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A Qualitative Study of Social Media and Electronic Communication among Canadian Adolescent Female Soccer Players

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Abstract

Social media and electronic communication perpetuate adolescents' lives and have the potential to shape the nature of adolescent athletes' experiences and interactions with members of their sports teams. However, there is no research to date that has examined adolescent female athletes' use of social media and electronic communication. Athletes, parents, and coaches *(N* = 22) from one soccer organization participated in semistructured interviews discussing their use of and perspectives on social media and electronic communication. Interview data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Findings include four themes: (a) uses of social media and electronic communication (in and out of the sport context); (b) athlete, parent, and coaches' perspectives of social media engagement; (c) friendships and trust with teammates; and (d) the development and perception of subgroups. Recommendations include developing policies for the use of social media and electronic communication for adolescents in sports settings

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and for coaches, parents, and athletes to engage in open communication about the uses of social media and electronic communication.

Keywords
qualitative, social media, electronic communication, peer relationships, youth sport, adolescence

Youth sport environments that are characterized as psychologically safe, developmentally appropriate, and socially welcoming can positively contribute to the development of adolescents' physical, psychological, and social competence (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Holt et al., 2017). In particular, female adolescents' sport participation is associated with several benefits such as higher self-esteem and perceived physical competence, positive body image, and greater psychological well-being (e.g., Eime et al., 2013). Despite such benefits, a recent report by Canadian Women and Sport (2020) has noted that although adolescent girls and boys show similar participation rates (52%–55%) at 6 to 8 years of age, nearly one-third of girls drop out of their sport by late adolescence, whereas only one-tenth of boys drop out across the same period. Thus, it is imperative to advance the understanding of adolescent females' sport participation to enhance their experiences and promote their retention.

During adolescence, one of the most salient developmental tasks is the formation of one's identity, which includes beliefs about one's self, values, and goals (Erikson, 1968). Studies show that adolescents who develop a positive identity may experience higher levels of self-esteem, well-being, and life satisfaction during adolescence and adulthood (Luyckx & Robitschek, 2014). Identity formation is closely tied to adolescents' interactions and perceptions of their place within the social world, particularly in the context of peer groups that they do or do not belong to (Erikson, 1968; Parker et al., 2006). Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), adolescents cannot engage in "pure" interpersonal relations without acknowledging the social groups to which they belong (p. 34, Tajfel & Turner, 1979). "In-group" individuals tend to be similar or share interests, and individuals will generally develop a desire to be recognized as part of the chosen group (Cameron, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Developing a social identity based on peer groups can result in stronger ingroup favoritism and respectively, stronger identification with the group (Tanti et al., 2011). In a sports context, an in-group might represent the sports team or subgroups within a team, such as attackers and defenders (Bruner et al., 2014). Therefore, the dynamics of a

sports team represent a complex system in which subgroups and interpersonal relationships impact any one individuals' affiliation as a team member (Bruner et al., 2014).

Group dynamics and peer relationships in youth sport teams can also impact the quality of adolescents' participation experiences (Petersen et al., 2019). Among male and female adolescent athletes, Bruner and colleagues (2017) found that those who reported a greater sense of similarity and bonding with teammates perceived greater physical and social skill development (e.g., working with others and providing/receiving feedback), while more positive peer relationships are associated with greater enjoyment in sport and desire to continue participation (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2009). Thus, athletes' interpersonal relationships are closely linked to the social groups of their sports team, and these social groups can impact athletes' experiences in sport. Given that female adolescents are more likely to exit sports due to feeling unwelcome by teammates, lacking a sense of belonging, or bullying (Canadian Women and Sport, 2020), there is a need to consider how the social dynamics of teams in which adolescent females participate impact their sports experiences and development.

Social Media and Electronic Communication in Young People

One of the means by which adolescent athletes may interact and build relationships with their teammates is through electronic communication. Social media use and electronic communication occur very commonly among adolescents in most developed countries (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). For example, in a national survey administered to 5,436 Canadian students from grades 4 to 11 in 2013, researchers found that 99% of students had access to the internet via various devices (e.g., computers and smartphones), and 85% of students owned a cell phone by grade 11 (Steeves, 2014). In a more recent survey, evidence showed that 95% of teens from the United States reported having a smart phone or having access to one (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Overall, social media use and electronic communication are a persistent and universal reality for adolescents in contemporary society. Definitions of social media and electronic communication vary, but for the purposes of this research, electronic communication referred to any form of communication via the internet or electronic device including text, phone calls, FaceTime, WhatsApp, and email, while social media referred to communication via platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat, and included both public and private messages on these platforms (Beyens et al., 2020).

Given the prevalence of social media use, researchers have sought to examine the impact of electronic communication on adolescents' well-being and social relationships. Findings from such studies have yielded mixed results, and a recent review by Odgers and Jensen (2020) concluded that much of the research has shown insignificant relationships between adolescents' use of technology and their well-being, and where associations have been found, they can span positive, null, and negative associations. For example, light use of social media by adolescents was associated with greater well-being compared to adolescents who did not use social media at all (Twenge, 2019), and some adolescents who engage in online communication have reported higher friendship quality and greater self-concept clarity (Davis, 2013). Although these findings highlight the benefits of electronic communication, negative consequences have also been reported in the literature, including poor body image, symptoms of depression, and cyberbullying (Boers et al., 2019; Kelly et al., 2018). Indeed, evidence suggests that different adolescents have different experiences with social media. For example, in a cohort of over 11,000 14-year olds from the United Kingdom, girls spent more time on social media and the internet than boys, and girls' increased time spent on social media was associated with increased self-harm, depression, lower life-satisfaction, and lower self-esteem (Twenge & Farley, 2021). As such, girls may be at higher risk of negative outcomes due to increased use of social media and the internet compared to boys of the same age (Twenge & Farley, 2021).

Differences in the use of social media, and its effects for different populations, may be explained by the differential susceptibility to media effects model (DSMM; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). For example, dispositional (gender and personality), developmental (age), and social susceptibility factors (parental monitoring and peer norms for social media use) may explain the different patterns of use between different populations, such as between male and female adolescents, and between individuals who use social media more, or less frequently (Beyens et al., 2020; Twenge & Farley, 2021; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). For instance, Beyens and colleagues found differential effects of social media for individual adolescents. Specifically, 46% of sampled adolescents reported weak to strong increases in well-being after using social media, while 10% reported a decrease in well-being, and 44% of sampled adolescents reported that they did not feel better or worse after light use of social media (Beyens et al., 2020).

Adolescents' attraction to electronic communication has been attributed to its features that allow greater controllability of self-presentation and disclosure compared to face-to-face communication (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), which may be helpful for adolescents trying to accrue social capital

or make more friends, particularly when there is congruence between their on-line and in-person identity (MetCalfe & Llewellyn, 2020). For example, electronic communication allows one to choose which audiovisual cues to share or hide (i.e., choosing to send only written texts without speaking verbally or showing their face), and one has the freedom and time to edit their message prior to sending it. In addition, electronic communication offers adolescents the opportunities to meet new people and freely choose with whom they wish to interact. This can also be beneficial when physical contact with others is difficult, for example, if peers live far from one another or during a pandemic, such as COVID-19, that requires physical distancing (e.g., Nesi et al., 2018a; Pitt, Hock, et al., 2021). Social categories can also be built and maintained through social media, and online categories provide opportunity for social comparisons of in-groups and out-groups and contribute to an individual's sense of group identity and belonging (Trepte & Loy, 2017). Nesi et al. (2018a, 2018b) suggested that while online communication provides adolescents with opportunities for peers to have more frequent and immediate relationships, keep records of conversations, and engage publicly and privately in peer relationships, these changes might lead to increased reassurance-seeking and co-rumination, increased expectations to maintain relationships, and novel opportunities for public displays of friendship hierarchies (Nesi et al., 2018a, 2018b).

Given the relevance of social media use and electronic communication in broader society, sport researchers are beginning to examine this topic, although the research in this area has largely focused on elite sport contexts. For example, researchers have analyzed Facebook posts and photos to examine how social media use can objectify and sexualize female athletes (Frederick et al., 2017), and Barnett (2017) found that while female athletes posted content online to demonstrate their commitment to sport, they nevertheless followed traditional gender scripts and stereotypes such as appearing nurturing and loving, but also submissive and docile (Barnett, 2017). These gender norms have also been demonstrated in nonsport populations, with research indicating that adolescents receive additional "social capital" (e.g., more "likes" on social media and perceived popularity), when their identity displays online were consistent with gender stereotypes of masculinity and femininity (MetCalfe & Llewellyn, 2020). Other studies examining social media use among college athletes has found that athletes who engage more with teammates via social media identified more strongly with their sports team (Kim & Kim, 2019). In addition, female athletes who engage more frequently in online social networking reported a greater sense of collective self-esteem with their sports team when compared to their male counterparts (Barker, 2009). Taken together, social media and electronic communication

not only provide additional opportunities for adolescents to engage in social relationships with their teammates and friends, but engagement with these platforms may also impact adolescent athletes' sense of belonging and collective self-esteem toward their sports group (Barker, 2009; Trepte & Loy, 2017). As youth sport presents unique opportunities for adolescents to develop team cohesion and social relationships (Bruner et al., 2014, 2017), and in light of research and theory suggesting that social media and electronic communication might change traditional peer relationships (Nesi et al., 2018a, 2018b), there is a need to explore how female adolescent athletes perceive the role of social media and electronic communication within their sports team and how these platforms impact their teammate relationships and team dynamics.

The majority of research that has previously examined adolescent athletes' social media use, and their social relationships has adopted cross-sectional quantitative methods (e.g., Frederick et al., 2017; Kim & Kim, 2019; Twenge, 2019) to identify group-level associations between social media use and adolescents' experiences (Kim & Kim, 2019; Pitt, Hock, et al., 2021). By adopting a qualitative approach to studying team relationships and team dynamics, the current work could extend previous findings by asking athletes about their perceptions of how social media and electronic communication impact their sport experiences. In addition, research examining adolescents' social media use in sport settings have not considered the perspectives of parents and coaches that could impact adolescents' experiences (Gould et al., 2020). As such, a qualitative approach may shed light on the reasons why youth athletes use electronic communication with their teammates, and how these interactions impact their relationships and team dynamics.

Parents' and Coaches' Perspectives of Social Media and Electronic Communication

Coaches and parents are key agents who influence adolescents' social development, as they can impact adolescents' feelings of social competence and sense of success in sport (Høigaard et al., 2017). When looking specifically at adolescents' social media use and electronic communication, coaches must consider the role of social media and electronic communication in how they coach and interact with athletes (Gould et al., 2020), while parents must navigate their child's growing technological knowledge and their ability to monitor their child's internet behaviors (Erickson et al., 2016). Some parents have also shared concerns about their children's safety online (Erickson et al., 2016), which coincides with evidence that some coaches have used social media as an unregulated space in which to engage in grooming and abusive

behaviors with youth athletes (Sanderson & Weathers, 2020). Owing to these complexities, there is a need to also consider how coaches and parents perceive social media and electronic communication in teams of adolescent athletes.

In sum, social media use and electronic communication are extremely prevalent, and previous research has demonstrated both positive and negative aspects of electronic communication for adolescents' development and social relationships. Despite such importance and relevance, there is currently a lack of studies that have examined social media use and electronic communication within youth sport contexts. Given that social media and electronic communication are pervasive in adolescents' social lives, it is highly likely that these forms of communication occur very commonly among sport team members and influence the social dynamics of their teams. Furthermore, given the importance of the peer dynamics and social relationships for female adolescents, considering this topic in female youth sport context is warranted. Therefore, the aim of the current research was to explore adolescent female athletes' use of social media and electronic communication in relation to their sport experiences and teammate relationships and dynamics.

Method

Participants

A total of 22 people participated in the study. The sample comprised of athletes ($N = 10$, *M*age = 15.5 years; $SD = 0.53$ years), parents ($N = 8$, *M*age = 49.3 years; $SD = 4.07$ years) and coaching staff ($N = 4$, *M*age = 40.3 years; $SD = 14.50$ years) from one U16 (athletes aged 15 or 16 years) soccer team in Ontario, Canada, that competes at the provincial level. The soccer team is part of a large club with over 3,000 athletes registered in recreational and competitive teams. The ethnicity of the total sample comprised of individuals who self-identified as: White/Caucasian ($N = 13$; 59%), Black ($N = 2$; 9%; including African, Haitian, Jamaican, Somali), and Other ($N = 7$; 32%; including South American, Indian, Hispanic, Brazilian, and Portuguese). All athletes identified as female, while parents identified as females ($N = 6$) and males ($N = 2$), and the coaching staff identified as females ($N = 2$) and males ($N = 2$). The marital status of parents and coaches were: married ($N = 7$; 58%), common-law married ($N = 3$; 25%), single ($N = 1$; 8%), and divorced or separated ($N = 1$; 8%). Parents and coaches had either completed high school (17%), obtained some college or university education (17%), or had completed college or university (67%).

Athletes had been playing soccer between 5 and 13 years ($M = 9.3$ years; $SD = 3.4$ years) and had been with their current club for a maximum of 13 years, with some athletes having entered the team at the beginning of the current season ($M = 4.1$ years; $SD = 3.6$ years). None of the athletes were participating in sports outside of soccer at the time of the study. Among the four coaches, two had completed the Respect in Soccer certification and one held a Canadian Provincial B license. Coaches had an average of 16.8 years of experience in soccer ($SD = 6.4$ years) and had been with the current club for an average of 5.5 years ($SD = 1.3$ years).

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the researchers' university research ethics board. The lead researcher shared the information letter, consent form, and invitation to participate with the team manager who forwarded the information to all athletes, parents, and coaches from the soccer team. Participants were contacted via email and asked to contact the lead researcher if they wanted to take part in the study. All the coaches and approximately half of the athletes and parents from the team agreed to take part in the research study. To maintain participants' confidentiality, the team manager did not know how many, or which parents and athletes on the team participated in the study.

Individual semistructured interviews with parents and athletes were conducted by the first author, and coach interviews were conducted by the last author via video calls with participants across an 8-week period from April to June of 2020. The first and last authors both have experience in conducting qualitative research with parents, coaches, and youth athletes. During interviews, the authors adopted a neutral and empathic stance, and focused on listening to participants' experiences without judgment (Patton, 2014). Participants were asked about their use of social media and communication and why they engaged in certain platforms. Participants were also asked about their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of social media and electronic communication for their team and how these platforms can impact teammate relationships and team dynamics (see supplementary file for interview guides). Interviews lasted on average 48 minutes ($SD = 13.7$) with coaches, 45 minutes ($SD = 7.4$) with parents, and 51 minutes with athletes ($SD = 8.5$), and ranged from 31 minutes to 69 minutes across all groups. Parents, athletes, and coaches were interviewed separately, although there were two instances in which both parents of one athlete participated in an interview together.

Data Analysis and Study Rigor

All participants were assigned participant numbers for anonymity (e.g., A1 = Athlete 1, P1 = Parent 1, and C1 = Coach 1), and parent and athlete numbers do not correspond to further ensure anonymity of responses (e.g., Athlete 1 is not the child of Parent 1 in the results below). Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo 12 software (QSR International, 1999). All members of the research team contributed to the data analysis. First, the 21 transcripts were divided into two groups and each group of transcripts was analyzed by three members of the research team. In line with content analysis, the researchers read the transcripts, identified initial units of text, then coded text units into themes (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Following this first phase of independent coding, the research team met to discuss their analysis and final themes were revised. During the analysis process, themes were considered both within and across the different participants; themes pertinent to athletes, coaches, and parents were considered individually, and common themes or points of disagreement between athletes, coaches and parents' perspectives on social media were discussed.

During data analysis, themes were identified using both inductive and deductive approaches (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). For example, when the research team met to plan for data analysis, we generated initial concepts in a deductive manner from interview questions; the theme "general use of social media and electronic communication" was designed to capture participants' responses about the apps and modes of communication that they used, therefore moving from a general question to participants' specific examples (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In addition, an inductive approach was also used via open coding and then creating categories based on interpretation of participants' responses (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). For example, the theme "building trust" was developed from participants' perspectives about the benefits of using social media, such as making friends with new players, improving in-game performance, and building relationships off the soccer pitch.

As the research team consisted of undergraduate, graduate, postdoctoral, and professorial members of different ages, the team collectively reflected on how their own experiences and perspectives of social media use might influence the analysis of the data, recognizing that we identified more with the athletes' use of social media (i.e., platforms used) than parents and coaches. Group discussions were used as opportunities to explore our preconceptions about the topic. We did not aim to conduct an interrater reliability assessment of coding as the research team shared a relativist belief that transcripts did not contain a single "truth" that could be triangulated and a variety of perspectives held by participants were represented in findings (Smith & McGannon,

2018). The first author developed the written results by analyzing and reviewing all the coded transcripts, and she consulted with the other members of the research team to further discuss the data and the interpretations presented below to ensure that themes raised in earlier discussions were appropriately represented into the results.

Results

General Uses of Social Media and Electronic Communication

Athletes reported using several different social media platforms and apps: "Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok—if you count that. . . uh, Twitter. I have most of them, I would say" (A1, 16 years). Athletes also commented that they used forms of electronic communication with family, coaches, and teammates. For instance: "I have family on WhatsApp and my coach on WhatsApp, um, and then for [the] team we have TeamSnap, and then we also have a group chat on Snapchat for the team" (A1, 16 years). Following the interviews, athletes were contacted via the email and asked to estimate how much time they spent on social media each day. Athletes reported that they spent between 3 and 10 hours each day on social media ($M = 6.33$ hours, $SD = 1.96$ hours). Athletes were also asked to report the top three apps that they used. Of the eight athletes that provided this information, every athlete reported one of the following—TikTok, Snapchat, or Instagram—in their three most-used apps. Athletes also distinguished between social media platforms used for communication versus platforms used for entertainment:

> I think like things like TikTok and YouTube and Instagram, things like that, they're more entertainment-wise. . . Like it just gives me something to do. But like, things like um, like Snapchat and things like that, I can message my friends and we can communicate or FaceTime (A2, 15 years).

Using Social Media and Electronic Communication for Soccer

Athletes engaged with several different social media platforms in relation to soccer. For example, athletes communicated with their coach across different platforms: "Coach, um, I usually email him. . . um, if I like really need to, I'd probably text him just for like a quick kind of thing" (A3, 15 years). The main source of communication with coaches was through an app called TeamSnap, which was introduced by the team manager and was accessible by parents, coaches, and athletes:

> TeamSnap is like, our manager set it up, and it's like a formal way of keeping our schedules and like, it shows you what's up like, what's next in the calendar and you like, verify if you're going or not. And then it says how many people are going, and then there's an email section and messages so we can get emails from our coach (A6, 15 years).

Despite all players having access to TeamSnap, players mostly communicated with each other through Snapchat: "on Snapchat we have a group chat for our team" (A6, 15 years). Eight athletes commented that the team's chat was mainly used for logistical purposes related to soccer. For instance, one athlete said: "we don't really use our group chat that much unless it's like about soccer, really . . . So, like what jersey are we wearing or something" (A6, 15 years). Another athlete commented: "if we think we're in the wrong spot at a game then we'll text in the group chat and be like oh is anyone else here? Or like where are you guys? How do I find you guys?" (A8, 15 years). In addition to the team chat, athletes also had separate smaller chats for communicating with a select number of teammates: "there's like a certain group of people that I like, Snapchat like, by themselves and then there's kind of like the group chat that like, I will snap on occasion" (A9, 16 years). Athletes reported discussing a variety of topics with their teammates within smaller group chats. For example, A10 (16 years) said: "with one girl, we have like a pretty close relationship. Um, I'll send her like clips of like, a game or something, and it's like yo, we should try to do this in game," while other athletes had conversations unrelated to sport: "there's people that like, I have more common interests with and like, more things to talk about" (A8, 15 years).

Three athletes also had additional social media accounts tailored for soccer: "I have Instagram . . . I have two accounts. So, there's my personal account and then there's my actual soccer account, so I post like highlight videos, like things, like posts of me training." (A5, 16 years). A social media "soccer account" was used as a resume for university, as one athlete explained:

> Our coaches like get videos from like tournaments or games that we play, and they post on a Dropbox that we have. And so, I go through those and I find little clips of me playing and then I have like a YouTube channel, but it's like private and it's all of my games. And then like, what I will do in the future, if I'm communicating with a coach from university, I can then send them the YouTube channel and give them access. (A2, 15 years)

From participants' descriptions, it was evident that social media, and electronic communication more broadly, was used to stay in touch with soccer teammates and coaches for logistical purposes, while also communicating with friends and wider social networks.

Athletes' Perceptions of Social Media and Electronic Communication

Athletes had different perspectives about social media engagement and the benefits of having a social media presence. One athlete commented that social media was for "mainly just communication and just staying up to date with what's happening around the world" (A5, 16 years), while another athlete saw social media as an essential part of their lifestyle: "I mean I use social media almost all day like, I'm always on my phone. This is kind of like, who I am" (A9, 16 years). In line with this, athletes had mixed views about the amount of time they spent on social media, either engaging extensively: "TikTok is just more of like an entertainment thing, like I could scroll on there for a really, really long time and it, I'll feel like it's been five minutes" (A8, 15 years), or choosing to limit the number of platforms: "I mainly just use Snapchat now. . . I just realized my screen time is going up a lot especially during the quarantine and I wanted to limit [it]" (A6, 15 years).

Regardless of athletes' perspectives toward social media, six athletes commented that they had profiles such as Snapchat, Instagram, or Twitter largely due to peer norms. Some athletes used these platforms in spite of how they felt about social media: "[Instagram] isn't really for me. I don't understand it really. I just have it because it was something I had at school and all my friends had it." (A6, 15 years). One athlete acknowledged that they would feel less accepted by peers if they did not use social media: "I think that there is definitely a thing among my generation where you're looked at weirdly if you don't have it. . . So that kind of has a big impact" (A1, 16 years). For these adolescents, social media and electronic communication are a ubiquitous phenomenon used for generating and maintaining social connections, so commonplace that some adolescents felt social media was essential in order to make friends. Snapchat was the most popular platform for communication between teammates, which reflected a wider generational trend for social interactions:

> Everyone has it [Snapchat], and like, I can talk to people that like I just met cause everyone has Snapchat. Like at our age, it's like really, really, really common. The first thing that you ask for from someone is their Snapchat, it's not their number. (A8, 15 years)

Due to the volume of connections athletes had on social media and in particular on Snapchat, athletes also discussed how they used this platform differently depending on who they were communicating with. For instance, one athlete commented that they did not share personal information on the

team group chat: "with the girls I'm closer with, we probably just have like normal conversations, talk about the life, but you don't really do that on the [group] chat or anything" (A7, 15 years). These feelings were shared by six other athletes, who indicated that they chatted more often with a select number of teammates: "there's like three or four other girls that like, I like to talk to on like a regular day, just like snap our faces or like have a conversation" (A9, 16 years).

In general, athletes spoke positively of social media use within their soccer team. One athlete summarized that "so far, at [Soccer Club] like, social media has been like a super positive thing that has helped us and that has like, added an extra bond, I guess" (A8, 15 years). Most athletes used the team chat as a way to communicate about practices and as an additional way to foster relationships with teammates, and athletes recognized that the group chat was a positive and useful tool for their soccer team.

Parent and Coach Perceptions of Athlete Social Media Use and Electronic Communication

Parents and coaches had mixed views about athletes' use of social media. On one hand, they saw engagement as beneficial to athletes' relationships and ability to develop their own personal soccer "brand" (C3) to showcase skills. On the other hand, parents and coaches had reservations about adolescents' extensive use of electronic communication and the effect of these habits on their children's development, including "real social consequences in terms of anxiety and in terms of people's introversion" (C1). It seems that parents and coaches viewed social media as a useful tool but were concerned with *how* adolescents were engaging with social media platforms. For example, coaches expressed concerns about the content on adolescents' public social media accounts that could have implications for future job or university applications. One coach said: "sometimes the youth don't pay attention. . . and they could end up posting something that causes a fault for them in the application for university" (C3).

Seven parents had positive perspectives of social media, describing it as the youth generation's entertainment: "where we would have watched television, they share you know, various videos and you know, whatever the latest thing on the internet is" (P4). Most of the positive views shared by coaches and parents were about the use of electronic communication for maintaining relationships with friends: "I'm the type of person that is all for social media because it's, you can always be in contact with that person no matter what" (C3). One parent also commented that social media provided their daughter an alternative way to communicate with her friends who lived further away:

"when she can't be sociable face to face then she'll use platforms to, to spend time with their friends" (P6).

In contrast, 10 parents and coaches also had concerns about social media, describing it as a "mindless drain" (P2) and "an industry that's not controlled" (C2), while another parent commented that selfies—self-portrait photos—are "the greatest waste of time that was ever created" (C1). These comments illustrated parents' perceptions that adolescents' engagement in social media and the internet more broadly could be detrimental. Parents felt that they were more aware of the drawbacks of electronic communication because they were older and had more experience to reflect on the possible impacts of social media engagement: "as a parent [I'm] very worried about what social media is doing for that next generation. . . I have a filter because I'm an adult, I've been through this, I know kind of, right from wrong" (C2). From these perspectives, parents were concerned with how social media might influence their child's developmental experiences, and felt their children were perhaps too young to understand the negative effects of social media engagement.

Coaches also described conflicting beliefs about the effects of social media engagement. One coach felt that athletes could develop closer bonds using electronic communication: "they get to know each other. Just at that deeper level. They get to reveal things about themselves that they wouldn't do in so-called formal settings" (C4). Contrary to this, another coach felt that in general, adolescent athletes used electronic communication because of an inability to converse in person. The coach described a previous instance with another soccer team where: "even in like, water-break interactions where you have downtime for two minutes, um, people are on their phone because they aren't comfortable talking to one another" (C1). As such, parents' and coaches' perspectives demonstrated that while adolescent athletes could derive some benefits from social media engagement (e.g., creating a soccer profile, connecting with peers), in some cases they felt that frequent engagement with social media could lead to detrimental outcomes.

Building Trust Through Social Media and Electronic Communication

Athletes felt that social media helped them to develop bonds with their teammates. Some coaches and parents also perceived social media as useful for building relationships, as one coach explained: "the aspect of having the group chat with your team, that is a great way of bonding because it's just like, you guys can send each other funny memes or little things that remind you of each other" (C3). One parent commented how positive communication through social media helped athletes support each other: "if they have a

lot of uh, great positive um, communication, and then when they see each other they just want to play better for each other, and they support each other" (P7). A particular instance when athletes used electronic communication to build friendships was when new players joined the team:

> We recently had four girls join our team . . . We added them to the group chat and then the individual players like started talking to them like individually, separately from the group chat. And yeah people, it like, we were just able to get close to them, understand them more, you know? Talk to them about their position, the way they like to play. So, like not just becoming like friends, but becoming teammates. (A10, 16 years)

From this athlete's perspective, continuing a relationship off the soccer pitch via electronic communication was integral to feeling like other players were her "teammates," and athletes consistently expressed how building closer friendships led to more successful team performance. For example, one athlete said that "social media influences our game a lot because, like I was mentioning, it allows us to have like, that fluidity. . . our friendships grow and then we get more comfortable with each other" (A2, 15 years). Another athlete felt that building trust led to "a closer bond on the field, because I feel like we trust each other more" (A8, 15 years).

In addition to the benefits for building trust and relationships, athletes felt that electronic communication was helpful because they lacked time at training sessions to engage in conversations with their teammates: "at soccer we don't have much time to talk unless we stay late" (A7, 15 years). Furthermore, three athletes commented that they lived too far from teammates to socialize in person: "We all live pretty far from each other so we can't see each other that often. . . a lot of them live like 30-40 minutes away and without social media I definitely wouldn't be staying in contact with them" (A6, 15 years). Thus, while generational norms were one reason athletes engaged in electronic communication, other factors including geographical distance among teammates and lack of time at training also contributed to their use of social media because it helped facilitate relationship building.

Subgroups and Friendship Groups

Beyond athletes' communication via group chats that included all members of the team, they also communicated with subgroups of teammates. As one athlete explained: "there's like three or four other girls that like, I like to talk to on like a regular day" (A9, 16 years). Smaller group chats formed between teammates who had similar interests: "my team has like a couple of different groups but like we're all friends, but like, it's just kind of like, based off of

like, interests" (A9, 16 years). Communication also differed depending on how actively athletes engaged with social media:

> All the people that are kind of like on social media all the time and whatever, they're very close and the ones that like kind of like stay away from social media a lot they're like, it's kind of like two groups. (A10, 16 years)

Although athletes acknowledged that subgroups existed in the team, they felt these groups were typical for their age group: "at the end of the day, we all have grown that trust for each other. And we all understand that we all have different personalities and we all understand that we'll have different friends" (A2, 15 years). Athletes also felt subgroups were inconsequential to the team's performance: "I don't think when we are actually training it has any effect. I think we are all respectful of the fact that we are there to play soccer" (A1).

In contrast, coaches and parents generally described negative perceptions of subgroups within the team. For example, all four coaches reported that social media could have negative effects for athletes' mental states, for example: "you see it on social media especially when you see oh these two people are hanging out and they're like 'oh why aren't we there?' It does affect them; in a way their mental state does get affected" (C3). One parent identified "cliques" within the team: "I am finding with, with their group, um, there's a lot of cliques. Um, and once they start, you can't break that up" (P3). While athletes felt subgroups were inevitable and based on common interests between teammates, three coaches and four parents felt these subgroups could be detrimental, as some athletes might feel excluded from a particular friendship group.

The differing views regarding subgroups between athletes and the coach/parent groups were also evident in the way they referred to the smaller groups of friends. Athletes avoided using terms such as "cliques" because they felt this implied the subgroups were inherently negative and that they were not friends: "it's kind of like two groups, but like I don't really like to put it that way. Like we're all friends" (A10, 16 years). Another athlete also said: "everyone is totally respectful and nice to each other, but there are definitely friend groups" (A1, 16 years). Athletes saw the team's group chat as a positive way of including everyone: "I think um, me being added to our group chat from the start just made me feel included" (A6, 15 years), and athletes had a mutual understanding that they communicated more frequently with certain teammates based on friendships and shared interests. Overall, social media was viewed as a catalyst for developing intimate relationships outside of training. While participants were aware that displaying relationships on

social media could magnify the existence of subgroups in their team, athletes reported that the subgroups did not necessarily lead to negative team experiences because they also felt included in the team as a whole.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore adolescent female athletes' use of social media and electronic communication in relation to their sport experiences and teammate dynamics. Findings suggested that social media and electronic communication played a consistent and prominent role in athletes' sports experience. While not all athletes engaged with social media to the same extent, with athletes reporting between 3 and 10 hours per day on social media, they all reported using some form of electronic communication with teammates. Electronic communication was mostly used to share logistical information regarding soccer; however, social media platforms were also used to develop friendships with new players, build trust with teammates, and sometimes used as part of athletes' soccer branding on a secondary Instagram account to highlight their skills. Parents and coaches were cautious about athletes' engagement in social media and electronic communication, indicating that it could be potentially detrimental for team dynamics, with particular concerns regarding friendship cliques. Athletes, however, seemed to view subgroups within their team as simply an extension of closer friendship groups that adolescents develop in all settings, not just in sport.

Given that female adolescent athletes in Canada may drop out of sport due to interpersonal challenges such as not feeling welcome on their team (Canadian Women and Sport, 2020), the current findings indicate that social media and electronic communication could be used to build trust and relationships among teammates that could, in turn, lead to continued participation (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2009). Furthermore, Bruner et al. (2017) found that athletes who felt similar to teammates had more positive experiences in sport; adding to this line of research, engaging with teammates via electronic communication could be a way for athletes to communicate shared interests that builds a sense of similarity and friendship.

Athletes also discussed that they built stronger friendships with a select number of teammates and tended to communicate more often with these individuals via electronic devices. Research examining in-person peer relationships (e.g., Smith, 1999), has shown that adolescents develop a wider peer group but also form a closer, more intimate relationship with one best friend (Parker et al., 2006). As such, while social media and electronic communication can assist in the development of peer groups, these forms of engagement are not necessarily the *cause* of friendship groups within any given sports

team (Brown, 2004), but provide adolescents the opportunity to continue 'offline' relationships with selected teammates in a virtual setting. These findings are in line with Nesi et al.'s (2018a) conclusions that social media can transform the frequency and immediacy of peer relationships. However, given that athletes felt they needed to be on social media to be accepted more broadly by their peers, there could be detrimental effects for adolescent athletes who do not use social media, who may be at risk of being excluded or not enjoying sport if they do not fit the 'peer norm' (Kelly et al., 2018).

Athletes' preferences to engage in electronic communication with teammates may aid in their social development by providing additional opportunities to build trust and friendships. Such a conclusion lends well to social identity theory, as athletes who engage more with their team on social media have reported a stronger sense of belonging and identify strongly with their sports team (Kim & Kim, 2019; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Trepte & Loy, 2017). Importantly, team dynamics may become more complex as athletes engaged in the team's Snapchat group but also engaged in online conversations with smaller groups of teammates with whom they shared similar interests. The presence of multiple subgroups could enable athletes to identify as part of the team, despite lacking relationships with particular teammates. More specifically, the presence of subgroups may enable less well-acquainted or dissimilar athletes to maintain a strong sense of in-group ties to the team without forming friendships with all players (Cameron, 2004). Further research would be needed to explore whether athletes' sense of belonging and identification with the team is impacted by their level of engagement with teammates via these online platforms.

Despite the fact that the development of friendship groups is a normal part of sport and adolescent life (Martin et al., 2015), in this study, there was a strong discordance between coach/parent and athlete views of social media and electronic communication, with coaches and parents referring to social media subgroups as *cliques*. Parent and coaches' concerns are warranted, as there is some evidence that social media can have a negative impact on adolescent relationships with consequences such as cyberbullying and social isolation (Allen et al., 2014; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). However, there was little evidence to conclude that electronic communication is inherently detrimental to the current sample of female adolescent athletes' sports experiences, given that athletes, parents, and coaches all commented that their team environment was very positive. Participants could only speculate as to how social media *could* influence team dynamics in negative ways.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that some parents may discourage social media use as part of a wider effort to maintain their role as the authority figure within the family dynamic, particularly when there is a large gap in

technological knowledge between parents and children (Schofield Clark, 2009). Finally, there is evidence that social media apps, such as Snapchat, may be used by adults (coaches) to groom adolescents in sport (Sanderson & Weathers, 2020), which may explain why parents and coaches may have concerns regarding athletes' online behaviors, especially if they are not privy to their child's activities online. In light of athletes' positive perspectives and use of social media within their team, there may be a need for stakeholders (parents, coaches, and athletes) to have open discussions about the uses and effects of social media in order to identify and address parents' concerns, as well as create safe spaces in which athletes can report negative experiences.

Participants provided several recommendations for coaches and athletes to navigate the complexities of social media and electronic communication within sports teams. For instance, some athletes used social media to create a digital resume for potential soccer scholarships in the future, and athletes felt that teams could also use social media for promotion and recruitment of other local athletes. However, online marketing through social media raised concerns with coaches, who felt that sport scouts may use social media to indirectly communicate with athletes who otherwise are protected under university scholarship and recruitment guidelines (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020). Considering this, parents and coaches felt there should be a code of conduct developed for the use of social media in youth sport. Specifically, they discussed a need to develop policies that outline how electronic communication is monitored by sports organizations, as well as outlining expectations regarding the use of devices in sports settings. Alongside social media policies, coaches and parents should work with athletes to guide and support their development of professional online identities, such as an Instagram profile for soccer, but also provide athletes autonomy to express themselves in online spaces (Pitt, Bell, et al., 2021). As such, more work is needed to understand how adolescent athletes use social media to promote their sports development, and the role of coaches and parents in both supporting and monitoring these methods for pursuit of a sporting career.

Elite sports teams use social media as a means of promoting their teams (Frederick et al., 2017), but currently, many youth sports teams do not have clear policies that athletes, coaches, and parents must adhere to regarding the use of social media and electronic communication. While athletes felt that they should oversee the team's group chat, most acknowledged that coaches would need to intervene if bullying or negative comments were made via electronic communication. Future research is needed to explore how policies that may exist in education settings, for example, policies that prevent teachers from communicating with children directly on social media (Rodesiler,

2017), could be applied or inform a youth sport policy in Canada. In addition, more research is needed to determine the types of policies that would benefit sports organizations, and how team dynamics may be impacted by the enforcement of policies surrounding electronic communication.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

There are several limitations that should be considered with this research. First, the current sample only included 10 players from one team, and the perspectives of this subset of players may not be reflective of the entire team or other soccer teams. Second, athletes were not asked about certain aspects of their social media and electronic communication habits, such as using devices before bedtime. This information could be critical to understanding teammate relationships via social media, as research suggests that adolescents may use social media at nighttime due to fear of missing out on peer interactions, despite known sleep costs (Scott et al., 2019). Third, as this research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible that athletes' time spent on electronic communication and social media may be inflated by additional time spent away from peers or due to increased online learning and virtual meetings. Athletes' experiences with social media in their sports team may differ when athletes return to in-person training, particularly as the athletes interviewed during COVID-19 felt online communication was an insufficient alternative to in-person relationships (Pitt, Hock, et al., 2021).

Furthermore, although social media and electronic communication may lead to positive teammate dynamics, participants in the current sample identified that they could not speak to the potential negative effects of social media due to their positive team culture. As such, further research is needed in a variety of team cultures to explore how social media may be used in different settings and between athletes with possibly fewer positive relationships. In addition, researchers could look to understand how the negative effects of social media engagement, such as bullying and depression (Boers et al., 2019; Kelly et al., 2018), may occur among adolescent female athletes who engage more or less in electronic communication with their teammates. Finally, all athletes in the sample engaged in the team's social media group-chat, which may represent a social media "in-group." The views of athletes who were not part of the group chat may be different or less positive than "in-group" members. As such, there is a need to explore the role of social media and electronic communication in teammate relationships with athletes who do and do not participate in group-chats, as well as athletes who do not use social media altogether.

Conclusion

The findings from the current research provide a first step in understanding how social media use and electronic communication can impact team dynamics and relationships. Recommendations were made based on athlete, parent, and coaches' perspectives and experiences, including helping athletes to foster positive relationships with teammates, to take ownership of communicating logistical information within their team, and also to consider the need for developing a policy around the use of electronic communication in the sports setting. In light of the ever-changing nature of social media and technological communication, and the growing use of electronic devices among adolescents (Bucksch et al., 2016), there is a need to continue researching how adolescent athletes' engagement with social media impacts their development and relationships in sport. Although we acknowledge research that has documented the potentially negative effects of engaging in social media and electronic communication for adolescents (e.g., Kelly et al., 2018), the current sample of adolescent female athletes predominantly focused on the usefulness of social media for developing friendships with teammates that translated to trust between teammates on the soccer pitch. As such, future research could investigate the role of electronic communication in team dynamics across a variety of sports teams, particularly in teams in which the sports culture is possibly more volatile.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material is available online with this article.

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