as well as various other niche sports that adopt the use of social media in similar manners.

The research question employed throughout this study asks: How have varied uses of Instagram such as self-promotional practices, community building, or identity building, influenced the niche sport of powerlifting in Ontario? This question asks about the specific uses of Instagram that propose numerous involvements related to the health and positive perseverance of the online powerlifting community.

Literature Review

Introduction

While there is an abundant amount of academic literature relevant to the relationship between popular sports and mass media, there is a definitive gap between small/niche sports and social media (Hutchins & Rowe, 2009). The purpose of this literature review is to highlight several academic works that contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding the relationships between niche sports and social media to contextualize and inform the present study.

In recent works, the long-winded relationship between mainstream, professional sports and traditional media is commemorated, with academics now acclaiming the demands of new media consumption. Hutchins and Rowe (2019) highlight the significance of private-ownership and pay-for-access systems that are branching away from the traditionally dominant form of sports consumption in live-television. Now, more than ever before, sports consumption is a capital endeavor that is actively operating in a new way. Streaming services like Tencent Video, DAZN and Amazon Prime Video, among others, call towards this new age of consumption and engagement with sports, such as over-the-top (OTT) streaming services (Hutchins, et al. 2019).

The ability to consume sports anytime and anywhere through a multitude of different mediums exemplifies the basis of this shift. And, at the same time, it makes television broadcasting and traditional modes of transmission obsolete in the context of sports consumption. Finally, the shift from traditional modes of communication like television to social media is a concept recently coming to light. Jan Boehmer (2017) commented on the perceived shifting landscape of sports media consumption from traditional methods like television and newspapers to newer technological mediums like social media. Although Boehmer notes that this shift is not clearly defined, looking at niche sports and their relationship with newer forms of digital media can help inform the lack of literature that informs the new age of sport consumption related to niche sports.

This growth and shift in the consumption of sports mainly refers to popular/ mainstream sports such as basketball, football or soccer. While these changes are important to the understanding of popular sports consumption, there is a lack of understanding on how this shift has affected niche sports. There is a distinct gap between prominent academic literature that invests understanding towards the relationship of smaller sports and media infrastructure. The goal of this literature review is to contextualize this advancement of digital sports consumption of popular sports and help to reevaluate our understanding towards the minoritized niche sport sphere.

Where the two sides of mainstream and niche sport distinctly separate is in their reliance upon, and use of social media. Popular sports certainly utilize social media platforms to promote organizations, engage with fans, make announcements, and other communicative efforts (Wang & Zhou, 2015). On the other hand, niche sports rely upon social media to operate effectively. If not for social media, many niche sports and their communities likely would not be able to

function, communicate and thrive due to their evident lack of infrastructure, unlike popular sports.

Next, Gashaw Abeza (2023) in their critical review about social media and sports studies, talks about the emerging social media management strategies primarily employed by larger organizations like major sport teams, or potentially even smaller professional-amateur (pro-am) organizations. Abeza discusses the increasing recognition for social media research in sports studies, indicated by the increased number of published articles surrounding this topic. He further explains how this trend implicates the rather conspicuous notion that social media is indeed becoming more relevant in sports studies. Through this work, Abeza offers categorizations for the different stages of development of sports media research: emergence, growth, maturation, and interdisciplinary collaboration stages. According to Abeza's work, this particular study done on the Canadian powerlifting community would fall under the categorization of the maturation stage, in which topics lean towards "sports business management (including fan engagement, brand management, sponsorship, and ambush marketing), sociocultural issues (including gender, racism, homophobia, religion, and disability), diversity and inclusion (including representation, education, and the use of inclusive language, and policy development, legal issues (including defamation, privacy, cyberbullying, contracts, and intellectual property), crisis communication, and more" (Abeza, 2023, pp. 257). The importance of defining this categorization of research suggests the evolution of this area of study. This study looks to contribute to this growing field and investigate the uses and potential benefits, as well as the pitfalls of Instagram within the powerlifting community in Ontario, Canada. Within this systemized maturation stage of sports media research, Abeza calls towards the establishment of research methodologies to appropriately and accurately research this field.

With this established scheme of sports media research, this paper takes on the role of contributing to social media's role in building a healthy community within the sphere of online powerlifting in Canada.

Social Capital

According to Putnam (2000), a primary author in the understanding of social capital, this concept is defined as “connections among individuals —social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (pg. 16). Putnam also emphasizes that social capital does not necessarily increase from simply more individuals in a network, but rather the connections and quality of connections between them. The idea of social capital is displayed and strengthened through social media research. For instance, online platforms have the capabilities to more accessibly bridge relationships between individuals within a particular fandom, which facilitates the growth of social capital (Fenton, et al, 2023). Holland-Smith (2017) conducted a study on social media and its effects on the participation levels of contemporary rock climbing, a sport which falls under the niche sport classification. It was found that social media has positive influences on the social capital of climbing athletes, including, but not limited to its ability to “cultivate, demonstrate and maintain cultural capital, status and social positioning within the climbing community” (pg. 1107). There are parallels drawn from the understanding of social media and its influence on social capital in the rock-climbing community to the online powerlifting community. Both sports fall under Greenhalgh's (2021) classifications of niche sports (i.e., a non-traditional sport that cannot sufficiently operate from ticket sales and mass broadcasting revenues).

Framework: Produsage

One salient proponent of what makes social media so significant in providing niche sports with a capable platform to grow is this idea of produsage. Produsage is characterized by the simultaneous consumption and production practices surrounding sports, in this case. What this might look like is the compelling atmosphere the supporting fans at a live sporting event might create. In turn, the sport becomes more of a spectacle due to the live, in-person fans producing an event worthy of consumption for more and more consumers. Another term similarly defined, called prosumption, is the original explanation for these phenomena. Beer & Burrows (2010) says prosumption is “participat[ing] in the production of what's being consumed” (pg. 4). There is a slight distinction between produsage and prosumption that proves the latter the more accurate term in the context of this paper. Axel Bruns (2008) offers a way of distinguishing the two terms and suggests that the idea of prosumption is an outdated one with the development of Web 2.0, and that this term suggests the consumer generated content is generally exploited by corporate organizations for capital gain. In his definition of produsage where ‘user-led content creation environments’ are a key characteristic, Bruns injects the idea that these environments are self-organizing, and that they differ from communities of prosumption through their decentralized and de-corporatized nature. In such a case, the best term and framework to guide the observed phenomena throughout this study would not be ‘prosumption’, but rather ‘produsage’. This is more encompassing of the mechanics of the online powerlifting community, one that engages in the production and consumption of user-generated content that encourages a content-generation-led community, mutually beneficial relationships, and an increasingly positive environment for incoming members.

This research will consider the idea of produsage with regards to the self-promotional practices that surround the online powerlifting community: participants of the sport post recorded training, add unique stylistic elements to their content, work with third-party sponsors, build an identity, educate, collaborate, or even promote their own business, all topics that will be discussed in this paper. It is evident that produsage is an impactful factor of the online powerlifting community, hence its applications can be telling of the trajectory of this niche sport.

As an objectively smaller sport, a fundamental issue with powerlifting is that competitions are less frequent, and generally not as notable as those of major sports. Accordingly, the nature of powerlifting offers a short competitive period, where there are limited time in which community members from different areas can physically interact with each other. With that said, powerlifting is popularly engaged with online. Within the online powerlifting community, online means on Instagram. Community members create content, other members consume and interact with it by reposting, commenting, liking, or more, and engagement thrives. This increasing engagement is defined by different production and consumption methods, each with their own individual implication to the sport's growth. Andrews & Ritzer additionally mention the importance of emphasizing collective individual relationships with sports fans, as this is how growth of prosumption occurs (2018). This literature pertaining to prosumption is valued in this specific study due to its similarity to produsage. To build on this, Beer and Burrows (2010) discuss prosumption and its ability to create content that is informative to others outside the community. The online powerlifting community is one that consists of informative/educational, recreational and promotional content. This is unique, as this posits that most fans and consumers of the sport are also people that compete or partake in physically engaging with the sport. Yet, to adhere to what Beer and Burrows claim, the content that is created within the

online powerlifting community often acts as introductory media to outsiders or new members of the community. Or, in other words, the content that is created by powerlifters on social media, draws new outsiders in, being progressive in its capabilities. To add to this, recent literature highlights the growing trend of smaller sports “participants hav[ing] always been actively involved in the consumption and production of niche and micro media” (Thorpe, 2017). This bodes to the importance of consumers as producers of digital media that benefit the growth of smaller sports. Without produsage, members of the online powerlifting community simultaneously producing and consuming, the natural engagement within the community would likely be disrupted.

Methods: Netnography and Semi-Structured Interviews

My research methods for this study consisted of netnography and semi-structured interviews. A netnography maintains the traditional data collection techniques of an ethnography, however, it solely focuses on observation of an online space or community (Addeo, et al., 2019). In a study about the doping regimens of Finnish powerlifters, strongmen and bodybuilders, Jokipalo and Khudayarov (2021) conducted a netnography to observe the online space that these participants occupy (Jokipalo & Khudayarov, 2021). The netnography was a way to unobtrusively observe these online spaces to get a better idea of the community in order to select participants that wouldn't be willing to label themselves as doping beneficiaries. This helped gather participants in an equitable way in which they were not negatively exposing themselves to the community. A netnography maintains the traditional data collection techniques of an ethnography, however, solely focuses on observation of an online space or community (Addeo). Similarly, a netnography can be beneficial in this study, as a means of observing the online

powerlifting community while maintaining confidentiality between the participants and the community and protecting the identity of the participants. Furthermore, an additional strength of employing a netnography is the speed with which this work can be done (Costello, et al., 2017). Additionally, already being an active participant within this community can be a means of accessing participants that an outsider may not be able to contact like higher level powerlifters, individuals who hold significant value within the community like long-standing gym owners, and more. Finally, as said in Costello et al., a “netnography recognizes that the cultures of online communities are constructed by the members who are invested in their development; hence their description and any construction of theory should be derived from the community members in question” (2012). This idea brings further validity to the perspectives of the participants and their experiences listed later in this study.

In gaining further insight into an online community, qualitative interviews can be used to gather rich information from the perspective of individual community members. In a study exploring identity-construction labor and community dynamics in the bodybuilding community, Mariah L. Wellman (2020) utilized informal and semi-structured interviews. Being an active participant within the bodybuilding community, Wellman used “insider status” obtained from her existing relationships within the community to gain access to influential people within this space. Mirroring Wellman’s approach in her methodology, my insider status as a powerlifter could provide participants with a sense of trust, comfort, and understanding that may be difficult to achieve with someone outside of the Ontarian powerlifting community. To add, Wellman practices reflexivity, “attempt[ing] to remain somewhat of an outsider capable of conducting critical analyses of the gym space” (2020). This idea calls for my need to be critical of my

position as a community member and remind myself to stay objective when approaching, observing and interviewing other community members.

Methods

The following methods were given approval by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board (#7098)

Netnography

To understand how identity building and self-promotional practices on Instagram influence the online powerlifting community in Ontario, this study involved the experiences of powerlifters who frequently engage with these practices online. The methods chosen include a netnography to identify and recruit participants, and semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data.

The prevalence of social media and its use within the powerlifting community was harnessed by employing a netnography. Through observing different powerlifting related accounts online, whether that was gym accounts, powerlifting influencer accounts, or amateur/professional lifter's accounts, I gained a more comprehensive and experienced understanding of the powerlifting community in Ontario. With that said, a netnography was first used to gather potential participants that could be recruited for the present study. The inclusion criteria that guided the netnography included:

- Individuals who are a member of the Ontario powerlifting community under the Ontario Powerlifting Association and the Canadian Powerlifting Union

- Individuals who use Instagram regularly as a way to socialize, promote their own personal brand, build their identity, as a form of recreation, or archive
- Individuals who have competed in a powerlifting competition at least once
- Individuals who are active on Instagram at least one to two times a week.

This study excluded members of the powerlifting community who are in the untested or drug-tolerant divisions of powerlifting outside of the International Powerlifting Federation (IPF). Community members outside of the drug-tested pool of powerlifting affiliations were excluded because tested powerlifting is a generally more accessible division of the sport in Canada. Additionally, I am more familiar with the tested powerlifting community, as it is also generally more popular and therefore more representative of the Canadian powerlifting community. Finally, this study excludes powerlifters in Ontario for convenience and to comply with this project's scope, reach and understanding of this specific community. To add to the diversity of participants considered for interviews, this netnography consisted of selecting members of the powerlifting community who hold diverse experiences and presented identities in the powerlifting scene. This includes professional and amateur content creators/ business owners; educators, nutrition coaches, powerlifting coaches, gym owners, veterans, beginners. Additionally, an emphasis was placed on contacting under-represented powerlifters such as queer and women community members.

Semi-Structured Interviews

With the netnography in place, eight participants from diverse backgrounds were recruited for the qualitative interviews. Invitations to the study were sent out through Instagram,

informing the potential participants of the background and intent of this study. Participants signed informed consent forms via email and scheduled individual interviews as per convenience. Each interview started with light informal discussion about how the participant is doing, how their powerlifting training is going and confirming their understanding of the purpose behind the study to avoid confusion or miscommunication. The interviews were semi-structured with predetermined questions after the informal discussions. Some of these predetermined questions included: “How do you use Instagram in relation to your participation with the online powerlifting community?”, “How do you express yourself on Instagram within the online powerlifting community”, “Explain why or why not you think Instagram has been a generally helpful platform for the online powerlifting community in Ontario”, and more. These questions looked to expand the understanding around how people use Instagram, with more specific follow up questions looking for insight into each participant’s self-promotional and identity building practices. During the interviews, minimal notes were taken to focus on the interview process. For this reason, each interview was recorded on the secure device the interviews were conducted on. Interviews were conducted online over Zoom’s web video conferencing platform and recorded to allow for further interpretation and transcription post-interview.

Grounded Theory

To understand the influence Instagram has on the online powerlifting community in Ontario, this study adopts grounded theory as an approach to analyze qualitative data after the data collection. Grounded theory includes the development of theories to help explain social phenomena or according to Khan (2014) grounded theory, “play[s] an important role in developing and building a theory from data”. Categories were inductively formulated using

participant responses to guide the identification of themes that emerged during the interviews. The themes that arise from this were split into two major sections: findings that aligned with the pre-identified themes (i.e., produsage and social capital) and the second major section includes new topics that emerged from the spontaneous discussions. The first major theme includes powerlifters using Instagram as powerlifting infrastructure, influenced largely by produsage, as well as other found phenomena. Next, the first major theme discusses the observation of both positive and negative uses of Instagram related to social capital within the online powerlifting space. The second set of major themes inducted through Grounded Theory includes: uses that promote gender inclusivity in the online powerlifting community. This category simultaneously relates to the first sets of major themes, infrastructure and produsage, as well as the positives and negatives of social capital, yet is a distinctly significant topic to categorize in its own section.

Research Reflexivity Statement

Throughout this study, I am positioned as a relatively new, yet dedicated member of the online powerlifting community in Ontario, Canada. As I conducted a netnography among the powerlifting community to determine representative participants, it was important to be conscious of my biases to certain members of the community. Similar to Maria Wellman (2020) and her attention to self, the ability to be reflexive throughout the present study only strengthens the interpretation of the collected data. Reflexivity involved reflecting on the participants selected and asking why they might be more inclined to be selected over other participants due to my pre-established relationships or previous interactions within this community. Furthermore, when analyzing the collected data, I made sure to be aware of all the data presented to me by the

participants. This involved asking more nuanced questions once the interviews started to take shape throughout the data collection process. And, throughout the data analysis process this involved categorizing data that may not have fallen under the hypothesized categories. The benefit of my positionality includes the probable higher level of comfort the participants would have interacting with me, versus a researcher who would assume an outside status within this community. Additionally, bias can play a role in my perception of different responses from participants as I may be more desensitized to phenomena that circulate within this community. Furthermore, I maintain a specific hunch throughout this research which holds a certain influence over my perception of this research. The hunch pertains to the positive impact Instagram has had on the powerlifting community; I believe it has opened many doors, acting as a preamble for many people, exposing the sport to large populations and allowing it to flourish without similar resources and accessibility as popular sports. As a member of this community, my interest lies in exploring this relationship of powerlifting and Instagram, in order to understand its benefits towards safe and beneficial community engagement within this sport.

Findings

Using Instagram as Powerlifting Infrastructure

Throughout the interviews, participants were asked about their perception of Instagram as infrastructure for the powerlifting community. Responses varied, pertaining to both beneficial and unhelpful perceptions of Instagram's influence on the powerlifting community as this tool. Yet, all answers alluded to the authority Instagram ultimately maintains within this community. The prominence of social media platforms in the sporting industry often act as groundwork through which organizations, beneficiaries of the sport, can disseminate information, especially

in the niche sports sphere (McGillivray, 2017). To start, multiple participants discussed Instagram's more negative influence over the IPF. In relation to a situation where the IPF changed rules regarding the bench press discipline, the large perception was that the IPF made this decision based on backlash from Instagram. One participant mentioned "you've also got an international federation that starts pandering to a handful of Instagram commenters [...] they go ahead, and they start changing international rules" (Participant B). This participant went on further and discussed changes the IPF implemented around weight categories that divide lifters, which was similarly swayed by commentary on Instagram. Another participant corroborated the rule change concern saying:

If you look at the recent rule changes within the IPF, for sure they are making decisions based on commentary they are getting from social media, that is without a doubt [...] forcing them to change policy because of what people are saying on social media which I think is a huge problem. (Participant F)

However one may view the rule changes implemented by the IPF, there is undoubtedly a perception that Instagram holds control over specific international governing bodies of powerlifting. This suggests that good or bad, Instagram and its reach are visible to the decision-makers in the powerlifting scene. The issue with this, as voiced by following participants, is that the commentary that influences these changes is not limited to the powerlifting community, but includes voices by various people online that believe things should be done a certain way. This neglects the voice of legitimate community members and delegitimizes the true values held by the powerlifting community.

In these scenarios, Instagram's influence and the commentary it fosters proves its capability to mobilize voices online. Whether good or bad related to the specific rule changes in the IPF, there is another case mentioned in an interview which can be analyzed: "They [IPF] keep trying to add rules related to uniforms and equipment for people that have religious standards and are trying to be more inclusive" (Participant B). The traditional rules of powerlifting do not allow for Muslim women, specifically, to fully cover their body. In the sport, each competitor must wear a singlet, which reveals some skin. This was a deterrent for Muslim women competing, as the rules directly obstructed certain religious standards. This used to be the case, until this exact issue was vocalized on Instagram. People questioned this rule and brought about changes to the regulations of the sport. These changes lead to further developments to make the sport more accessible and inclusive for Muslim women. Further, powerlifting equipment companies eventually developed full-length singlets, and the IPF passed a rule which allowed these singlets to be worn in any competition. Granted, this rule alteration still holds its own limitations: athletes wearing the full-length singlet are not allowed to wear knee sleeves, which creates a large disadvantage in the squat discipline. As much as the IPF looked to promote cultural inclusivity, they created additional issues surrounding this matter. However, it cannot be overlooked that without Instagram and its members that mobilized this issue, powerlifting would have continued to be a sport fully inaccessible to Muslim women. This shows a positive outlook on the social media's platform to create structural change, and prove its efficacy to help take the sport in the right direction.

Instagram as infrastructure has many benefits to help powerlifting operate as a niche sport. With the popularity of Instagram in this sporting community, its use as a positive information disseminator and message distributor has effectively led towards more cogent

organization and structure to the powerlifting scene. A participant mentioned the utility of Instagram in this sense: “You get the news right away through Instagram, or you get links right away, or you get access to the media packages, or just updates about the meet calendar and all that stuff, because a lot of us are on Instagram already, so they are pivoting” (Participant D). This idea assigns a function of Instagram as a site to access information for what is going on around the community. Whether that be event promotions, access to those events, scheduling updates, live coverage, community engagement with these events, etc. All functions of traditional media outlets with the added utility of features of engagement and more individualization, catered to the specific user.

Another significant tenet of Instagram as infrastructure for the powerlifting community is its role as a means to connect sponsors to athletes. Participant A discussed how their identity online is more for recreational and entertainment purposes, and while doing so, this has led to other opportunities for them:

It’s more entertainment stuff and that then leads to different things [...] I try to be funny or try to show different sides of powerlifting [...] A lot of times that has led to further business opportunities like sponsorships or people wanting to hire me for coaching because they feel like we have more of a connection. (Participant A)

This experience shows a positive relationship with how this particular participant builds their identity online, through which various opportunities have arisen for them. Instagram’s role in this relationship is its ability to garner a large audience. To corroborate this idea, another participant found: “Instagram a pretty easy place to get a wide reach [...] because it’s some level of

short-term content compared to YouTube or blogging. So, there is technically less time involved with it, so more opportunity for output” (Participant D). Another participant mentioned something similar: “Instagram is so good because it’s not long form content. It’s short form. People can scroll through like 1,000-2,000 things a day, and if two to three of those things are one of us then they’re going to notice it much more.” (Participant C). This participant also said “Instagram is just a thing that has held the test of time for people doing online stuff. Not everybody has a Facebook anymore [...] Not everyone has a TikTok, not everyone has a Twitter” (Participant D). These participants all agreed with Instagram’s capacity to be more accessible, reach a wide audience, and increase the visibility of their particular content or information online. This bodes to the platform’s ability to act as a facilitator of information and the primary medium of communication within this online sporting space. Among these participants, content creation, education, advertisements, promotions, etc. are all justifications behind their use of Instagram’s platform.

While one participant mentioned their satisfaction and positive experience with their particular sponsor in the online space, another participant gave a differing outlook on their relationship with their sponsor, Strength, Belief, Determination (SBD). SBD is the primary organization that sponsors high level powerlifters, and world level events. They also are one of the largest powerlifting equipment and apparel brands which supply many powerlifters with the required items needed to compete: belts, knees sleeves, singlets, etc. When discussing their sponsorship deal with SBD, one participant mentioned:

They are posting requirements. So now when I’m posting, it’s not necessarily because I feel like posting, it’s because I have an obligation to post because of the sponsorship. I

would definitely post less about powerlifting if I wasn't a sponsored athlete. (Participant F)

The requirements SBD enforces on their athletes, specifically the obligation of posting on Instagram, proves the social media platform's use as not only a social site but a commercial space. With this, might come certain benefits that make Instagram seem an infrastructure for powerlifting, yet, the same benefits might pose some concerns for the organic nature of the grassroots of this sport. This particular participant mentioned their use of Instagram mainly as a means to uphold their agreement with SBD, by posting and advertising their products in this space. However, they mentioned their disinterest in using Instagram outside of the sponsorship deal. This may act as a constraint to certain athletes and members of the community who would prefer to use their accounts for more personal content, rather than more commercialized matters. Instagram used as infrastructure for a niche sport like powerlifting contains both its advantages and disadvantages. When considering the social media platform as a message disseminator it can be very helpful in this manner. Yet, as a platform that holds many possibilities, concerns of commodification and commercialization can jeopardize the casual affinity that community members on this platform value. "It's unregulated, sometimes things are being misconstrued... people are misinterpreting the science and applying it to their programming [...] or they're just straight up fabricating things to sell their product" (Participant E). Participant E's comments on this challenge towards the legitimacy of content suggests yet another concern related to the regulation of Instagram. This matter poses a threat to the well-being of relationships between community members, dealing with complications to positive social capital, which is discussed next

Social Capital

There were positive perceptions of Instagram providing a platform to promote social capital between members of the online powerlifting community. However, certain caveats were also identified throughout the interviews. To start, some of the more supportive principles of social capital that were posited by participants included Instagram's facilitation of fostering a support system and encouraging newcomers. When asked about the strengths of Instagram's platform within their community, one participant said: "Instagram is really good in-terms of community building, building friends and finding resources for education as well" (Participant G). The same participant gave an example of how members of the community support one another online: "I've seen people talking shit in the comments and then they're people I know commenting back and defending that person [...] and that's a really good thing, because it's showing that even though it's an individual sport, it doesn't feel like an individual sport because you have that community to back you up" (Participant G). This idea of community building and increased usage of Instagram within the sport is so prevalent that one participant mentioned "some people I know by their username before I even know their real name" (Participant A). Furthermore, this participant mentioned "the way I get to know people would be either the people that train with me or people online... that's where you spend majority of your time with other lifters [...] via social media is how people are more connected." (Participant A). This participant also mentioned the increased engagement online and their perception of why that is: "A main reason why I think the sport is growing and why people are getting stronger, you can just open your phone and see some of the strongest people in the world and that can motivate you" (Participant A). Lastly, another participant mentioned they use Instagram for this very reason: "a lot of people use Instagram for that sense of community, I post training because of

that” (Participant E). These participants agreed to the notion of connectedness that Instagram enables within the community. This bodes to the capabilities of the social media platform to link members, potentially increase social capital through increased engagement and participation, as well as encourage and motivate newcomers to join the sport. While this perception of Instagram acting as an effective platform to connect community members, and additionally, encourages the inclusion of newcomers, there was another, more negative perception popularly discussed among the participants. This common negative perception of Instagram in relation to social capital refers to the lack of quality amongst the relationships between community members.

To start, many participants found Instagram to be a platform where the idea of over-connection was prominent. “We are all so connected that some of us can’t distinguish the difference between being online and offline” (Participant D). This participant mentioned the discontent they had with people interacting differently online, versus in-person with them. Another participant had a similar issue: “when you have a big following, or people know you on Instagram, but they haven’t met you, they might perceive you a certain way. Especially if you’re strong in powerlifting [...] people may think ‘oh they’re probably full of themselves’ or very [...] cocky.” (Participant A). This idea highlights a common fault on social media platforms where the persona depicted online does not wholly represent the person creating and posting the content. This makes it easy for consumers online to perceive a content creator in a negative manner, not aligning with what the creator’s intentions or values are. Another participant supports this claim: “It’s just a highlight reel. I feel people still don’t understand that message” (Participant D). Although Instagram acting as a highlight reel is a prominent consideration online, this participant believes that people don’t truly favor this idea and attribute what they see online to real life. “I feel like people are basing each athlete’s quality of training or their

discipline on what they can see on Instagram [...] we don't know that person's life" (Participant D). Again, this suggests that people within the community value what they see on Instagram over a more critical understanding of what goes on outside of online content.

These examples of participants' perceptions online offer a negative outlook on Instagram in relation to the social capital of members in the online powerlifting space. The quality of relationships between community members is impaired online, skewing real-life perceptions of the same people who engage with the online community. Another fault related to negative social capital and the impact it has on community members is Instagram's facilitation of comparison, specifically among beginner athletes or newcomer members. Two participants gave their input on the fault of comparison on Instagram: "In terms of comparison, I've definitely seen social media being a big influence with some of my athletes, specifically the younger ones" (Participant G). And "People getting exposure to some of the higher-level athletes, and they might get discouraged, and that's a problem we have with younger athletes coming in" (Participant E).

While Instagram has been perceived as a positive facilitator for newcomers through its ability to connect community members, present motivating content, act as a platform for education and entertainment, it also holds perceived negatives amongst other participants. Namely, Instagram can have a deterring effect on new athletes from joining the sport due to intimidation, enabling comparison among athletes and their individual progression, getting overwhelmed by which information can be trusted, etc. While Instagram contains these different implications to newcomers in the sport and community, women are another demographic that, according to certain participants, are making more headway in the sport. Accessibility for

women, inclusivity, as well as individualization amongst female participants in the sport were applauded throughout the interviews.

Uses that Promote Gender Inclusivity

The process of organizing the qualitative data included rewatching recordings of the interviews, transcribing them and selecting quotes deemed favorable for understanding the complex relationship between Instagram and the online powerlifting community. As this data organization process unfolded, specific categories appeared, with similar answers to similar questions throughout the interviews. There was considerable discussion about many of the themes mentioned in the introduction including social capital, self-promotional content, identity building, etc. However, as with the nature of semi-structured interviews, the questions evolved and with them the answers. Other categories arose and will be discussed in this section.

To start, some of the spontaneous discussion that arose included the utility of Instagram as a means to promote women in sport, honesty and transparency in this online space, as well as the social media platform's ability to be an effective usher for beginners in the sport. The first topic discussed is Instagram's capabilities to help push women forward in a traditionally male dominated strength sport like powerlifting. This finding aligns with Erin Nicols' (2024) discussion of the potential Instagram's platform holds in reforming powerlifting towards a more inclusive sport and community. Nichols discusses how what is primarily popular in the sport of powerlifting is what is 'seen' on social media, namely Instagram. With the focus on beauty and aesthetics that goes along with this, one might think powerlifting is another sport that deters those who might not be visualized as athletic or 'fit' in the traditional sense. Despite this, participants in this study agree about the benefit Instagram has had to promote the commonly

misconstrued notion that you must look the part to play the part. A particular participant mentioned their positive experiences in the online powerlifting space: “I think there are a lot of body positive things that come from powerlifting because you’re using your body for strength as opposed to how it looks.” (Participant F) This idea focuses on the fact that powerlifting as a primarily strength sport, centers around the function of the body and not its appearance. This is an encouraging notion towards the population of newer lifters, especially female athletes where body image as well as the efficacy of its function is largely scrutinized in the traditional sport sphere (Gregg & Gregg, 2017). Another participant mentioned their switch from general fitness to the more focused powerlifting scene: “I switched to powerlifting because I wanted to focus less on aesthetics when it came to the gym, because I think that's a huge thing that the gym community does nowadays” Additionally, Participant G mentions “It doesn’t really matter how you look or carry your weight, you can see a huge variety of size when it comes to powerlifting.” The pattern among participants of engaging with the powerlifting community calls towards its inclusivity of diverse body types and appearances. The relation of Instagram to this notion is that its presentation of these diverse bodies enables the circulation and an archiving of inclusivity of women in sport. The authenticity Instagram enables sets the norms the community stands upon in the online powerlifting space.

Yet, there is an argument to be made around the “performative ecology” (Reade, 2021) or presenting a more curated ‘authentic’ self. This suggests that oftentimes users neglect authenticity when representing themselves online. This idea segues to the following discussion of authenticity and identity in the online powerlifting community. With this idea of authenticity being a selective endeavor online, one participant boasted about their positive experiences with their demonstrations of honesty online. “I’m really honest, especially when it comes to how I

feel in the gym, or how I'm doing mentally, I've gotten a lot of really positive feedback" (Participant G). To add, this participant highlighted the positive benefits being wholly transparent in this online space has to other members in the community: "I'm very transparent about stuff that I've been through [...] and having that accessible to people makes them feel less alone, that's the feedback I've gotten" (Participant G). This mutually beneficial type of communication between community members represents another fashion: this platform can be harnessed for positive relationships and greater communal understanding.

A Platform of Duality/ Instagram as a Double-Edged Sword.

Finally, another notable use of Instagram that multiple participants expressed, was its duality of usefulness. When asked about their overarching perspective about the potential of Instagram and how they think it is best utilized, many participants agreed that as a unique tool, the utility of Instagram is largely dependent on the user and their intentions of use. With positive intentions, Instagram can be a valuable platform for education, identity-building and relationship-building. But, if used incorrectly or exploited, Instagram can be an assemblage of saturated content, misinformation and unregulated matters. With regards to this, participants mentioned:

All social media, it really is just what you make of it [...] there are tools you can use to curate your algorithm [...] I literally hit 'not interested' in that post, and I found that it's done wonders for my self-esteem [...] even if I might come across a fitness influencer who would make me feel really bad about how I looked [...] I would just block it. (Participant G)

Another participant mentioned something similar, suggesting that there are different ways to go about using Instagram's platform:

I think there is a lot of positives that come from it, but at the same time, it's kind of that double edged sword because of the low barrier to entry, becoming like a 'content producer' or 'influencer' [...] there's no policing the matter, so for folks coming in that are new, there's a lot of education there, and it's free and easily accessible. You can learn a lot about strength training, powerlifting, programming, technique and get better at the sport, right? But, with that comes [...] garbage, unfiltered stuff. (Participant E)

This participant further emphasizes the contrasting use of Instagram, from a plenitude of helpful and positively guiding content online, to a platform that harbors misinformation and an abundance of junk online. These participants refer to how Instagram has these two contrasting qualities that prove its positive utility, or lack thereof. The participant that utilized Instagram's feed-curation tools also mentioned the following: "I don't think it's innately a good or bad thing. I think it's how you tailor it [...] you get out of it what you put into it" (Participant G). To further add to this dichotomy of the function of Instagram, one participant said: "Instagram was a bit of a double-edged sword for me, it was fun to post your lifts, but also, people post for the most part their highlight reel" (Participant F). This idea suggested a more recreational approach towards the same contention of Instagram. They suggest that while Instagram can be a rewarding place to interact with other community members, post your lifts and share your progress, there is a potential overemphasis of competitiveness or comparison within this online space.

These presented mindsets about the duality of Instagram depending upon the use of the platform are largely telling of the direction users should adopt or avoid. The testimonies to engaging with this platform in a constructive manner is emphasized by these participants, versus engaging with various inflammatory content online, or involving yourself with inimical matters like comparison.

Discussion

The primary goal of this research was to explore and understand how members in the online powerlifting community in Ontario use Instagram in different ways like promoting their own brand or identity and to further explore how these particular uses influence the niche sport of powerlifting. To specifically focus on the advances within the community, this study found eight exemplary members of the online powerlifting sphere in Ontario through a netnography, and discussed their experiences and perceptions through semi-structured interviews. The various findings included:

1. The powerlifting community's adoption of Instagram as the niche sport's infrastructure
2. A divided perception of social capital
3. Transparent presentation of identity to strengthen community bonds

Portions of the findings support the anticipated outcomes of this study. However, there was plenty of data that suggested other indications and implications of how multiple uses of Instagram have both benefited and deterred the online powerlifting community in Ontario. There were also specific limitations the results from this study contain that will be elaborated upon

further in this section. Finally, this section will conclude with suggested avenues for additional research surrounding the sports media research field, specifically related to the limited, yet expanding catalog of niche sports like powerlifting.

The findings suggested that through the use of practices like self-promotion, event promotion, educational or entertainment content, powerlifters online harness Instagram's platform and leverage it as infrastructure for the sport. Due to the lack of infrastructure noted in the niche sport realm, as well as the corroborated evidence that this is the case in powerlifting, this study found that the community uses Instagram as a valuable collaborative tool. These different practices used by community members to promote themselves and their respective accounts also represent a growing engagement and aggregation of powerlifting content online. This finding has an overall positively perceived benefit to the impact of the various uses of Instagram towards the growth and visibility of powerlifting.

Throughout the interviews multiple participants applauded the capabilities of Instagram in regards to its infrastructural potential. Participants mentioned how the powerlifting community has used Instagram as a way to swell powerlifting related engagement: promote powerlifting meets, engage with third-party sponsors like SBD, engage with other members, coach other powerlifters, etc. These uses exemplify how this community has harnessed Instagram's platform to simply engage with others. This application of Instagram's platform herein aids the circulation of powerlifting and its community in this online space. The evidence that powerlifters primarily use Instagram as a medium to share competition dates and sign-ups, volunteer sign-ups, competition live-stream links, and post-meet media packages, are all indications of Instagram's place as powerlifting infrastructure. This shows that Instagram may not only be beneficial for the

self-promotion of community members online, but rather a more overarching platform through which visibility of the sport is increased. Additionally, the platform's ability to effectively disseminate this variety of information to a wide community further proves its positive influence towards the operation of powerlifting. This suggests that without Instagram, powerlifting would struggle to effectively operate. While community members collaborate and engage in the growth of the sport, there are also negative perspectives of these developments and how Instagram feeds into these more adverse outcomes.

First, while many participants agreed to the viewpoint of the community largely using Instagram as a beneficial platform to improve the sport, they simultaneously urged caution towards the accelerated contradictory outcomes of this growth. Instagram as a grounds for comparison and counterproductive community engagement was a frequently noted experience. Especially towards beginner athletes, participants found that the increased engagement of self-promotional practices like simply logging your training online or showcasing your lifts, led to inverse expectations of newer lifters. Participants mentioned their experiences with newer powerlifters and found that they were often guilty of comparing themselves to stronger people and that this would in turn, lead to the discouragement of these new community members and their eventual disinterest in the sport. Another negative outlook a participant noted was the lack of regulation of the content that circulates within this community. While they agreed that the overall increased community use of Instagram was beneficial for the sport, one participant argued that the lack of unregulated content can lead to fraudulent interactions or misinformation online.

Another way in which the community seemingly used Instagram was by circulating their opinions and voices towards consequential matters surrounding practices of the sport. This

conclusion refers to the IPF bench press rule changes, as well as the addition of the full-length singlet to accommodate certain religious standards. This use of Instagram which largely influenced the sport suggests Instagram as a platform of visibility to the sport's decision makers. This use was not completely beneficial however. Participants discussed how the voiced discontent of people on Instagram which led to the IPF executing various rule changes throughout the sport, was not necessarily representative of what the community valued. While this proves the efficacy of Instagram's visibility to the decision-makers of the sport, participants were displeased with who exactly these decision-makers were listening to. Random online users who plainly detested the traditional rules of powerlifting, like the arch on the bench press discipline, caused enough backlash online for the largest international federation to administer a rule change. This ties back to the previous issue of lack of regulation throughout the platform. While Instagram can be a tool to enact significant changes, historically, the platform has been found to adhere to changes desired by those outside of the community. Yet, participants mentioned a more positive outcome of a similar situation. The introduction of the full-length singlet, promoting inclusivity within the sport, was brought about by community members who voiced their opinions online. This was a more promising outlook on the ways this platform has been used for positive social change related to the effectiveness of Instagram to mobilize what the community truly values.

Second, many participants agreed to Instagram being an excellent facilitator of communication, community building, as well as aiding their personal uses like identity building, online transparency, education etc. Thus, implications of Instagram as a promoter of positive social capital are frequently perceived within the online powerlifting community. It was noted that participants frequently experience and maintain positive relationships with other members in

the community. According to Hsu (2014) more frequent social interaction has a generally positive impact on knowledge sharing, which in turn, positively influences the continuity of a relationship. This idea offers the perspective that through these positively shared experiences, like sharing free educational content on Instagram, or even simply expressing vulnerability in the online powerlifting space, there are positive implications to the health and longevity of the community. Additionally, the recurrent perspectives of Instagram's ability to encourage newcomers further proves the platform's efficacy as a social capital cultivator. This is similar to Holland-Smith's (2017) study which found a positive relationship between social media and social capital in the niche sport rock-climbing community, specifically related to the consolidation of positive relationships between community members through social media. However, this study's findings also indicate adverse perceptions of Instagram related to the idea of social capital, social status and authenticity in this online community. While there are numerous displayed positives Instagram might offer from a social capital perspective, on the contrary participants suggested that Instagram can be a platform that also promotes negative social capital. Participants admitted users who may not necessarily earn the following they acquire due to certain misleading or unmerited factors. For example, participants believed that people within the community accrue a following and further consumers of their specific content, plainly because of their notable physical strength. While one participant mentioned that strength is the goal of the sport, others mentioned that content creators will leverage this characteristic to promote a product or service. This is not always warranted from someone who is solely strong, lacking the credentials or experience to promote a product within this online space. Oftentimes within the community, strength or powerlifting coaches will sell products or services strictly based on their athletic prowess, not their intellect or efficacy of strength knowledge. According

to Dino Numerato and Simone Baglioni (2012) this is a misuse of trust and the social connections between community members, namely for capital gain. This study found that this is not the only negative experience situated from the inextricably linked sport and commercial business. It was found that one participant noted disinterest in their use of Instagram, related to their required engagement online and their third-party sponsorship. The individual experience of one participant claiming that they would likely post less on Instagram if not for their obligation to advertise third-party powerlifting apparel links to this topic of sport and commercial affairs. While at the same time, a different participant was content with their commercial promotion of powerlifting equipment online. These results suggest a varied response towards these different uses of Instagram and the linkage of commercial affairs, in these positions of community engagement online.

Third, the presentation of transparency online was a largely suggested and discussed topic to be further analyzed. One participant was passionate about their use of transparency within the online powerlifting community. The strength of this utilization is in its ability to foster trust, communication, inclusivity and understanding between community members. Transparency is also seen as a positive implication in regard to newcomer longevity within sport, as according to Hsu (2014), 'knowledge sharing has a positive effect on relationship continuity'. This suggests that transparency and honesty within this online community can be an effective use of the platform as a means to inspire newcomers and positively influence their relationship with other community members and the sport. Furthermore, this notion of transparency online can be pointedly beneficial for women in the sport of powerlifting. Women within online sporting communities are able to discuss more personal information, connect with other women, as well as discuss the various gendered challenges they face (Hardin & Whiteside, 2012). Instagram's

facilitation of transparent content shows that this online space is not only an effective tool for harboring a safe space, but further providing an inclusive environment for anyone who uses it in this manner.

Finally, the sequence of these diverse uses of Instagram explicitly boils down to the idea that the utility of Instagram lies within the intention of the user. Throughout this study, it has been recognized that Instagram holds a large measure of influence over the online powerlifting community. Thus, depending on the intended use of its platform, Instagram can be a largely beneficial or easily counterproductive tool for advancing niche sports. In this community, good intentions can lead to mutually beneficial relationships, a plethora of educational and recreational content, or it can simply be a means to express yourself how you want. Many participants settled with the conclusion that Instagram is as helpful as a platform as you make it out to be. Comparison, discouragement, or negative interactions online are frankly inevitable effects when using the internet, especially with a large social media platform like Instagram. Yet, many constructive and favorable outcomes are just as feasible.

There are notable limitations to consider in this study which are important to note for understanding the confines of this work, as well as suggesting alternate routes for future research in the sports media research field. The first limitation surrounds the methodologies of this study. While a netnography is a beneficial method to observe an online community, other methods like a content analysis could be similarly useful to take a unobtrusive examination of the user-generated content so frequently discussed in this paper. Furthermore, an effective content analysis would have the benefit of analyzing the specific online content within the powerlifting community that offers an interpretation of the different uses of Instagram. This could look like observing the content that offers education, wellness, entertainment, news, etc. Or a content

analysis could further elaborate on the more definitive themes that present themselves within the community like competition media package circulation, educational event promotion, university powerlifting club growth, and more. Another limitation is the sample size and geographic limitation presented in this study. With a sample size of eight participants who engage within the online powerlifting community in Ontario, there was only a limited number of diverse perspectives particularly related to the entirety of the online powerlifting world. While Ontario contains one of the largest growing powerlifting communities in Canada, the online engagement with this sport is relatively new in this area. A larger sample including individuals from various backgrounds and geographies would offer a richer and deeper understanding of the experiences that powerlifters have with Instagram and provide greater insight.

There is more work to be done towards a more encompassing understanding of niche sports consumption. While this paper explores Instagram and its influence on the powerlifting community, there are many other niche sport communities and other online social platforms that offer different uses. Furthermore, the preceding growth of powerlifting and how its consumption is evolving is another area to be explored. New developments countering the lack of infrastructure within the sport of powerlifting have been on the uptick. The IPF recently signed a deal with Columbia Broadcast System (CBS) to broadcast the powerlifting world championships to North America as of February 2024. This deal will likely increase exposure to the sport and its community. This research did not invest in this development due to its timing in regard to the relevance and focus of this study on conditions prior to this deal. Future research dealing with the inclusion of traditional communication mediums like television broadcasting niche sports would be a uniquely appropriate study related to this field.

Conclusion

The diverse use of Instagram by members of the online powerlifting community in Ontario provided preliminary insight into the positive potential of social media in niche sports. The main ways in which powerlifters used Instagram was 1) in an infrastructural manner, where the social media platform facilitated the operations and proceedings of the sport, despite the lack of regulations in place to foster a productive and safe space. And 2) where powerlifters used Instagram related to its capability to act as a positive facilitator of community building. Through the lens of social capital, the shared experiences with Instagram as a space to provide things like knowledge sharing and identity building proved an overall positive influence on the development of the community. Again, there were shared negative experiences with these defined uses. The perceived efficacy of Instagram as a platform to encourage new community members was split down the middle by participants, with people acknowledging both its benefits and drawbacks. Comparison online was a primary negative experience participants mentioned would deter newcomers. As well, recognizing the previous issues with the lack of regulation online, participants also mentioned the exploitation of trust built from positive social capital, in order to benefit financially. Finally, 3) The use of Instagram in a constructive and transparent manner, to promote positive relationships within the community. This use of Instagram offers another valuable approach to strengthen relationships. Exercising transparency online was found to improve social ties between community members, increase the confidence of the user, and further endorse the growth of the sport.

This study contributes to the manner in which Instagram can be a beneficial facilitator for the growth of the niche sport powerlifting. However, the most pertinent finding was the emphasis on intention in this online space. While the various uses of Instagram outlined in this study may

inherently materialize, it is important to remember that Instagram is solely a tool which the community can use however needed. Participants throughout the study suggest this tool is a ‘double-edged sword’, with many favorable or harmful uses. Instagram is a very effective facilitator of getting a message across. Yet, it depends on the intention of that message and how it is conceived. While in the context of niche sports, this social media site proves an effective one for overall growth and maturation of a young community.

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