RACKING UP THE TWITTER POINTS:
HOW PROFESSIONAL HOCKEY PLAYER IDENTITIES ARE AFFECTED BY TWITTER USAGE

by

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Abstract

In this thesis, I examine the use of Twitter by NHL athletes to determine how and in what ways professional hockey players’ personal and professional identities are shaped by their use of this medium. I explore the current cultural moment surrounding the lives of NHL athletes, focusing on the increasingly blurred line between their private and professional identities. By grounding my analysis of their Twitter use in a new labour context that is academically situated betwixt the literatures on media studies, celebrity culture and identity presentation, I show that participation in this medium allows both athletes and fans to actively reshape their own and each others’ identities, constructing a new set of standards for professional hockey players that takes into consideration the heightened demand for access to the behind-the-scenes of their lives. The ability of professional hockey players to interact with fans and media on Twitter is also creating new types relationships and producing new discourses for the typical hockey player identity, and the labour this career involves. Finally, through interviews with NHL players, I draw out their motives for using Twitter, their understanding of the impact of their interaction with fans on the perceptions those fans have of their professional identity, and their desire for work-life balance as their professional and personal identities seemingly merge on Twitter in a postmodern labour context fuelled by heightened celebrity culture.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Context

As social media has become an essential part of the marketing and communications toolbox in professional sport, the life and work experiences of professional hockey players have also been altered. By capitalizing on the potential of social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, the National Hockey League (NHL) is attempting to bring the fan experience online to “grow the game in a changing media culture” (Wyshynski, 2009). Indeed, the League, its teams, and its athletes are all trying to leverage further ways to engage their fans, even as they also struggle to grasp the nature of this new and evolving industry (Maul, 2009).

Because of the increasingly ubiquitous presence of social networking in North American culture, fans with a basic technological understanding and Internet access have become connected to others across physical and geographical boundaries. Seamlessly integrated with more traditional publicity channels such as television advertising, the seemingly organic pervasiveness of the NHL’s new media campaigns has facilitated the integration of these tools in the professional hockey marketplace, encouraging both athletes and fans to become content producers as well as consumers (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). Athletes have also embraced social media as a branding tool and have begun to redefine the traditional hockey player image of a humble, “good old” Canadian boy that has been perpetuated over the years by NHL advertising campaigns and sponsorship agreements. Both major and minor hockey celebrities strive to increase their online presence, accessibility and interactivity with fans by publicly broadcasting their identities as professional athletes; as they do so, they also seek to heighten their value in the sports industry marketplace (Adelson, 2012; Horn, 2011; Hutchins & Rowe, 2012).
Drawing on interviews, media texts, and secondary literature, the objective of this thesis is therefore to explore the current cultural context in which professional hockey players operate, with consideration of the implications that their social media use has on their individual identity as it is performed in both their private and public lives. Specifically, the thesis focuses on NHL players’ use of Twitter (www.twitter.com), a popular interactive social media microblogging tool that allows users (tweeters) to post 140-character status updates publicly or privately on the Twitter.com website. Each update, or tweet, can contain a variety of content, from basic text to links. Several third-party tools also facilitate the integration of photo and video content with tweets, allowing users who subscribe to the tweeter’s feed (followers) to more easily interact with the tweeter and his or her content, whether by replying to it or forwarding it (retweeting) on their own feed to their own followers. All tweets, including replies and retweets, are public and accessible online to users who are not subscribed to Twitter, unless the tweeter elects to make his or her feed private and accessible to authorised users only. Twitter users can also use hashtags (created by adding the number symbol directly ahead of the text, e.g., #hashtag) to make a word or expression (typed without spaces or punctuation between composing words, e.g., #ThisHashtag) more searchable or easier for others to track in real time through third-party tools. This is a particularly important facet for live tweeting, as tweeters will use a team’s standardised tag (e.g., #Habs) to contribute to and follow partisan discussions.

Twitter is the favourite social network for athletes as this medium is “unfiltered,” “instantaneous,” and “simple” (Adelson, 2012; Horn, 2011; Hutchins & Rowe, 2012; Sanderson, 2013). Additionally, Twitter has become “an epicenter – perhaps the epicenter – of sports news, reaction and discussion” (Adelson, 2012), and the readily available statistics, such as the number of tweets and followers, tempts athletes’ competitive natures (Horn, 2011). Athletes who take to Twitter desire to express their opinions and seek the attention of their fans, who in turn desire the
behind-the-scenes access tweeting provides (Adelson, 2012; Horn, 2011; Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). However, as with any form of public communication, athletes are reminded by team representatives and managers to be cautious about getting caught up in the immediacy of the medium, and to use “common sense” when tweeting to avoid negative repercussions, scandals, and backlash, whether from fans, mainstream media, or league officials (B. Geoffrion, personal communication, October 16, 2012; C. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013; Horn, 2011, NHL Social Media Policy, personal communication, March 15, 2012; Sanderson, 2013). Still, Twitter remains an effective way for athletes to communicate with fans without going through traditional media intermediaries (Horn, 2011). Twitter also allows athletes to promote and emphasize aspects of their identity that would be difficult to transmit through traditional media channels, and to build personas and cultivate fan followings (Sanderson, 2013).

**Rationale**

I came to this thesis topic through a personal interest in the use of Twitter by NHL athletes. I have a background in journalism and communications, and worked as a reporter and editor throughout college and my undergraduate degree, often writing sports-related stories. I was also employed as a freelance broadcast technician for a variety of live sporting events, including the NHL’s most storied radio and television partner, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s *Hockey Night in Canada*. This, coupled with my personal exploration of and appreciation for new media, and a particular interest in the rapprochement created by social media use, led me to pursue a master’s programme where I could further develop my understanding of how these two interests intersected.

My decision to study Twitter use by NHL players was also influenced by my lens as a fan of the sport who craved more of the behind-the-scenes access that my job afforded me, and this despite having long abandoned the fairytale-like idolatry of the professional sport industry that I
had developed in my younger years. Still, my impressions of professional hockey as an industry remained mostly warm, and so I attentively observed as my favourite league and team delved into the world of social media in an attempt to further tempt their fans into buying in to their product, whether via game tickets, merchandise, or by selling the experience of being a fan of professional hockey. In this context, I wondered how both fans and athletes felt about the relationships they were building via Twitter interactions, and if either of these groups had noticed a change in their own perceptions of the sport, its teams, its fans, and its athletes as a result of their use of this networking tool. At the time, my career goal was to work in the media relations department of a professional sport league or team. I therefore sought to examine an issue that would further my understanding of the context in which I was to work. Consequently, I decided that investigating digital identity from an athlete’s perspective was the most achievable and useful topic on which to focus my research. As such, I chose to focus my thesis on determining how and in what ways professional hockey players’ personal and professional identities were being shaped by their use of Twitter.

Shortly after settling on a thesis question, I accepted a full-time position with a professional hockey team in the American Hockey League, the NHL’s top development league. This new environment resulted in a slower pace in terms of thesis progress, mostly because, as I finally overwhelmingly understood, employment in the professional sports industry, especially in a media-related position, is virtually a 24/7 job. Nevertheless, this personal experience added to my understanding of the context I was attempting to explore and understand through my thesis.

After leaving my job at the end of the 2011-2012 hockey season, I revisited my data collection plan. Originally, I had intended on doing a close reading of two current NHL players’ Twitter streams so as to be able to discuss the specific content I had collected and analysed during their subsequent in-depth interviews. The objective was to obtain “regular” everyday content available
on the participant’s public Twitter stream, along with any replies and retweets to and from the player’s account, as well as associated data such as the content of links or pictures. However, due to the NHL’s implementation of a more restrictive social media policy prior to the 2011-2012 season, which affected the Twitter culture in which its players and fans operated, and the data collection dates falling in a busy time in the selected players’ team schedule, each player posted no more than 2 tweets within the 18-hour collection period. The data did not meet my expectations, as a preliminary analysis showed that very little information could be gleaned from these tweets, and I continued to stumble over unexpected obstacles such as the lockout that led to the cancelation of half of the 2012-2013 NHL season, a period during which team media relations personnel, who were to assist me in recruiting interviewees, were technically forbidden from speaking to contracted players.

As a result, I reformulated my thesis questions. Having pre-selected potential candidates prior to the data collection period, I had already observed their tweets and interactions over the past two NHL seasons so as to familiarise myself with the players, and had more than enough specific content to develop a set of meaningful questions for player interviews. After eventually obtaining the interviews I needed from the selected athletes, and upon reviewing the interview data I had collected, I realised that different questions had emerged, ones focused more specifically on capturing and contextualising this transitional cultural moment in the NHL.

**Research Questions**

Though branding through social media in the sports industry is an emerging field of study, it had rarely been examined from a sociological perspective. Previous studies on the use of social media in sport have been performed in the field of digital fandom in the context of the entertainment industry as well as in the newer field of celebrity studies. Professional sport
appears to exist at the intersection of these fields, which are typified by parasocial interaction\(^1\), but with the added element of athletic identity and performance. Though sport management research has been published on the Twitter content posted by professional athletes, and the literature covers the branding and sponsorship potential of tweeting athletes, very few studies have examined how athletes’ identities are shaped through Twitter usage. Additionally, most of the existing research that focuses on athletes’ use of Twitter falls short in positioning conclusions in a sociological context. As such, this thesis seeks to theorize the athlete’s perspective and experiential learning in using Twitter as a medium for identity formation and presentation in the work of sociologists such as Mark Andrejevic, danah boyd, and Zizi Papacharissi. Thus, the questions examined in this thesis are:

1. How do the co-constitutive forces of Twitter use and celebrity culture shape the public and private lives of NHL players?
2. How does the increasingly blurred line between public and private information affect athletes’ decisions to tweet?
3. How do professional hockey players manage and perform their identities within this emergent and dynamic cultural context?

I will address these questions by exploring the presently evolving labour context that requires athletes to work to produce and broadcast their identities on Twitter. These identities are expected to fit a particular discourse that has been created by the NHL and its fans over time. Therefore, this thesis suggests that athletes must assess the increasingly blurred line between their professional and private lives. In this thesis, I apply a theoretically rich socio-cultural lens to professional sport industry issues that are traditionally approached from a sports management point of view.

\(^1\) Parasocial interaction takes place when a fan interacts with a celebrity in a way that resembles actual social interaction, but without the existence of a personal connection or relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956, as cited in Sanderson & Kassing, 2011, p. 122).
perspective, thereby contributing a unique perspective to the literature surrounding the current cultural moment.

**Methodology**

This thesis deploys interviews and textual analysis to reconstruct and analyse the increasing pervasiveness of social media use by professional hockey players and the changing expectations this entails.

**Participant selection process.** I chose to interview two players affiliated with the Montreal Canadiens, firstly because of personal and professional connections providing easy access to these players, and secondly, because of the rich cultural context that the team’s centenarian fan base has shaped. While gender diversity was an impossibility given the homogeneity of the league, racial diversity was not achieved due to lack of access to the one visible minority on the team, as he was involved in ongoing contract negotiations at the time. The two players who were selected, Blake Geoffrion and Colby Armstrong, have differing family histories, took opposing professional paths to reach the NHL, and had a varied profile in terms of age group, marital status, years of experience in the NHL, and number of teams for which they had played. This diversity made them excellent candidates for comparison, as their statements and feelings were rooted in different lived experiences. I did consider interviewing more athletes; however, by choosing to focus on two players, I was able to delve more deeply into their backgrounds, explore their typical Twitter usage, and become familiar with their personalities prior to the interviews. This led to a richer exchange and more meaningful conversations.

**Interview process.** Both participants were interviewed during the 2012-2013 hockey season. At the time of his interview on October 16, 2012, Blake Geoffrion was playing with the Montreal Canadiens’ minor league affiliate, the Hamilton Bulldogs of the American Hockey
League, as the NHL was involved in a labour stoppage dispute. Colby Armstrong was interviewed shortly after the shortened NHL season started. The interviews lasted one hour, and included questions about general Twitter usage habits, identity performance and self-censorship, Twitter use as a professional activity, as well as questions relating to specific tweets or Twitter moments such as that season’s NHL lockout. These interviews were conducted in semi-private locations that were familiar to the participants, and free of the supervision of agents or media relations representatives. Both interviews were recorded using a personal recording device, and then transcribed manually. In accordance with the guidelines established by the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at Queen’s University, participants signed consent forms that authorized non-anonymity, including the disclosure of their names, likenesses and identities.

**Data treatment.** The data for this thesis was analysed using a grounded theory approach, though adjusted to respect the confines of the academic requirements for a Master’s thesis at Queen’s University. While traditional grounded theory as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) advises researchers to discover patterns through data analysis rather than through a literature review, I had to complete a literature review as part of my thesis proposal submission (Charmaz, 2003). This technically would not be in accordance with the idea of letting the data “talk,” which is typical of grounded theory. However, my personal involvement in the field of sports media allowed for this literature review to be influenced by the inductive reasoning strategies Glaser and Strauss recommend, and therefore, allowed for grounded theory to be used as a primary tool for analysis in this thesis. In a sense, I had already applied the principles of grounded theory before determining that this theoretical frame was as a good fit for my work. Additionally, the delays in researching and completing my thesis led to my simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis, a primary characteristic for using grounded theory, according to Charmaz (2003). Further, the circumstances surrounding the completion of my thesis encouraged a research
process that naturally lent itself to using grounded theory’s distinguishing feature, constant comparison (Charmaz, 2003). Indeed, constant comparison was the primary technique through which I read and contextualized the data I had collected.

While transcribing the interview data, trends and themes emerged within and across interviews. These initial comparisons and analyses were noted in memo format. This grounded theory technique allowed for codes and categories to be developed as ideas that could then be assessed for assumptions and interrelations, both mine and those of the interviewee (Charmaz, 2003). The conceptual categories that emerged at this stage – identity, interactions, labour, performance, and Twitter technology – were then used to guide line-by-line coding of the interview data. Each paragraph of the transcript was numbered, and then isolated at every turn of the conversation, so that while some statements were presented for coding along with related sequential statements, most statements were coded as standalone pieces. These statements were coded in physical format, with specific colours highlighting fragments of speech that related to each aforementioned category. Fragments could be highlighted in multiple colours to indicate relatedness to multiple categories within the same segment. Additionally, focused coding principles were applied on a line-by-line basis, to encourage selective, analytical and comparable codes that exposed any preconceptions about the topics discussed (Charmaz, 2003). Glaser and Strauss’ “constant comparative methods” were also used to integrate these categories by “delineating their relationships, delimiting the scope and range of the emerging” analysis (1976, p. 105, as cited in Charmaz, 2003, p. 104).

After each paragraph was treated through line-by-line coding, I used memos to identify and clarify the selected codes, such as “awe at technological capabilities,” so as to better be able to see relationships between bits of data. As Charmaz (2003) explains, “Through focused coding, you can move across interviews and observations and compare people’s experiences, actions and
interpretations” (p. 92). These memos were indeed a useful inductive strategy for discovering and elucidating comparisons, both with previous statements made by a single participant and with statements made by the other participant, whether or not those statements had been treated at that time. Verbatim material was included in memos when necessary, providing the foundation for the abstract analysis and detailed development that grounded theorists use to “demonstrate the connection between the data and analysis” (Charmaz, 2003, p. 108). Memoing also provided guidance for additional data collection, from sources other than the study participants, by identifying gaps in the developing analysis and making assumptions, relationships, and processes explicit. Finally, memos were focused on integrating and grounding analysis in the participants’ lived experiences.

**Chapter Outline**

In Chapter Two, I theorise and contextualise my thesis, positioning my analysis among the literatures on media, identity performance, and celebrity studies. I also describe the new labour context in which current professional hockey players operate throughout their careers, focusing on Twitter use as a work-related task, while situating the increased access to athletes and their personalities within a changing culture that promotes decreased privacy for public figures. Chapter Three provides the necessary background to understand the statements made by the players I interviewed for this thesis. In Chapter Four, I explore the significance of Twitter use in the new labour context in the NHL, examining the struggles players face with the increasingly blurring line between their public and private lives. Chapter Five sets the stage for a redefinition of the typical hockey player persona. This chapter explores specific examples of Blake Geoffrion and Colby Armstrong enacting the expected values for a professional hockey player on Twitter while performing their own personal and professional identities. It focuses particularly on their interactions with other Twitter users. Finally, Chapter Six will provide an overview of my thesis
conclusions and future research possibilities.
Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This thesis addresses the current cultural moment in the NHL, the new labour context it entails, and the shifting character of professional hockey player identity, as situated in the fields of media studies and celebrity culture. Until now, the literatures relating to digital fandom, celebrity identity, and social media use in the professional sports industry have largely existed as parallel to each other, with limited research exploring the perspectives of athletes who use Twitter in this new context. Therefore, this thesis is informed by three key theoretical frameworks, particularly in their relation to what some researchers call the “networked self,” or the concepts of identity negotiation and self-presentation through social connections in the digital age (Papacharissi, 2011): Karl Marx’s notions of labour, production, and surveillance; Michel Foucault’s understandings of power relations; and Ervin Goffman’s performance theory. I draw on these approaches, and adapt them to the current media and labour contexts in the NHL, to begin to put these literatures and frameworks in conversation with each other.

Media: Everything old is new again

Historically, media and the news industry have undergone so-called revolutions as new media are added to the mix. First, newspapers had to adapt to the possibility of live reporting through broadcast radio; next, television joined radio as an option for consumers; then, the Internet further complicated the market as it became increasingly interactive, forcing the television industry to adapt to the reality of an interactive, 24/7 news cycle (Andrejevic, 2004). Similarly, modes of consumption, production, and cultural practice have changed over time, creating cultural shifts at each transitioning moment (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 8). In other words,
there is nothing new about the types of thoughts, behaviours, and actions we are seeing in the current new media revolution; though the specific ideas may be new, the addition of social media is not a rupture between old and new media but instead a cultural shift (Andrejevic, 2004). The changes affected by this particular shift include the materialization of a context in which information is available through media, traditional and new, at any time of day or night, and from the proximity of a handheld device (Hutchins & Mikoza, 2010). This compression of time and space leads to a shrinking, or blurring, of the boundaries between private and public (Murthy, 2012). Moreover, the literature shows that consumers may have access to more than one screen at once, increasing the promise of interactivity and exploitation from marketers and other stakeholders in media industries (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 4). As Mark Andrejevic explains, “the complete convergence of entertainment and consumption must be understood as one of the central goals of online commerce, and this understanding allows the logic of current practices of the cultural industry to fall into place” (2004, p. 43).

This thesis understands the addition of social media such as Twitter to the media mix as a cultural shift, one that can be likened to the recent “revolution” in television prompted by the development of reality television. With reality TV as with social media, both fans and celebrities find themselves “caught between the promise of an empowering form of interactivity and the potential of an increasingly exploitative one” (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 7). In this new context, both reality TV and social media “constitute spaces where individual and collective identities are expressed and negotiated through round-the-clock interaction and activity” (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 102). As such, I adapt the context of identity formation through reality TV to the same cultural shift on social media. While it may be immediately apparent how individual identities can be shaped by their appearance on reality TV shows, followers too experience a change in their personal identity by participating in reality TV fandom activities. As with Twitter, “reality
shows promise to collapse the distance that separates those on either side of the screen by cultivating the fantasy that ‘it really could be you up there on that screen,’” except that on Twitter, individuals truly can behave like celebrities without needing to first become a celebrity by engaging an audience (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 8). In addition, since the advent of 24/7 “breaking news” updates that are reminiscent of watching “Big Brother” type reality TV shows, the line between news reporting and celebrity gossip reporting is increasingly blurred. In the sport industry, celebrity gossip show TMZ announced a “TMZ Sports” division as early as 2009, officially launching it in October 2013 (Premiere Networks, 2013; Sandomir, 2009). This new context empowers sports teams and athletes to become news content producers as well as consumers, and in effect, to become their own media outlets and attempt to control media content via Twitter (Murthy, 2012). Hutchins & Rowe (2012) address this eroding boundary between news organizations and professional sport organizations, citing Australia’s News Limited’s Group Editorial Director Campbell Reid, who states,

Sporting bodies want to act as news providers themselves, so they want to restrict competition by limiting the existing news providers. There is nothing to stop sports bodies becoming media organizations that produce and distribute their own content – in fact, in the digital age the barriers to entry are low, and they are doing it already. (Proof Committee Hansard, 16 April, 2009, p.48, as cited in Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 131).

The current cultural context values immediacy, interactivity, and authenticity. Sporting bodies and even athletes themselves can now use Twitter as news providers by filling the gaps between traditional publications and broadcasting reports with undeniably accurate information about their lives (Dart, 2012). For fans, this “interactivity allows access to a reality that one-way, centralized media, could stage only as a spectacle” (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 46). In other words, the scepticism that fans might associate with external news reports fades when athletes willingly
provide information on interactive social media channels (Rein, Kotler, & Shields, 2006). As the literature shows, the nature of fandom is such that direct communications from athletes are easier to trust and accept, and therefore, are nearly always assumed to be authentic (Booth, 2010). As a result, athletes can actively engage their fans by performing the work of a media outlet through this new medium. Thus, this research contends that because the way athletes think about media has changed, especially in terms of content production through social media such as Twitter, so has the way they approach issues of time and space management (Papacharissi, 2011).

**Celebrity Culture**

Due to their mediated status, celebrity athletes are forced to negotiate between the blurred line of public and private life, with each decision they make shifting the way fans and celebrities interact with each other on a larger scale. Hutchins & Rowe (2012) purport that for fans, there is no such thing as too much information about an athlete or team in which they are interested. Indeed, while Twitter has broken barriers between fans and celebrities in terms of the potential for revelatory interactions, it has also increased the distance between fans, celebrity athletes, and other sport industry professionals by exposing athletes’ perceived elite and extravagant lifestyles. Meanwhile, fans have also benefitted from an apparent increase in meaningful interactions, just as industry stakeholders are continuing to use these perceptions to seek profits in the sport industry and across related economic sectors, and on a global scale (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012).

Truthfully, celebrity studies research shows that in the current cultural context, “fandom involves an ‘illusion of intimacy’ that aims to compensate” for the loneliness studies show we feel due to the decrease of real face-to-face intimacy in our everyday lives (Holmes & Redmond, 2006, p. 3). In other words, fan-celebrity relationships have become an important productive and affective cultural force, and are a springboard through which the social and cultural norms surrounding relationships and identity can be debated and evaluated, and even shared in our shifting society.
through large-scale, wide-reaching conversations on social media such as Twitter (Turner, 2004 in Holmes & Redmond, 2006). Further, social media have provided new spaces in which celebrities and the identities they present can be discovered, constructed, re-constructed and circulated, in effect commoditising them as media texts (Holmes & Redmond, 2006). This mediated status and the highly performative context in which celebrities appear lead to the contradictory questions that emerge from the literature and are characteristic in our current cultural moment: Is there a distinction between our private and public selves? Is Twitter use by athletes merely a new site of self-performance and public presentation? Are fans truly interacting with athletes or are celebrity confessional moments yet another ploy in the illusion of meaningful connections? (Dyer, 1986, in Holmes & Redmond, 2006). Through this lens, then, the technology of Twitter becomes in itself the site of construction of celebrity identities, providing both fans and celebrities with the capability of producing these identities (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

**Celebrification.** The phenomenon of celebrity, in sociological terms, positions all celebrities within broader economic, political and social networks (van Krieken, 2012). Turner (2004) defines a celebrity by the way an individual is represented and talked about; the process through which an individual becomes a commodity; and as an aspect of culture in which the individual is constantly being “reinscribed and reformulated” (as cited in Marwick & boyd, 2011). As the literature states, the production of celebrity depends not on a celebrity’s achievements, talents or virtues, but on “the more abstract form of capital that celebrities have gathered in themselves – attention” (van Krieken, 2012, p.61). In other words, it is not the celebrity’s identity, whether as an inspiring artist or a record-breaking athlete that constitutes them as a celebrity, it is their ability to grab and maintain attention socially, in increasingly large pockets (van Krieken, 2012). Therefore, a celebrity can be defined as anyone with high visibility around whom a great deal of economic activity revolves, and “whose name has attention-getting,
interest-riveting and profit-generating value” (Rein, Kotler, Stoller, 1997, as cited in van Krieken, 2012, p. 58). With this interpretation of attention-capital as the key to celebrification, the power relations between celebrities and their audiences can be understood as complex, multi-layered, and evolving in multiple directions at the same time (van Krieken, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Without the attention of their audiences, celebrities are in a sense non-existent; thus, both audiences and celebrities are interested in blurring the boundaries between public and private life (van Krieken, 2012). However, for celebrities, the tension between their right to privacy and freedom of expression “can be better understood as revolving around the limits to the freedom to make use of a public personality’s attention-capital, when they themselves have no interest in increasing their own visibility” (van Krieken, 2012, p. 76). As this thesis shows, the question for each celebrity is not whether to participate in the blurring of the line between public and private life, but how much privacy to forgo, and where exactly the boundary between the public and private spheres lie for that particular individual in that individual’s context (van Krieken, 2012). This research suggests that this boundary is co-constituted by fans and celebrities through the shared experience of using interactive media such as Twitter, in effect creating the illusion of a face-to-face relationship, with the give-and-take that such relationships entail (Horton & Wohl, 1956, as cited in van Krieken, 2012, p. 83).

Professional athlete identities are unique in that they are unavoidably public in nature and so athletes perform their roles before a wider audience than most career-related identities (Webb et al., 1998). In addition, a life in professional sports necessarily entails competition, and the public is able to weigh in on an athlete’s successes and failures, potentially affecting the impact of those outcomes (Webb et al., 1998). Twitter makes it easier for fans to do just that. Also, Twitter’s private-public forum makes inner worlds like the behind-the-scenes, “personal” lives of professional athletes available for others to interpret, especially when athletes tweet themselves
Barnett, 2009). Most of the time, their audience is a group of people who may not know them or each other but who share a common interest in the sport or the athlete (boyd, 2007). As boyd (2007) explains, in unmediated environments like face-to-face conversations, boundaries and audiences are structurally defined: the audience is restricted by time and geographical presence. In mediated environments, like Twitter conversations, boyd (2007) suggests the need to consider all the people who may experience or witness reproductions of a specific time or space event; a potential audience is consequently exponentially larger, invisible and impossible to constrain. These experiences may be both synchronous (tweeter and tweet-reader are online at the same time, while the tweet is being sent) or asynchronous (tweet-reader is online after the tweet has been sent by the tweeter), and may take place externally to the original medium (Murthy, 2012).

According to the literature, athletes on Twitter therefore need to conceptualize their audiences when they are deciding how to present their identities online, and so this thesis puts forward that Twitter and tweeting could be approached as a performance of self-identity and athletic identity. Players who participate in social networking are often thought to “construct identities for a dual audience, those intimate friends whose favor they seek [people “in” the industry, like other players, team officials, and sponsors] and a broader public audience whose purpose for viewing cannot be known [fans, media, potential sponsors, anti-fans]” (Barnett, 2009, p. 201). This multiplicity causes a more complicated and enhanced identity presentation process as athletes may elect to develop different “selves” to protect their privacy, or their “real” self. Barnett (2009) focuses on adolescent identity formation, but his theory of postmodern assemblage can be applied to athletic identity formation as well. By adopting a postmodern approach to identity rather than attempting to construct one “true” self as per modern thinking, athletes may be able to more easily respond to these multiple audiences and present an identity with several potentially diverse voices that live comfortably in one individual who passes through multiple
worlds, both personal and professional (Barnett, 2009). My research suggests that Twitter may allow for the various aspects of a professional hockey player’s personality to come together in the performance of this professional identity (Sanderson, 2013). Since athletes are caught in a continual postmodern state of identity formation and because of the precarious nature of their industry, they may succumb to the very real consumerist pressure of revealing information about the self they wish to keep hidden in an attempt to mould their identities to fit market demands for the professional hockey player persona myth (Barnett, 2009).

It comes as no surprise, then, that celebrities reveal “the real person ‘behind’ the fabricated personality” in “confessional moments” through Twitter, with its inherently self-reflexive and interactive nature, as well as in tabloids and magazines (Littler, 2004 in Holmes & Redmond, 2006, p. 209). Regardless of the message sent, tweets are expressive and of a personal nature; they work best when they convey affective content, whether spontaneous or thoroughly thought through (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 77). However, these purportedly authentic expressions of identity that bring the celebrity into being through their ability to attract attention-capital also lead to an “affective and emotional connectivity” for fans, further investing them in the co-construction of celebrity identities that they therefore help to authenticate (Holmes & Redmond, 2006, 2012, p. 209). Holmes & Redmond (2006) use different vocabulary than van Krieken (2012) but with a similar conclusion, stating, “the famous person exists only at the level of representation, cut free from any existential potentiality or possibility” (Holmes & Redmond, 2006, p. 209). This theory supports the idea that blurring private and public lines could be beneficial to some celebrities. Indeed, as van Krieken (2012) explains, even historically, the public interest in who famous people such as Queen Victoria and Prince Albert “‘really’ were, the human beings behind the public image, was both a benefit and an unwelcome intrusion into their private lives” (p. 4).
Commodification. Undeniably, athletes have become commodities that, like stocks on the market, can see their value increase and decrease arbitrarily, and can be traded or sold by their teams (Sage, 1998, p. 212). Because the new information society is characterised by instantaneous gratification, sports stars have come to be treated like other North American celebrities in that their lives too have become a product to be consumed by fans and the general public alike (Horne, 2006). In this context, “everything from one’s daily happenings or musings become part of a publicity-driven culture” that helps athletes market themselves through their tweets, in effect selling themselves through self-commodification (Murthy, 2012). The fan, in order to build a complete image of his or her sports hero, craves lifestyle information pertaining to the NHL player, and “the star (off stage, screen, music or sport) becomes known not for what they did (performing extraordinary deeds) but who they were, and what they were like”’ (Horne, 2006, p. 79). Additionally, sports management research suggests that the sports celebrity has cross-promotional potential since NHL players are no longer just athletes but also entertainers, and the fans can read whatever they want into branded stars like Sidney Crosby, for example, thereby enhancing the construction of the Crosby phenomenon (Horne, 2006, p. 82). NHL players using Twitter are therefore feeding the consumerist machine by providing their followers with inside information in an engaging fashion and filling the gaps left by mainstream media as the fans attempt to build their personal understanding of the athlete’s personality and lifestyle (Boyle, 2000; Horne, 2006). However, though the athletes are elevated to iconic status and lauded as role models, the stereotypical roles prescribed to them rarely live up to expectations (Boyle, 2000). Fame, therefore, does come at a price, as athletes learn when the media, whether mass or social, are quick to jump on their flaws and turn them from heroes to fallen angels and sometimes, villains of sorts, symbols of all that is wrong in the sporting industry (Boyle, 2000; Sanderson, 2013).
Before the rise of globalised consumer sports, fans and athletes used to be more closely associated on an economic level as well as on a personal level (Quinn, 2009): Players were like “us” not an “other.” As player salaries increased, so did the separation between the two groups. Though there is a general acceptance of the large sums of money professional hockey players now earn due to fans’ greater understanding of market pressures and issues, the personal and personalised relationship between them has eroded (Quinn, 2009). In embracing social media, athletes are attempting to bridge the gap between sport product and consumer by reaching out to fans on a personal level, implementing fan feedback mechanisms, all the while enhancing their own personal worth by reinforcing athlete identity stereotypes (Leggio, 2010; Quinn, 2009). The rise of celebrity culture may have created distance between athletes and their fans as the former were socially constructed as heroes and role models, but interactive technologies like Twitter have certainly narrowed the gap between the two groups (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012).

**Digital Fandom**

The first phase of digital fandom emerged in a Web 1.0 environment, where web pages were static, one-way texts that made no attempt to involve the reader (“Web 1.0”). Fandom in this digital era was mostly composed of shrine-like websites to particular players or teams, with some sites including guestbooks for visitors to leave comments. Though email, message boards and basic chat programmes did exist, they were only used by a select group of highly skilled early technology adopters (“Web 2.0”). As these tools became increasingly accessible and popularised, Web 2.0 emerged. This phase of digital fandom, which is still ongoing, includes the considerable evolution to immediate interactive platforms like social networking services and the integration of audio and video components. With Web 2.0, the reader is in a relatively greater position of power because he or she is actively producing the text rather than simply consuming it (Ironstone, Leitch, Onyango, & Unruh, n.d.). Fandom in this era may transcend offline boundaries such as
geography, community influences, and historical belonging that usually limit someone’s capacity to become a fan of a different player or team (Longhurst, Bagnall, & Savage, 2007). The globalising effect of web technology also allows fans to more effectively follow the activities of players and teams on the other side of the planet than they could through television and other mass media (Crawford, 2003).

The literature implies that Twitter, and the use of social networking services in general, can therefore be interpreted as a postmodern activity. Twitter’s postmodern Web 2.0 environment allows for a constant process of re-interpretation of meanings. The fluid yet fragmented interactions of tweeters make them both text consumers and producers, effectively erasing the possibility of a read-only audience in Twitter-based digital fandom. The act of tweeting while watching a sporting event on TV or online is undeniably postmodern in that fans are actively contributing to reshaping the discourses being developed in relation to that sporting event even while the event is still taking place. This is especially observable when considering not only tweets from fans worldwide but also Twitter content about a particular sporting event produced by reporters covering that game, by the digital media specialists tweeting on behalf of the teams playing that game, and by athletes involved in that game or sport. Sport, in this sense, is “a simultaneously embodied and mediated experience, a dominant form of media content and representation globally, and a site where social media technologies are used for varying purposes” (Hutchins & Mikosza, 2010).

Though social networking relationships exist in a virtual space, like fandom, they can be just as “real” or genuine as offline relationships in their effects on others and impact on the individual (Booth, 2010; Guimarães, 2005; Mackay, 2005). The concept of “telecopresence” is important to consider here. Coined by Zhao (2005), this term describes a disembodied state that allows people in different geographical locations to communicate in real time through electronic
mediation in a corporeal interaction format; the people interacting are present in person at their local sites but connected by an electronic proximity rather than a physical proximity (p. 388). The literature states that this kind of interaction is characterised by the lack of non-verbal cues, which in face-to-face interactions are essential markers of authenticity, helping to guide our reactions and responses and build our identity (Zhao, 2005). However, mediated environments like social networks offer different signals that can reveal an inauthentic identity, such as contradictory statements, silences and omissions of commentary (Murthy, 2012; boyd, 2007). The spontaneity, speed and immediacy of Twitter interactions have also helped integrate them in the everyday flow of social life (Hutchins, 2011). In this thesis, I apply these theories of Twitter as a media for postmodern identity formation and presentation to fan-athlete relationships. Research has shown that live spectator sports are the most popular setting for the use of mobile text messaging after ‘crowded public transport’ (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu, & Sey, 2007, in Hutchins, 2011); this thesis draws on mobile messaging research and applies it to the use of one-to-many and many-to-many multimedia status update technologies such as Twitter. Indeed, as McQuire (1999) argues, “Twitter's importance stems from the fact that it is both a constitutive part of contemporary media experience, and a frame through which this experience is filtered and understood” (as cited in Hutchins, 2011, p. 153).

Additionally, though some of the information fans seek to obtain may be easily accessible via other sources, research in the field of sport management has shown that the immediacy, ease, and unique interface of Twitter privileges it in some fans’ minds (Horne, 2006). Also, it is worth noting that some of this requested information used to be available exclusively to media or simply did not reach fans because publication and on-air deadlines made them irrelevant and untimely for general release in the traditional media cycle (Rein et al., 2006). However, not all fans have made Twitter their one-stop shop for all things NHL, and even those who have tend to use it in
conjunction with other resources, both online and offline (Hampp, 2010; Hutchins, 2011; Steinberg, 2009). Moreover, Twitter usage is clearly not exempt from issues related to class, accessibility and the need for a technological understanding that goes beyond basic digital literacy. Still, as audiences become increasingly interactive contributors through public tools like Twitter, sport consumption has become a “key source of personal identity – both material and symbolic, that is it meets needs and it expresses a person’s place in the world” (Horne, 2006, p. 71). New media research affirms that some fans may use Twitter to “engage in a postmodern version of spectatorship and fan affiliation… which offers a curious form of resistance to the mediated forms of information and attitudes fed to fans by mainline information sources” (Stoddart, 1997, p. 96; as cited in Horne, 2006, p. 64), and so Twitter becomes a more trusted source of information for some NHL fans. Fans use Twitter to quickly spread the sport experience throughout the digital community, allowing for a relatively unfiltered democratic participation in the sport that deepens the relationship between that sport and the fan and effectively eradicates non-interactive audiences (Rein et al., 2006).

In my research, I have observed sports fans using Twitter on a day-to-day basis to (a) communicate with each other by cheering for a common team or player, “bashing” an opposing team or player, basking in reflected glory (BIRG), cutting off reflected failure (CORF), or simply discussing the unfolding of the game; (b) discuss media reports pertaining to the sport or their favourite team and players; (c) ask for team information or read and share tweets about team practices and line-ups; or (d) “talk” to players by commenting on their play, asking them questions or replying to their tweets. Usually, tweets to players are a one-way communication as opposed to interactions, since the players do not tend to reply to fans. While some players do retweet fan comments (often upon request), the conversation is not furthered in a meaningful manner, and so I would not consider these types of interactions to be two-way communications.
(see Mezzy, 2011). My research uses these observations to extend the existing literature, and to infer that digital fandom, like offline fandom, is determined by fan identification levels. According to Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman (1997), fan identification can be defined as “the personal commitment and emotional involvement customers have with a sport organization” (p. 15). Sutton et al. outline three discernable levels of fan identification: low (social fans), medium (focused fans) and high (vested fans). From a marketing perspective, a heightened level of fan identification usually corresponds to increased game attendance, merchandise purchases, and team support through the good, the bad and the ugly (Sutton et al., 1997). Therefore, this research assumes that higher Twitter activity relating to a particular sport, team or player would indicate a higher level of fan identification, which would be an economically beneficial result.

Similarly, Twitter also provides fans with a new way to connect to their favourite sports. Rein et al. (2006) outline five different sport fan identification entryways: (a) participation (in the sport or fantasy leagues); (b) on-site experience (attending a game); (c) media (traditional or new, this is the most accessible entryway); (d) word of mouth (including via social networking services or mobile services like texting); and (e) mentoring (via personal relationships). Sports management literature shows that Twitter use in sport generally enhances all of these entryways, and therein lies its potential for sports marketers as well as for fans; it “not only connect[s] the sport to the fan but [it] provide[s] up-to-the-minute information and a more detailed and personalized experience than television” (Rein et al., 2006, p. 70). In the current cultural context, Twitter has completely changed the way several fans access some of these entryways, particularly on-site experience, word of mouth, and mentoring. Though a fan could previously experience a game through live television coverage, social media adds the additional element of understanding the game from the perspective of a fan on location rather than just that of a corporate
commentator. Also, as this thesis shows, “new media have begun to compensate for live word of mouth and fans now have unprecedented opportunities to communicate with the sport and each other technologically” (Rein et al., 2006, p. 71). This increase in connections has also led to the development of more potent relationships between fans of the same or different fan identification levels, as well as between fans of different teams, therefore encouraging cross-fandom mentorship opportunities. As such, fans can now more easily band together across geographical and fandom boundaries, reacting to events in support of or in opposition of an athlete, team, or league. Thus, when NHL teams and athletes engage fans through Twitter, they are able to capitalise on these digital fan-to-fan interactions to help them feel a sense of belonging and active involvement with their favourite franchises and players. Market research is starting to discover that the use of such relationship-marketing tactics effectively strengthens fan identification, affiliation and activity, creating an interactive feedback loop between NHL teams and fans and producing even higher levels of fan identification. The managerial benefits of higher fan identification usually include decreased price sensitivity and decreased performance outcome sensitivity, and so it is in the best corporate interest of NHL teams to have an active and effective Twitter presence (Sutton et al., 1997). Undeniably, the existing literature tends to approach fan identification from a sport marketing perspective; however, my thesis uses these concepts to frame athlete interactions with fans on Twitter, as their intensity tends to vary based on the fandom levels of the tweeters.

Indeed, research also shows that fans are using Twitter to monitor athletes’ behaviour by sharing that athlete’s off-ice activities with or without the athlete’s knowledge, and confirming or contesting on-ice and off -ice actions by interacting with published information (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). As Sanderson & Kassing (2011) state, “mass media organizations have long relied on audience labor to strengthen media consumption processes” (Cohen, 2008; Yahr, 2007
As cited on p. 120). While athletes cannot prevent fans from photographing and videotaping them while in public places, players now need to be even more conscientious about the possibility that this footage, published through social media, can have a significant impact on their career (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Sanderson & Kassing (2011) suggest that the willingness of fans to police athletes is likely grounded in identity, as sport fan identification becomes so strongly linked to social identities for some that they “base their social belonging and self-esteem on the sports team’s success” (p. 121). Die-hard fans therefore feel the need to publicly report behaviour that may threaten their favourite team’s success because the fan’s feeling of self-worth is so interconnected with this success that compromising actions will have repercussions on both the team and the fan’s identity (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). This research fills the gap in the literature about Twitter use by fans as a monitoring media, expounding the matter through the eyes of the athletes who fans aim to police.

Furthermore, as Horton & Wohl (1956) explain, parasocial interaction occurs when a fan interacts with a celebrity “in ways that resemble actual social interaction,” though they have no personal connection or relationships (as cited in Sanderson & Kassing, 2011, p. 122). Sanderson & Kassing (2011) apply this theory to Twitter, which they describe as one of the main media through which parasocial interaction is currently evolving in sports communities:

First, fans develop strong identification towards athletes and these attachments may fuel a desire to become involved in the athlete’s media narrative (blog/tweet). And social media enable fans to physically intervene in these narratives by providing commentary, guidance, advice, and praise to athletes (p. 122). Additionally, Sanderson & Kassing (2011) purport that social engagement and interaction on social media fosters dimensions of parasocial interaction such as inspiration and affection, relational behaviours such as encouragement and praise, as well as active social interaction.
behaviours such as giving advice or displaying playfulness; it also allows fans to feel “closer” and more involved with athletes, providing an immediacy, at both temporal and psychological levels, that enhances their interactions. In this research, I explore parasocial interactions from the perspective of the athletes, showing that strong fan identification, from their perspective, likely contributes to the development of dominant athletes’ social media presence as well as to the intertwining of social media and traditional sports media that is currently taking place.

Indisputably, social media can be used as a battleground of sorts for players, organizations, and fans to disclose practices they disagree with, or voice their discontent at developments on and off the sports field. As sports reporting continues to shift towards celebrity journalism, social media allows fans to participate – and build positive attachment – by capturing and broadcasting intimate aspects of athletes’ private lives (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Plus, with more athletes choosing to promote themselves and their perspectives on social media (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012), the bonds between athletes and fans are growing (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). This thesis touches on the resulting conception of collective identity and shared experiences between the two groups, an approach that has been largely underdeveloped in the existing literature.

**Labour and Production**

*Professional hockey culture.* Due in part to the globalisation of sport and the cultural shift in the media industry, the nature of “work” is changing for hockey players in the current cultural moment. While professional sport has long been about the production of a commodity (sporting event) by exploiting other commodities (athletes, sponsors, buildings, fans), athletes now have a more active role in generating profits (Dart, 2012). One of the NHL’s greatest achievements is in constructing a discourse, culture and identity that runs so deep in our
collective minds that it positively influences young boys’ dreams to become NHL players. After this dream has been realised, the players themselves operate within the league’s established norms continuing to perpetuate these same ideological discourses on future generations of players and their fans (Robidoux, 2001). In fact, the NHL singles-out certain carefully crafted individuals based on their extraordinary on-ice performance and apparent morally irreproachable off-ice performance to do just that (Boyle, 2000). The mainstream media then helps make household names of the likes of Wayne Gretzky and Sidney Crosby, who represent the NHL’s mass of labourers to the general public. Caught up in the demanding day-to-day labour routines imposed by the league, these superstars continue to spread the “love-of-the-game” mentality they grew up with (Robidoux, 2001).

Without a doubt, Foucault would interpret these superstars as docile bodies, as they are produced by the disciplinary power of the league and its teams (Markula & Pringle, 2007) and were selected for their productive capacity to best perform the on-ice and off-ice skills associated with this role (Shogan, 1999, p. 35). Of course, players are also heavily disciplined by their teams and the league, both in terms of the strict regulations and rigorous training schedules imposed on athletes in order to maintain elite performances, and in terms of the self-mastery of the body required to stay competitive on the ice (Shogan, 1999). This is where Foucault’s theories and sport studies usually intersect: in disciplinary power, whether positive or negative, strengthening or repressive. It focuses on the control of bodies that is exercised fundamentally by means of surveillance techniques such as hierarchical observation (by coaches, scouts, managers and fellow players), timetables (structured daily routines) and “systems of rank” (earning a guaranteed spot

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2 And not girls, who have never (save for the exceptional case of goaltender Manon Rhéaume, who played one exhibition game in the NHL), been granted entry to the league.
on the roster rather than facing the threats of being benched, scratched, or even sent to the minor leagues) (Markula & Pringle, 2007, p. 39).

Though professional athletes are essential to the existence of the NHL, and although many of them earn considerable sums of money, it is important to remember that they are essentially labourers whose skills and image can be traded or sold as commodities on the NHL marketplace as their values rise and fall. Without players, there would be no sporting event and no product since it is athletic performances that attract audiences and media, or, in other words, the financial stability needed to operate the teams and league. But, as Sage (1998) explains, “professional athletes do not own or control the means of producing their athletic labor because they have no access to professional sports leagues” except through the mechanisms created by the league (p. 212). Likewise, without fans, sponsorship and other such revenue would not be great enough to afford the excessive salaries of professional hockey players. Indeed, social media offers a new revenue stream and new audiences for sport and entertainment industries by engaging fans on an innovative, more personal, interactive level and this push towards capitalizing on any and all earning potential is beginning to change the NHL’s culture (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993).

As this thesis shows, athletes are required to carry out the labour tasks that they have been assigned for generations, but are also expected to be media producers, public relations managers, and celebrities in their local, national, and international communities. From a political economy standpoint, this media marketplace of user-generated content allows corporations, including sport organizations and athletes, to generate large profits by trading in information, or content, that has been freely created and donated by the “labour power” of the users – including sports fans, and the athletes themselves (Dart, 2012). As such, sport management literature confirms that athletes have come to act as brands, or corporations of sorts, concerned with issues
like image rights and being paid for the off-ice, “off-hours” work they do (Dart, 2012). This search for power while negotiating the role of acting as actual content as well as content producer typifies the neo-Marxist relationship between forces of production (media, professional sport industry) and relations of production (athletes, fans, industry staff and executives), and so becomes the mode of production of the professional hockey player archetype (Dart, 2012). As Andrejevic (2004) elucidates, “on the web, Karl Marx’s dream has been realized: the tools and the means of production are in the hands of the workers” (p. 13), allowing professional hockey players to co-create their public identity and image along with the pre-existing socio-cultural norms that are enforced by sport industry practices. This promise of power sharing, however, is a “ruse of economic rationalization” and the appeal of interactivity as entertainment “comes to look a lot like work” (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 7). Still, as this thesis shows, athletes are aware of the labour aspect of this interactivity but rationalise the work it requires in exchange for its entertainment value.

Furthermore, the media revolution in which Twitter is situated is a cultural context characterized by an emerging, interactive online economy. The literature suggests that this context leads to a “fundamental shift in control,” as those who are watched increasingly become willing participants in this activity (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 7). The work of being watched is one that anyone can perform, and in the case of professional athletes – who are watched both in the performing of their career roles (for example, while playing hockey) and in the performing of their role as a celebrity (for example, by tweeting about their professional and personal lives and activities) – this work truly is a production of content that is then exploited by the brands to which they are attached (sports teams and leagues). This concept of the celebrity as commodity, known as “name economy,” purports that celebrities stand “at the centre of the intersection between commerce and culture, mediating between the public’s desires, needs, wishes, and aspirations and
the patterns of economic production and consumption, which both responds to and helps create those desires and needs” (Moeran, 2003, as cited in van Krieken, 2012, p. 53). Research shows that the “cross-over aspect” of celebrity athletes in particular, and their ability to function across the fields of sports, entertainment, and business, make them exceptionally suited to “mediate the relationship between economy and culture” (Moeran, 2003, as cited in van Krieken, 2012, p. 53). To be clear, when celebrities perform the labour of being commodities, “the commodity being traded is not simply the persons who are celebrities themselves, their image or their persona, but something else related to their position in the broader networks of economic, social and political action” (van Krieken, 2012, p. 54). This thesis understands that in effect, the simple act of existing, once an individual has been tagged as a professional athlete, means that in the current cultural moment, all the various elements of that individual’s life are in fact forms of labour (Andrejevic, 2004; Holmes & Redmond, 2006).

**Twitter as a Panopticon.** In this new labour context, athletes are performing the work of being watched through Twitter use. This surveillance is a form of self-empowerment that seems to work in the favour of the promoters of this new online economy, and is repositioned “as the guarantor of individualism and self-expression and thereby as a means of overcoming the homogeneity of mass society” (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 18). According to the literature, the appeal for fans who use Twitter to interact with athletes is to “‘search’ for the ‘authentic’ person that lies behind the manufactured mask of fame” (Dyer, 1998, as cited in Holmes & Redmond, 2006, p. 4). This thesis extends the literature further, purporting that fans hope to find that the athlete they are interacting with really is interesting, but in a different way than they have come to expect based on the corresponding existing socio-cultural mould. Twitter is therefore an intermediated form of monitoring that acts as both labour and escape for the celebrities who use it, both an act of participation and one of submission (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 53). This surveillance via
interactivity makes Twitter a dedifferentiated space of consumption and production, one which Andrejevic (2004) would say provokes a monitoring gaze as a means of keeping both processes in check simultaneously.

According to Foucault, it is in discourse that power and knowledge become linked and consequently, “it is the daily and ceaseless relations that occur between all people in all locations that ultimately produce subjectivities, economic systems, laws and, more generally, social realities and transformations” (Markula & Pringle, 2007, p. 37-38). Power and knowledge cannot exist without each other, yet knowledge is also produced by normalising and disciplinary methods, including the surveillance methods enabled by the openness of Twitter. NHL players are now perceived to have the potential to truly and completely control their communications with other power groups (fans, reporters, league and team officials) via Twitter, and this means that they are also able to contribute to the discourses involving them by producing their own knowledge and dispersing it through an open, non-discriminatory publishing platform. However, NHLers are still subjected to disciplinary measures like surveillance by their agent, their team, the league, mainstream media reporters (mostly those who engage on Twitter on behalf of the corporations for which they work), and especially, the fans. This thesis understands that all power groups, including athletes themselves, exert this monitoring gaze, and that the athletes are vaguely aware of the additional discursive pressure that this surveillance entails.

Because one does not need to be a Twitter user to see the tweets produced on the medium, Foucault’s interpretation of Bentham’s Panopticon is particularly applicable here. Athletes on Twitter are metaphorically similar to the group cells arranged around the guard tower of the Panopticon prison, with league and team representatives potentially using Twitter as a paternalistic surveillance tool to protect the discourses they have built over the years. Indeed, the literature defines the panoptic gaze by the potential observation it implies, as well as the
invisibility of the examination that may result from it (Markula & Pringle, 2007). The illusion of surveillance, as well as the very real constant surveillance from fans on Twitter, encourages athletes to practice self-discipline and to filter their own content before posting; Foucault’s Panopticon analogy makes that process more visible. Thomas Mathieson (1997) also introduces the concept of “synopticism” or the “viewer society” as a crucial counterpart to panopticism, “where the viewing relationship is reversed so that the many watch the few, that is, celebrities” (as cited in van Krieken, 2012, p. 74). Indubitably, the intensity of celebrity culture driving the fan’s demand for access, along with social media providing a method for increased access, has led to players’ privacy being reduced. This thesis maintains that whether players realize it or not, they are actually giving in to the demands for their privacy to be limited by voluntarily posting to Twitter, and they are actively changing the expectations for NHL athletes and the ways in which they interact with fans by constructing a new dominant discourse for typical NHL athlete-fan interaction via Twitter.

**Grooming docile bodies.** The literature defines athletic identity as “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athletic role” (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993, p. 237, as cited in Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). In North American hockey especially, this identity is formed early in life, as talent development in players who “make it” often became the child and his or her family’s central preoccupation. Research shows that athletic identity becomes internalized at the expense of other possible social roles, and as a result, it becomes the dominant aspect of the individual’s self-identity (Webb et al., 1998). Hockey players have long been viewed as role models and heroes in their local communities, but the commodification of sport has enhanced the view of athletes as products and essential parts of the machine of professional sport: Foucauldian docile bodies that have been shaped by their occupation of choice (Sage, 1998). Still, these docile bodies are productive, both in Foucauldian and Marxist terms, as they
use their carefully crafted image to earn sponsorships and other related revenue on a personal level, contributing and enhancing the ability of their teams, the league, and the mainstream media to earn advertising and other related revenue as well (Kelly & Hickey, 2010). This thesis supports that the use of social media is only one of the new demands, responsibilities and expectations that are constantly emerging, one more aspect of the identity of a “professional athlete,” which is constantly in flux (Kelly & Hickey, 2010). The literature states that these constant pressures, coupled with the persistent observation of the athlete by the NHL and its fans, create a normalising pressure that encourages NHL players to not only conform to the dominant discourses but also to be like one another (Shogan, 1999). This thesis briefly explores how Twitter might provide the potential for some athletes to step out of these normalising moulds.

As studies show, professional athletic careers are usually short-lived (the average age of NFL, NBA, NHL, and MLB players is 27; the average career length is about 5 years); successful athletes must therefore manage their public reputation from before the start of their professional careers (Sage, 1998). This thesis believes that serious amateur athletes realise that the performance-based aspects of their reputation are tied to the “collective esteem” of the community to which they belong, and forges a collective identity that is created through the shared experiences of fans and athletes during athletic performances. The reputation of these athletes, and therefore their productive value as labourers, can rise and fall easily, along with their social status and personal self-esteem (Webb et al., 1998). As Webb et al. (1998) explain, athletes become “psychologically fortified by this public acclaim.” As such, one's public athletic reputation becomes part of the athlete's overall identity (Webb et al., 1998). Sport sociology literature maintains that professional hockey player identity also includes a dominant medicalised understanding of risk, pain, and injury, as well as dominant readings of masculinity in sport. NHL players are also reluctant to candidly refer to “getting paid to pay the game they love” as “work”
Having grown up in a professional hockey culture perpetuated by their parents and coaches, their understanding is that only those who “work hard” and persevere through pain and adversity will make it to the big league, and that NHL players are “lucky” to earn a living in professional hockey (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). Additionally, once these athletes reach a certain level or recognition, they expect and are bestowed with a level of respect that puts them on par with other socially constructed “heroes” (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). Indeed, more people associate with athletes as representatives of their countries and their national pride than other artists or entertainers, and so the pressures of fame, combined with a “larger than life” treatment by consumers of professional hockey culture, create high expectations for these athletes on the ice and off the ice (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). This thesis suggests that through Twitter interactions, these docile bodies can attempt to gauge the reactions to their actions, adjusting them to either fit the existing discourse or to diverge from expected behaviours. Eventually, NHL athletes seem to become so in tune with the dominant readings of professional hockey culture and identity that they feel the need to perform to the expectations of their adoring audience or face a quick and public demise.

**Identity performance.** The use of Twitter to express identities, and Twitter itself, can be approached as an act of performance (Murthy, 2012). The word “performance” is not only used here in the dramaturgical sense, but also to signify “enactment.” Traditionally, performance is tied to the creation of meaning and identity, but scholars such as Judith Butler and Stuart Hall argue that it is the transmission of meanings through performance that actually constructs these meanings and identities (Hall, 1996; Mendelson & Papacharissi, (2011); Paul, 2005). As Pierre Bourdieu (1984) explains, “the daily, sometimes ‘banal’, is pregnant with meaning” (as cited in Murthy, 2012, p. 1062). On Twitter, these ‘banal’ tweets are an important way for individuals to assert their identities and even to invent them through their identity performances (Murthy, 2012.)
This understanding of identity performance emphasizes the constructionist nature of society as the repetition of performative acts symbolic of a hockey player identity, for example, help to perpetuate existing power relationships in sport (Hall, 1996). Performance, in this sense, includes “ritual, the interplay of genres, and even the process of reading” (Lee & LiPuma, 2002, as cited in Paul, 2005), all of which are crucial to the lived experience of a professional hockey player. This thesis agrees that a hockey player who from a young age is raised to represent a certain communal identity may unwittingly enact the discursive role of a “professional hockey player” simply due to the repetition of the performance of actions that are typical of this role; in so doing, they may unknowingly be helping to perpetuate the traditional representation of a “professional hockey player” in society.

Performance theory literature also draws on Goffman’s work. Though Goffman does conceptualise ritualisation as a critical aspect of interaction (Murthy, 2012), he mainly focuses on performance in the traditional sense, where individuals are actors whose social interactions are in fact “dramaturgical performances shaped by environment and audience, aimed at creating specific impressions according to the desired purpose of the actor” (Bounegru, 2008). This is commonly referred to as the “mask” or “face” one puts on in social situations. This self-awareness also requires the awareness of an audience in the first place, and the desire to play to or for that audience (Haddon, 2008). Goffman identifies two kinds of expressive behaviours that are applied to Twitter performance in this thesis: the deliberate and conscious expressions that a tweet gives in order to contribute to a certain image others may have of that tweeter (as a professional hockey player, for example), and the seemingly unintentional expressions that a tweet gives off which, equally as importantly, provide cues for others to determine what kind of person or player they are “behind” their mediated self (Haddon, 2008). This thesis also agrees with Goffman’s belief that our daily communications are imbibed with personal feelings (Murthy, 2012).
As this thesis demonstrates, Twitter is an interactive performance, and so the audience is not separated from the actor by traditional Goffmanian stage boundaries. Instead of a performance with pre-determined lines and scenes, Twitter can be fashioned as an improvisation skit, where the rules of traditional performance do not apply due to the instantaneous nature of the interaction and the self-monitoring skills that tweeters use to change their self-presentation on the fly. According to the literature, this type of interaction can create a heightened level of connection between fans and players, in some cases leading to the development of online-only or online and offline communities or sub-cultures that may evolve beyond a simple sport fandom rapport (Booth, 2010; boyd, 2007; Ovadia, 2009; Zhao, 2005). My research shows that tweeters who truly embrace the technology use self-disclosure to blur the lines between front and back stage, public and private information, selective identity presentation and inner true-to-self identity presentation. Goffman’s “backstage” comes into focus on Twitter as individuals portray a posed view that allows us to see only what they want to let us see (Murthy, 2012). Yet while impression management is still an important aspect of tweeting, the “face” we construct as an accurate representation of our selves is also partially shaped by our interactions with fellow tweeters. This interaction leads to a more honest “face” because Twitter users can be held accountable to their “true” identity by other tweeters. As this thesis reveals, that is the essence of the performance of a hockey player identity on Twitter. By following other hockey players and having them follow back, players using Twitter are not just performing the act of friendship (all the while constructing their hockey player identities), they are also creating, performing, shaping and adding to the shared Twitter experience of their fans and fellow players, both within their small group and on a platform-wide scale, and situating themselves within that context and experience. This participation, and the embedding of players’ Twitter content in collective memories, whether through the original tweet, a retweet, or a re-embedding of the tweet’s content by reply or
external preservation, are two essential applications of Goffman’s understanding of interactions that inform this thesis (Murthy, 2012).

**Summary**

The current cultural context in the NHL is dominated by a postmodern understanding of identity formation and presentation, where Twitter becomes both a constitutive space and a lens through which the celebrity identities of professional hockey players are co-created by both athletes and fans. This shift towards the understanding of media as an information tool where one can be both a producer and a consumer of content promotes values such as immediacy, interactivity and authenticity. For athletes, this creates a conflict as the line between their public (professional) and private (personal) life becomes blurred due to the increasing demands of their highly mediated careers. As celebrities, professional athletes depend on their attention capital. Using Twitter to interact with fan and other audiences creates an illusion of intimacy that helps to both empower and commodify athletes.

Indeed, athletes are aware that they are products, in a sense docile bodies that are consumed through the business of professional sport. With this role comes the additional responsibility of living up to the strict expectations their publics set for professional hockey players to fit stereotypical moulds that have been socially constructed by the discourses the NHL has helped to shape in our society over time. As such, fans use Twitter as a surveillance tool to police athletes’ on-ice and off-ice behaviours and activities, triggering a panoptic gaze effect in which athletes are performing the work of being watched as they enact their fluid identities.

However, athletes themselves are also exerting this monitoring gaze, and are vaguely aware that in interacting with fans on Twitter, they are acting as labourers under the disciplinary power of the league. Truly, by becoming a professional athlete in a cultural moment that thrives
on the name economy, all aspects of one’s life effectively become “work.” In this new labour context, the trade-off for athletes is the ability to control, if even marginally, the degrees to which they share information publicly, as well as the opportunity to perform mediated identities that can sometimes diverge from the traditional representation of a “professional hockey player.” This possibility creates a shift in the balance of power between athletes and their league that is actively reshaping the collective identity of an NHL athlete and the ways in which he is expected to interact with his various audiences. Indeed, a new dominant discourse is being constructed around the current cultural moment, as social media use has become but one of the new demands, responsibilities, and expectations that is emerging for the professional athlete.
Chapter 3

The players and their team

About the Montreal Canadiens

The Montreal Canadiens is one of the most storied franchises in the NHL, and is consistently listed as one of the most valuable hockey markets in North America in Forbes Magazine’s annual NHL team valuation special issue (Ozanian, 2012). Its rich history pre-dates the formation of the league, and the team leads all others in playoff championship awards, having won the Stanley Cup 24 times over its 104-year existence (Canadiens de Montréal, 2012). As such, Montreal, Quebec, Canada is a city that is said to live and breathe hockey, and to bleed “Bleu-Blanc-Rouge,” a popular reference to the team’s colours (Wyshynski, 2011). Fans of the Canadiens (a.k.a. the Habs) share a collective identity, renown globally for being demanding of their favourite team, and “cultish,” whether they live in Montreal, Canada, or abroad (Wyshynski, 2011). In 2009, Université de Montréal theology professor Olivier Bauer even launched an undergraduate-level course devoted to exploring the similarities between Habs fandom, with its relics and rituals, and religion, which is similarly deeply rooted in Quebec history and culture (Blatchford, 2009).

About Blake Geoffrion

Blake Geoffrion was born in Plantation, Florida, in the United States of America, on February 3, 1988 (Blake Geoffrion, n.d.). He grew up in Brentwood, Tennessee, and was recognized as having a strong potential for a professional hockey career at an early age (Blake Geoffrion, n.d.). Geoffrion is the son of retired NHL and World Hockey Association (WHA)
player Daniel Geoffrion, who played a total of 189 professional hockey games in North America’s top two leagues in the 1970s (Blake Geoffrion, n.d.). Blake Geoffrion, who is a left-shooting centreman, is also the grandson of Hockey Hall of Famer Bernard Geoffrion and the great-grandson of one of the NHL’s first stars, Hall of Famer Howie Morenz (Blake Geoffrion, n.d.).

Thus, Blake Geoffrion’s progress as a professional hockey player was tracked by scouts since he started playing at Culver Military Academy, a private college preparatory boarding school in Nashville, Tennessee (Buccigross, 2013). Geoffrion was invited to join the USA National Development Team Program in 2004 and made his international debut in 2006, scoring five points in six games to help lead Team USA to a gold medal at the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) World Under-18 Championship (Blake Geoffrion, n.d.).

Blake Geoffrion was drafted into the NHL in 2006, in the second round, 56th overall, by the Nashville Predators (Blake Geoffrion, n.d.). Instead of joining the Predators’ American Hockey League affiliate as drafted players traditionally do, the 6-foot-2, 195-pound forward decided to attend the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he majored in consumer affairs while playing for the Badgers (Blake Geoffrion, n.d.).

Geoffrion joined Twitter, which was at the time a budding social networking service, in August 2009 for a college course on social media (Fontaine, 2012). Students were instructed to write a certain number of tweets a week and discuss how they were using the medium (B. Geoffrion, personal communication, October 16, 2012). When the Badgers’ media relations agent heard that Geoffrion was on Twitter, he encouraged him to tweet game results and other relevant team information (B. Geoffrion, personal communication, October 16, 2012). Said Geoffrion,

I would update every once in a while, after a game, after a win, how we were feeling.

That’s what he said. He was like, ‘just write on there how you’re feeling’, or if someone
goes down for an injury, he’s like, ‘just say someone was down with an injury’ and then say, ‘we’re going to be fine,’ you know, ‘we can’t wait for him to get back’, or something like that (personal communication, October 16, 2012).

During Geoffrion’s college hockey career, he also suited up with two World Junior Hockey Championship teams for the United States, earning a bronze medal in 2007 but failing to medal in 2008 (Blake Geoffrion, n.d.). Geoffrion was a points-leader for the Badgers during most of his time at the University of Wisconsin, and was named team co-captain in 2008-2009. In 2009, Geoffrion became one of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)’s most well-rounded players, leading in points and in faceoff wins (Blake Geoffrion, n.d.). He was selected for the first all-star team in his college association and in the NCAA, and was named US College Hockey Online’s national player of the year (Blake Geoffrion, n.d.). In 2010, as the Badgers reached the 2010 NCAA championship game, Geoffrion won the prestigious Hobey Baker Award for the top player in American college hockey (Blake Geoffrion, n.d.).

Geoffrion turned professional at the end of the 2009-2010 season, when he signed an amateur try-out contract with the Nashville Predators’ AHL affiliate, the Milwaukee Admirals, and signed his first professional contract that summer, making him the first Tennessee native to sign an NHL deal (Blake Geoffrion, n.d.). Geoffrion spent most of the 2010-2011 season with the Admirals⁳, becoming the first player since 1994 to win two consecutive “AHL player of the week” awards (Blake Geoffrion, n.d.).

Geoffrion’s name-recognition was so significant that the Admirals ordered bobblehead figures in his likeness for a promotional giveaway on February 4, 2011, a game in which he participated in his team’s four goals and was named the game’s first star (Mertz, 2011). Geoffrion

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⁳ AHL affiliates are “farm teams” or training grounds of sorts for their partner NHL teams, although AHL teams can also sign players who are not affiliated with the NHL team. The NHL is the top professional hockey league internationally, and the AHL ranks just below in terms of hierarchy, particularly by North American standards.
also wrote a blog for the Nashville paper *The Tennessean* during the 2010-2011 season, posting 14 short personal accounts relating to his life as a professional hockey player (Blake Geoffrion, Nashville Predators, n.d.).

The Predators recalled Geoffrion on February 25, 2011, and he played his first NHL game on February 26, 2011 against the Dallas Stars, becoming only the second player raised in the American South to participate in an NHL game (Blake Geoffrion, n.d.). He also became the first fourth-generation player in the league’s history (Buccigross, 2013). Geoffrion scored his first NHL goal in his third game against Martin Gerber and the Edmonton Oilers on March 1, 2011. His first hat trick came later that month, on March 20 against the Buffalo Sabres (Blake Geoffrion, n.d.).

On February 17, 2012, Geoffrion was traded to the Montreal Canadiens (Blake Geoffrion, n.d.). While he wore a number “5” jersey in Nashville, Geoffrion elected to honour his grandfather and great-grandfather in Montreal by combining their sweater numbers (5 and 7 respectively, both retired numbers in Montreal), wearing “57” (Blake Geoffrion, n.d.). Geoffrion set another record during his first game with the Canadiens, becoming the first fourth-generation player to suit up for the same team as his ancestors (Buccigross, 2013).

Geoffrion began the 2011-2012 season with the Montreal Canadiens’ AHL affiliate, the Hamilton Bulldogs\(^4\). One month after interviewing for this thesis, while playing against the Syracuse Crunch on November 9, 2012, Geoffrion suffered a compressed skull fracture and

\[^4\] Most non-established players start the season with the AHL affiliate, unless they have an extraordinary training camp. These players hope to gain experience and strengthen their game so that they will get recalled by their NHL team following an injury or trade. Contract structure also plays a role in who gets sent down to the affiliate or called-up by the “big” team; rookies tend to have lower-paying or two-way contracts (different salaries depending on league of play), while more experienced players will have one-way contracts that pay them the same amount regardless of which league they suit up for. The latter may also have to overcome additional hurdles such as clearing waivers – and potentially being claimed by competing teams – before joining the AHL affiliate, which is why typically, only inexperienced or young players are sent to the AHL after training camp.
required emergency surgery (Buccigross, 2013). Though he was expected to make a full recovery, Geoffrion is still to this date experiencing concussion-like symptoms, and in March 2013, informed the Montreal Canadiens that he was pondering retirement due to the slow recovery process (Buccigross, 2013). On July 15, 2013, at the age of 25, Blake Geoffrion officially announced his retirement from professional hockey, accepting a professional scouting job for the Columbus Blue Jackets the next day (Buccigross, 2013).

**About Colby Armstrong**

Colby (Joseph) Armstrong was born on November 23, 1982 in Lloydminster, Saskatchewan, in Canada (Colby Armstrong, n.d.). He grew up in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where he played youth hockey with the Saskatoon Red Wings and the Saskatoon Blazers (Colby Armstrong, n.d.). Armstrong, who also figure-skated as a child, grew up with several other NHL players, including his younger brother Riley Armstrong, who currently plays for the San Jose Sharks (Colby Armstrong, n.d.).

Colby Armstrong played four years of junior hockey, joining the Western Hockey League’s Red Deer Rebels at the end of the 1998-1999 hockey season (Colby Armstrong, n.d.). After leading the Rebels to the Memorial Cup championship title in 2000-2001, the 6-foot-2, 194-pound right-winger was named the Rebels’ team captain (Colby Armstrong, n.d.). Armstrong, who placed in the top three points-leaders for Red Deer in his last two seasons with the team, was drafted in the first round as the 21st pick overall by the Pittsburgh Penguins in the 2001 NHL Entry Draft (NHL Player Search, n.d.).

His reported strong leadership skills and a hard-working attitude helped Armstrong make the jump to the AHL, as he joined the Pittsburgh affiliate team, the Wilkes-Barre Scranton Penguins, in 2002 (Colby Armstrong, n.d.). There, Armstrong spent three years fine-tuning his game before being called up by the Pittsburgh Penguins mid-way through the 2005-2006 season.
(NHL Player Search, n.d.). He played in his first NHL game on December 9, 2005, earned his first point on January 3, 2006 against the Montreal Canadiens and scored his first NHL goal three days later against the Atlanta Thrashers (Canadiens de Montréal, 2012, p.52). Armstrong’s rookie season statistics were impressive, as he totalled 40 points (16 goals and 24 assists) in 47 games with Pittsburgh, earning a team-high plus-minus score of plus-15 (Colby Armstrong, n.d.).

In 2006-2007, Armstrong tied a Pittsburgh season record by scoring 3 overtime goals and went on to play for Canada in the 2007 IIHF World Championship (Colby Armstrong, n.d.). His only goal of the tournament was the gold-medal winning goal, putting Canada over Finland 4-2 in the final (Colby Armstrong, n.d.). His performance earned him a new contract with Pittsburgh, but in February 2008, Armstrong was traded to the Atlanta Thrashers (Colby Armstrong, n.d.). He joined Team Canada again in 2009, helping them win the silver medal at the IIHF World Championship (Colby Armstrong, n.d.).

Armstrong became injury prone in the 2009-2010 season, a trend that continued over his next two years with the Toronto Maple Leafs, having signed an unrestricted free agent contract with the Canadian team in 2010 (Colby Armstrong, n.d.). As a result, the Leafs bought out Armstrong’s contract following the 2011-2012 season and the right-winger signed a one-year unrestricted free agent contract with the Montreal Canadiens in July 2012 (Colby Armstrong, n.d.).

Though Armstrong’s Montreal homecoming was delayed due to the NHL lockout, his excitement at joining his childhood team and his skilful use of Twitter helped him easily integrate within the hockey-crazed community (Denis, 2012). Armstrong joined Twitter on a whim in May 2009, while he was with the Atlanta Thrashers (C. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013). Said Armstrong, “I was just sitting on the couch bored and I didn’t really know what it was and I signed up for it. Just to do it” (personal communication, February 1, 2013). On July 27,
2013, Colby Armstrong announced on Twitter that he had signed a one-year contract to play for the Växjö Lakers of the Swedish elite league and would be moving there immediately with his wife and two young children.
Chapter 4

A new labour context in the NHL

As outlined in Chapter 2, the context in which professional athletes operate is changing, and so are the labour practices surrounding the professional sports industry. Access to athletes has increased in the past 20 years, and more so in the past 10 years, as media production techniques continue to improve and evolve (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). Whether via team or league websites, or traditional media outlets such as print, radio and television – all of which more often than not include multimedia content – or even through the athlete’s own social media feed, the personal life, habits and preferences of today’s NHL athletes tend to be easily discoverable with just a flick of the wrist. As Hutchins & Rowe (2012) confirm, “Athletes have been the prime beneficiaries and targets of criticism arising out of these developments. Stars now command their own followers as they post messages and bypass publicists and journalists.” (2012, p. 73). However, professionally-produced media material has become just as immediately available as the content produced by social media users, be they athletes or fans, so that audiences can construct a real-time impression of athletes’ on-ice and off-ice identities (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). Indeed, “fans lavish attention on major sports events through a combination of television viewing, social media use, and website access, creating a transmedia sport experience irreducible to its constituent parts” (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 74).

Twitter as labour

Therefore, the work involved in being a professional NHL athlete has also evolved. The immediacy of social media like Twitter, both when used as a news platform and as a forum for social commentary, is one of the key enablers of this changing context, along with the
globalisation and commodification of sport (Horne, 2006). Additionally, the interpenetration of the “always on” celebrity culture and professional sport culture has blurred the lines between personal and professional identities for many NHL athletes (Sanderson, 2013). Media responsibilities and fan-interaction requests have expanded from side-effects of employment as a professional athlete to required activities, as regulated by the “Standard Player Contract” and the “Form of Standard Club Rules” included in the latest Collective Bargaining Agreement (National Hockey League [NHL] & National Hockey League Player’s Association [NHLPA], 2013). While the specific requirements are undefined in the Agreement (NHL & NHLPA, 2013), the stipulation is that NHLers will collaborate with reasonable requests to promote both themselves and their teams as quality sport entertainment products; in other words, to keep the fans hooked on professional hockey. Similarly, while tweeting is not a requirement for NHL athletes as of yet, Twitter usage is a form of labour precisely because in the context of sport and athlete commodification, it enhances the profile of that athlete and his team.

Evidently, various Twitter styles, tweeting frequencies and intensities correspond to different commitment levels, and different workloads, though all unpaid. The rare exception exists when athletes are required to tweet as part of an endorsement deal, or when they receive free goods or services in exchange for “spreading the word” through Twitter. At an organizational level, despite the CBA having been re-negotiated in the 2012-2013 off-season, neither the NHL nor the NHLPA officially acknowledged the proliferation of social media use by athletes. While the NHL could stand to lose from recognizing Twitter as an integral activity of the professional hockey player’s labour, as players may then seek compensation for the promotional work that the NHL is currently benefitting from for “free,” it is surprising that the player’s union has yet to suggest that tweeting should be recognized as a work-related activity, just like media availability. This would enable them to include Twitter as a remunerable activity, with guidelines for use
included in player contracts. One possibility for this hesitation might be that both governing bodies have yet to determine the implications for unrestrained identity expression through Twitter, or how to manage transgressions of appropriate conduct on a medium that is not as easy to supervise as traditional media availability (Sanderson, 2013).

However, the NHL did implement a social media policy at the beginning of the 2011-2012 hockey season in response to the increase in players using Twitter and other social media. The policy may be vague, with unspecified consequences for offenses, but it shows an awareness of the changing context in which the players operate. The main stipulation can be summarized as “use common sense,” which is consistent with the recommendations of team public relations personnel (B. Geoffrion, personal communication, October 16, 2012; C. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013; NHL Social Media Policy, personal communication, March 15, 2012). Similarly, most players do not receive specialized social media training from their team, not even during the media training refresher portion of pre-season training camp (Media Relations Director, personal communication, March 15, 2012). On a related note, though the CBA releases any ownership or copyright of a player’s image, it does not allow for the athlete to assert or sell his own “image rights” or “publicity rights,” as they are referred to in the United States, without asking the league or team for permission prior to doing so (2013). This puts the NHL behind European professional leagues and most major professional sports leagues in North America in terms of providing athletes with access and active proprietary control of their public image and life stories (Hutchins & Rowe, 2013). As a result, though Twitter “possesses public relations utility for athletes,” (Sanderson, 2013, p. 427) the league and teams still maintain the majority of the power to control an athlete’s image and identity, along with those who create and publish content through traditional media channels.
Still, the prevalence of athletes on Twitter has affected labour relations between athletes and reporters as well as athletes and fans. Whereas athletes formerly had a limited opportunity to communicate directly with fans and control the often unfavourable impression reporters construct of them (Sanderson, 2013), social media offers the athletes “autonomy over how to present and promote their identity” (Sanderson, 2013, p. 421). It also offers journalists more opportunities to interact with the athletes they cover, outside the confines of media access and availability rules (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). Indeed, the casual interactions that used to take place in arena hallways or while in transit on road trips now more often than not take place on Twitter, with the public nature of the interaction offering fans a glimpse into the world of professional sport (C. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013).

Armstrong recounts an instance during the 2012-2013 NHL lockout where, having signed a player contract with the Montreal Canadiens over the course of the off-season, he joined his future teammates in un-official games presented in front of an eager fan audience in the Montreal area. Dave Stubbs, a veteran Canadiens beat reporter with the Montreal Gazette, suggested on Twitter that Armstrong attempt to breach the normalcy of an official professional hockey game by taking a picture of himself with his phone while on the bench and tweet it while still in-game, an act that is restricted by the NHL’s Social Media Policy. In exchange for accomplishing this feat, Stubbs would provide a free steak dinner at one of Montreal’s top steakhouses. There are two different pieces at play here in relation to labour. The first, of course, is the changing relationship between athletes and reporters and the public nature of this interaction, accessible to fans and other observers, circumstances that did not exist with such immediacy prior to Twitter and serve to create a shared experience between the observers and the participants. The second is the bartering of a good (steak dinner) for a service (a novelty tweet), another situation that may have transpired differently without the watchfulness of other Twitter users to ensure Stubbs stuck
to his end of the bargain. Additionally, this act could not have been performed in the context of the NHL season because of the restrictions outlined in the NHL’s Social Media Policy as well as due to the specifications of the league’s accreditation agreement with its journalists, which technically prohibits “official” contact and player requests without going through the intermediary of a team or league media relations employee (Media Relations Director, personal communication, March 15, 2012; NHL Social Media Policy, personal communication, March 15, 2012).

Despite these seemingly apparent links between Twitter and labour, both Armstrong and Geoffrion do not perceive Twitter use as labour. Armstrong does admit he uses Twitter for work purposes, as an instrument for promoting the team and publicizing sanctioned personal appearances, but rationalises this type of use as part of the job, as detailed in the CBA, rather than an additional task (personal communication, February 1, 2013). Similarly, Geoffrion conceded that active Twitter use *takes* work, though he does not consider tweeting to *be* work (personal communication, October 16, 2012). Still, Twitter served as a unique information and communications tool for the players during the 2012-2013 NHL lockout, and a new way for them to relate labour issues to fans. In other words, the use of Twitter by athletes to make sure their point of view was as justly represented as that of the NHL owners and Board of Governors emphasises the connection between fandom and the work of being a professional hockey player. As such, while this changing fan relationship did not, according to both the players interviewed, influence boardroom discussions, it did affect public opinion, which may have helped shape board decisions that have a very real impact on the day-to-day professional life of NHLers. Indeed, Armstrong stated that being able to connect with fans in this way is a distinct advantage of Twitter, and that he did not “see why you wouldn’t have it and take advantage of it,” (personal communication, February 1, 2013). However, Armstrong hesitated to say that not being on
Twitter, as an athlete, is a mistake. Rather, he views it as a personal choice, as does Geoffrion, who added, “it can do nothing but help you if you use it the right way” (B. Geoffrion, personal communication, October 16, 2012; C. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013).

Armstrong’s reluctance to recognize tweeting as part of the job description of a professional athlete in this new context is interesting, because it is at odds with his personal keenness for the medium. Armstrong has integrated Twitter use into his daily routine, even going so far as to say he has become slightly obsessed with checking Twitter for notifications (personal communication, February 1, 2013). Armstrong’s regular use includes interacting with fans and performing a hyped up version of his personality on Twitter; he also encourages teammates to sign up for the medium, regardless of their familiarity with technology or eagerness to use social media. This helps Armstrong to increase the “fun” factor in public conversations, which fits with his “class clown” personality, his use of Twitter as a hobby, and main motivation for using Twitter: to entertain and be entertained (personal communication, February 1, 2013). Indeed, though both Armstrong and Geoffrion insisted that Twitter has not become a replacement for texting, despite the similarities of these two communication methods, Armstrong noted that, “it’s just more fun, instead of just texting a guy a funny joke, do it in front of everybody. It’s like more exciting and interesting and fun for everybody. So you can have fun with that” (personal communication, February 1, 2013).

However, Geoffrion cautioned that because of fans and reporters,

You’re not going to tweet at someone a conversation when you’ve got a hundred thousand people following you that you don’t know who they are. Media, you know, alone. So like, media can turn, they can interpret a conversation into something that was not meant to be interpreted that way at all, but they can spin it off and it can… it can be a mess (personal communication, October 16, 2012).
This caution fits with Geoffrion’s approach to Twitter. He is more reserved than Armstrong, both in sharing details of his personal life and in his frequency and intensity of use. Geoffrion’s background of growing up in a family with a professional hockey history, and choosing the college route rather than going through junior hockey to reach the NHL, may have influenced the ways in which he uses the medium. Geoffrion gained an appreciation for Twitter from a business perspective in college, even turning a class project into a patent for a smartphone app (currently in development) that relies on Twitter’s immediacy and ability to connect people in order to be effective (personal communication, October 16, 2012). Geoffrion’s approach to using Twitter as a professional tool, both for hockey and in anticipation of a post-hockey career, is consistent with his desire to keep his “personal time separate from [his] hockey career,” from which I also inferred that Geoffrion recognises that his career as a hockey player is his job, not his life (personal communication, October 16, 2012).

Geoffrion’s Twitter use is also marked by his heightened level of fan interactions, as compared to other professional athletes. Geoffrion is keen to enhance fan connections rather than trying to gain followers, which he admits is something that he is not willing to put the work in to get (personal communication, October 16, 2012). He explains this eagerness to connect as a “simple, easy deed, it’s just putting some time in and for retweeting a message it’s 30 seconds, so I’m more than happy to do it” (personal communication, October 16, 2012). Geofffrion is particular about his interactions despite feeling obligated to respond, however, and takes the time to assess whether or not he should retweet a fan’s message by checking their profile, recent tweets, and gauging the reason for their request. This voluntary extra labour is rooted in Geoffrion’s occasionally feeling annoyed by the “crazy,” sometimes “scary” amounts of requests he receives, though he repeatedly emphasised that he’s “really not that big of a deal, really, but, for someone to take the time and actually believe that, or think that, I mean, it’s not hard for me
to make a simple gesture” and that “it’s just a way to brighten somebody’s day” (personal communication, October 16, 2012). Both Geoffrion and Armstrong have shifted their downtime activities to add Twitter and other smartphone and digital media activities. In fact, tweeting and checking for Twitter interactions is something both players admit using as a cure for boredom in labour-created gaps, for example, while waiting in airports or between required events while on the road (B. Geoffrion, personal communication, October 16, 2012; C. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013).

**Twitter and the panoptic gaze**

The link between the panoptic gaze and the 24/7 digital sport and news context perpetuated by celebrity culture is even more visible in the Canadiens’ market. In a sense, Montreal has always been a postmodern, celebrity culture-fuelled professional sport milieu due to the amplified expectations of its obsessive fans. NHL players have allegedly consistently avoided playing in Montreal, and though every public figure is subject to scrutiny, the intense mental hardship of dealing with thousands of fans scapegoating a player for a minute mistake is a market reality to which Canadiens’ players must adjust (Wyshynski, 2011). Both Armstrong and Geoffrion showed awareness of this challenging audience in their statements about self-censorship on Twitter (B. Geoffrion, personal communication, October 16, 2012; C. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013). Though they do not admit to censoring their tweets, they do admit to taking the time to weigh their words and being careful about what they tweet out of fear of making a mistake and unleashing the impending backlash (B. Geoffrion, personal communication, October 16, 2012; C. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013). Armstrong referred to these critics who actively search for controversy as “keyboard warriors,” stating,
At first I didn’t actually think much of [Twitter], I just thought it was some stupid little thing, and I didn’t realize, like how big it could actually be, or how many people you could touch in like, one little message. It kinda like… Gets your anxiety going a little bit if you have something out there (personal communication, February 1, 2013).

Hutchins and Rowe (2012) refer to this desire to “scandalize” athletes by catching them in an error as an “information accident,” explaining that “the difficulty for the offender is that unclicking the ‘tweet’ or ‘share’ button is impossible once their accident has been exposed and its contents endlessly copied and reposted,” noting also that the effects of an accident are hard to predict. Both Armstrong and Geoffrion have personally experienced information accidents. Geoffrion recalls one particular incident, which occurred in the summer of 2012,

I tweeted, “7 a.m. golf. Love it.” And I took a picture of, like, the fairway. ‘Cause I was just like, “Man, this is awesome.” And it was during the playoffs, and I got, like, ripped for it, because it was in the newspaper the next day, the Montreal Gazette, saying how I was playing golf instead of watching the playoffs and saying how bad I (hate the), how bad I wish I was playing hockey and stuff like that, and fans ripped into me on Twitter. So the next day, I was like, “8am golf. Love it, but wish I was playing hockey. Love you, Habs fans,” like that, so it’s like… I thought that was a little ridiculous, but… (shrugs). I guess in this market you have to be even more cautious (personal communication, October 16, 2012)

Geoffrion posted his apology tweet to make light of the situation, not on the recommendation of his agent, who, after seeing the incident on the news, simply cautioned Geoffrion to be careful about what he tweets (B. Geoffrion, personal communication, October 16, 2012). Thus, while Geoffrion assumes that a member of his management team keeps an eye on his tweets, he has never confirmed this fact (personal communication, October 16, 2012).
Similarly, Armstrong encountered a fan surveillance information accident situation in January 2013. He recounts,

I tweeted something about like, Ray Lewis and how he’s like a, you know, you just watch him as an athlete and what he brings to the field every day, and just like his energy and his leadership and how he performs and his career, and I sent a message out, with like, “respect” to what he does, and I just got like (sighs). You know, you don’t think about it, I never even thought about it, but it blew up about how he’s potentially like, in some murder controversy back in the day, and people are just like, roasting me about like, saying good things about a murderer, or something, like, I mean, I was just like, woah. You gotta really be careful (personal communication, February 1, 2013).

In other words, while the Panopticon may work to retroactively punish athletes for transgressions on social media, it is only a deterrent in so much as it encourages athletes to “sit on it a little bit sometimes” before deciding whether to press send or delete (C. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013).

As Hutchins & Rowe (2012) state,

This example and many others show that ‘getting the brand out there’ and ‘engaging with fans’ on Facebook and Twitter has a flip side when it involves the loss of control over information and photos, and that for leading sportspeople there can be no such thing as a ‘completely personal site’. (p. 96)

Relatedly, Armstrong discusses the vague consequences mentioned in the NHL’s Social Media Policy with scepticism, suggesting that he would like to test the policy’s limits, wanting to set a record for being “the first guy to get suspended for that, like a fine?” because being “the first guy to get Twitter-fined” would be “cool” (C. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013). The lack of official social media training by teams, leagues, and player agents has
encouraged athletes to adopt a “common sense” approach, which varies greatly between players. Even though the NHL’s Social Media Policy does not impose strict discipline, it does limit the times at which players may tweet, with restrictions surrounding practices, games, and other official team and league activities. The constrained spontaneous and open-ended interaction that makes Twitter attractive to athletes and fans is also regulated by the anticipation of negative reactions, and so many athletes post content that is “often banal, disposable, and of negligible insight” (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 87). However, as Hutchins & Rowe (2012) state,

Yet it is precisely these characteristics that make tweets stand out as a form of media sport content. The spectacular representation of athletic feats and contests, and the unremitting adulation and scrutiny of sport celebrities, render otherwise mundane messages from leading footballers and tennis players somehow special. (p. 87)

Twitter, then, is not only an act of labour, it can be a laborious act. In fact, while Armstrong and Geoffrion may have been on Twitter had they not made it to the NHL, they likely would not have amassed such a great following. Indeed, Geoffrion admits that Twitter is part of his work as a hockey player, in that pleasing the fans “comes with the territory” (personal communication, October 16, 2012). Relatedly, when he chooses to retweet fan requests, especially those that are for a charitable cause, Geoffrion is doing “free” labour by promoting the cause, which leads to a slew of new requests. Similarly, Armstrong voluntarily provided free labour when he decided to tweet about his brother’s new clothing line. However, his audience quickly pointed out that his excessive tweeting may be interpreted as spam, and Armstrong desisted, recognising that if he were not playing hockey, he would not have any followers (C. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013).
**Twitter takes work**

Despite the differences in their uses, experiences, and opinions of Twitter, Armstrong and Geoffrion agree that for professional athletes, using Twitter takes work. However, while both players are aware that their statuses as celebrities in a globalised cultural context entails constant supervision from fans, media, and other professional sport stakeholders, neither is willing to go so far as to say that Twitter usage is work. This generalised denial has enabled the NHL and the NHLPA to avoid discussing Twitter as a remunerable labour activity even while social media activity that fits with discursive expectations is encouraged as it enhances the public profile – and worth – of the league, its teams, and its athletes. In actuality, this duality serves to further commodify athletes, as the league and teams retains the majority of the power to control an athlete’s image and identity. Yet this balance of power is shifting towards the athletes, who increasingly participate in casual interactions with their fans on Twitter, and have integrated this and other social media tools in their day-to-day lives.

Indeed, the ebb-and-flow of a typical professional hockey player’s day and the seasonal characteristics of the job provide multiple opportunities for NHL athletes to use Twitter as an entertainment tool as well as a work tool. For players like Armstrong, replicating the dynamics of the private dressing room on a public forum such as Twitter is simply more fun, and can trigger more interesting reactions than the behind-the-scenes conversation would. Conservative players like Geoffrion would caution that while it’s easy to make someone’s day by replying to a request for interaction on Twitter, one must also be aware of the unknown audience that is viewing the exchange, and the potential consequences of a possible information accident. As the NHL’s Social Media Policy is vague in outlining the penalties for divergence from its guideline of “common sense,” both Armstrong and Geoffrion are aware that the panoptic gaze is the real
deterrent when deciding what to post on Twitter. As such, Twitter use by a professional athlete is undeniably a form of labour, even when it is being used as a personal communication tool.
Chapter 5

“Playing it up” on Twitter

Where the traditional typical professional hockey player of the 1950s-70s needed a summer job or helped with the family business to make ends meet year-round, and received no or an insufficient pension once retired, the postmodern typical professional hockey player builds a career in hockey rather than playing hockey as one of several forms of employment (Robidoux, 2001). While the traditional typical hockey player embodied Robidoux’s (2001) hard-working, humble persona, today’s sport stars have their often extravagant lifestyles on display for all to see, opening the door for fans to question the sincerity of the humility and gratefulness that current NHL players still reference as part of the dominant discourse of hockey player identity (Boyle, 2000; Quinn, 2009). Still, despite the apparent contradictions, these players remain docile bodies because their extravagant lifestyles are the result of high paying contracts that are only achievable through excessive discipline, on and off the ice. Even athletes who prefer a more private lifestyle operate in a different day-to-day context than their fans, at least financially, enabling a shift in perception amongst fans towards the increase in the demands of labouring as a professional athlete in comparison to the apparent rewards that a public identity affords (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012).

Identity performance on Twitter

For most of professional sport’s history, athletes have had their identities constructed and disseminated by sport reporters. As athletes started to broadcast their own voices through blogs, personal websites, and now social media, certain journalists capitalised on developing perceptions
of these athletes as “selfish, greedy, and not team players” (Sanderson, 2013, p. 422). The perception of these athletes as self-righteous isn’t helped by incidents such as #DanEllisProblems. Dan Ellis was a goaltender for the Tampa Bay Lightning, who, in September 2010, tweeted about the nuisance of losing 18 percent of his income to the NHL’s escrow payment system, and that he was more stressed about money now than when he was in college (Myers, 2010). Predictably, the Twitter reaction was immediate and negative, with users posting sarcastic tweets mocking the hardships of life as an NHL player using the hashtag #DanEllisProblems (Myers, 2010). In a more recent example, Winnipeg Jets rookie Evander Kane posted a photo of himself on Twitter during the NHL lockout, using a “phone” made of stacks of $100 bills to pretend to call boxing champion Floyd Mayweather (Wyshynski, 2012). Clearly, this did little to create sympathy for the NHLPA and its arguments regarding the unfair division of hockey-related revenues. Also, Kane’s reputation of being “an out-of-shape, uncaring KHL player” and reports of off-ice behavioural issues as perpetuated by the way he managed negative backlash on his social media accounts did not help the cause of athletes trying to change the perception of professional athletes to better reflect the realities of this career to their fans (Wyshynski, 2012).

Indeed, athletes have been elevated to iconic status by marketing but rarely live up to the expectations fans set for them (Sanderson, 2013). The identities of athletes are highly visible, and, therefore, they are subject to a higher level of scrutiny. Social media use by players allows for a selective self-presentation of that identity, and for an optimized projection of preferred identities that provides fans with opportunities to validate these identities (Sanderson, 2013). As identity is a construct that is affected by internal and relational factors, it fluctuates as messages are exchanged between people (Sanderson, 2013). According to the communication theory of identity

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5 The Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) is Russia’s professional hockey league, and the NHL’s main competitor for player recruitment and retention.
(CTI), “identity is formed, maintained, transformed, and expressed through communication. CTI suggests that identity is composed of four inter-connected layers: (a) personal; (b) enacted; (c) relational; and (d) communal” (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 2003, as cited in Sanderson, 2013, p. 421). Therefore, while one’s concept of self is influenced by one’s own preconceptions, by the identity elements one performs, and by the reactions of others, it is also affected by the communal component of collective memories and associations that exist on Twitter, and are performed repeatedly over time, during the continual process of identity formation (Sanderson, 2013). Additionally, these shared experiences help to co-construct the collective identities of both players and fans, as each group individually enacts behaviours and attitudes that come to be expected of their respective collectives in those highly public, highly performative discursive moments. Indeed, in most of their responses, both Armstrong and Geoffrion habitually refer to “the fans” as a collective identity, only individualising pockets of fans when relevant to specific situations. In other words, collective identities are shaped and shape individual identities.

The enactment of an identity on Twitter, in Goffmanian terms, allows for a seamless transition between front and back stages, or between multiple identity positions. Different aspects of the same person can be represented with a single voice, and so an athlete may tweet about his various interests and showcase the complexities of his identity, creating a new context for fans to understand him and relate to him (Sanderson, 2013). Sanderson’s (2013) study of athlete identity formation through Twitter found that athletes demonstrated a commitment to becoming a better athlete, but that, “in addition to occupational identities, athletes also projected a facilitative identity, demonstrating their ability to connect their followers with other people as well as commercial products and services” (p. 426). Armstrong provided personal examples of this multifaceted tweeting, explaining that accounts he follows on Twitter include comedians, and that he tweets at public figures such as the stars of Duck Dynasty and Swamp People (two of his
favourite TV shows), sometimes even earning himself free merchandise (C. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013). Geoffrion also showcases the diversity in his identity, following and tweeting about patents and business news but also about his Christian faith (B. Geoffrion, personal communication, October 16, 2012). At times, displaying these aspects of his identity, rather than trying to create an impression of himself on Twitter that would leave out personality traits that are important to him, engenders both positive and negative reactions. For example, he stated,

Sometimes I’ll put a scripture on there that if I think it’s a really good one, and most people will tweet back, I’ll get half and half, like, “oh, I didn’t know you were Christian,” or “hey, I just lost a lot of respect for you since you just tweeted that,” or like “Well, you just lost one more fan,” you know, something like that (B. Geoffrion, personal communication, October 16, 2012).

Geoffrion says these reactions don’t affect his future tweets and that he stands by his beliefs. Conflictingly, Armstrong admits that the potential for negative reactions from his followers does influence his tweeting decisions, though not insofar as to practice self-censorship; in his desire not to offend anybody, thinking about potential reactions affects the way he tweets in all cases (personal communication, February 1, 2013). Thus, though social media technically allows for athletes to be selective in their self-presentation, the relational aspect of the medium may affect an athlete’s internal desire to keep part of his identity private.

Similarly, Armstrong believes that he does manage the impression he puts out on Twitter, with tweets representing both his personal identity and his professional identity:

I don’t want to disrespect anybody, I don’t want to make my team look bad or anything negative that way, but at the same time, but there really isn’t much thought put into what
I’m tweeting! (laughs) Whatever I feel or whatever I think (personal communication, February 1, 2013).

Armstrong also admitted to performing a hyped identity on Twitter, though not in those words,

I think you ham it up a little extra, like you’re trying to make, trying to push it a little farther, always trying to have more fun with it but, at the same time, it’s nothing that I wouldn’t say out of the ordinary, so (personal communication, February 1, 2013).

Both Armstrong and Geoffrion were insistent that their tweets are not performances, but rather either filtered or “amped up” versions of content that fits with their respective identities (B. Geoffrion, personal communication, October 16, 2012; C. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013). For example, Armstrong purposefully holds back from tweeting after a loss, though he stressed that he tends to “stay away from everything” as part of his post-loss routine, explaining that he is concerned about how people would react if they perceived him to be “a little bit loose about hockey, or loose about the game, and I don’t want to give that impression to the fans, especially because I’m not, you know” (personal communication, February 1, 2013). This is an especially relevant concern in the Canadiens’ fandom “culture of complaint,” where fans may not only be frustrated but may also become depressed after a loss, and Habs fans routinely take out their anger on players via Twitter (Sanderson, 2013; Wyshynski, 2011). As Armstrong added,

It’s always tough… A little more tough to tweet after you lose a game though, you don’t feel like you’ve earned the right to tweet, kinda thing, and uh, I don’t know. You shy away, I don’t know, I personally shy away from it a little bit more, uhm, after a loss, or, it feels a little better to reach out to excited fans after you win a game (personal communication, February 1, 2013).
Armstrong’s self-assessment is important here, as it reveals the traits he finds to be important in a hockey player’s professional identity: humility, honour, and being a hard worker.

Geoffrion describes his own Twitter style as simple and inconsistent, adding that when he does tweet, he focuses on retweeting and replying to fans (personal communication, October 16, 2012). Consistently, while Geoffrion is trying to show fans “who I am and what I’m about and what kind of person I am,” he tries to keep his personal life separate from his professional life, and finds it “creepy” and “shocking” that fans know “a lot, like some weird things” about him, like his favourite colour or his favourite food (personal communication, October 16, 2012). He attributed this reluctance to share personal details to his awareness that he does not know much about his fan base and that in this celebrity-crazed culture, there are a lot of “creepy people out there, and a lot of weirdos” (personal communication, October 16, 2012). On the other hand, Armstrong posited that a teammate might recommend him as a follow by saying, “Follow Colby Armstrong, good teammate. Good guy. Random tweets. Good follow. Hashtag beauty. [laughs]” (personal communication, February 1, 2013). When asked if that description typifies the ideal professional hockey player personality, Armstrong imparted that it’s in the nature of hockey players that “they’re just easy to relate to and, uhm, everybody pretty much gets along, they’re pretty simple dudes, so it’s uh, always easy to just slide right in with a group of guys,” which fits the dominant discourse for the professional hockey player persona (personal communication, February 1, 2013). Similarly, when discussing the ways in which professional hockey players use Twitter, Armstrong notes that a lot of players are following “a lot of the same people because we’re all into the same thing,” indicating a certain homogeneity to hockey player identities (personal communication, February 1, 2013). Even when discussing the ease Twitter provides in transitioning to a new team because players can break the tension by getting to know each other online prior to meeting in person, Armstrong again alludes to the fact that hockey players are a
homogeneous group, with the aforementioned easy-going nature as their common denominator (personal communication, February 1, 2013). Indeed, when an NHLer is revealed as straying from the norm perpetuated by the dominant hockey player nature discourse, fans seem to react with amazement and in uproar at the possibility of a professional hockey player presenting a diverging identity.

A paradoxical professional hockey player identity

One professional hockey player who consistently breaks the discursive mould is Paul Bissonnette, who tweets under the username @BizNasty2point0⁶. Bissonnette’s deliberately controversial tweets, while sometimes reflective of the types of comments that are exchanged in the private microcosm of professional hockey locker rooms or as an element of on-ice taunts, includes trash talking and links and comments some may consider inappropriate yet not unusual for a celebrity (Az Vibe, 2010). As Geoffrion related, Bissonnette’s situation is unique because “the guy is like a freakin plug in the freakin NHL, but just because he tweets and he’s hilarious, people love him, you know?” (personal communication, October 16, 2012). In fact, Bissonnette’s career as a professional hockey player is only noteworthy because of his tweets, which often poke fun at himself and his lack of playing time as a struggling fourth line forward. Still, though both players show admiration for Bissonnette’s personality and Twitter style, they recognize that his identity is a unique brand. Said Geoffrion,

I’m not wired like him. He puts some crazy things on there. I’m not, I don’t have that unique of a mind, to, to put, you know, witty things on like that, so… I just, I stick to what I do, and that’s it (personal communication, October 16, 2012).

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⁶ @BizNasty2point0 is Paul Bissonnette’s second Twitter incarnation, having shut down his first account under pressure from his agent and his team, the Phoneix Coyotes, after he referred to Russian free-agent Ilya Kovalchuk as a “communist” in commenting on the star’s contract woes (Az Vibe, 2010).
Armstrong’s understanding of Twitter as a tool for entertaining interactions influences his perception of Bissonnette as

a really good hockey player tweeter. I think he’s like, not even a hockey player, just in general, he’s good at Twitter. Pretty interactive, pretty funny. Just, some wild ideas every once in a while that he sends out there. (personal communication, February 1, 2013)

Armstrong also appreciates the way Bissonnette “fires back” at fans, and recognizes that many of the negative tweets Bissonnette receives are meant to trigger a response, whether as a retweet or as a reply from the athlete that may be publicly shaming (personal communication, February 1, 2013). In other words, the interplay between Bissonnette and his followers has become a game for both sides, indicating that Bissonnette’s approach to Twitter may have become more of an identity performance tool than an identity representation tool.

When discussing the often-controversial nature of celebrity tweets in general, Armstrong emphasized that “you can always offend people,” and that “hockey players are pretty reserved tweeters. Nothing crazy, out of the ordinary, and… I don’t know. You don’t really see too many guys getting in trouble with tweets” (personal communication, February 1, 2013). Bissonnette, he admitted, does get into trouble “every once in a while, but it’s nothing like crazy. He doesn’t do anything that crazy, you know. He’s just having fun with it, and fun with fans, so” (personal communication, February 1, 2013). Still, both Armstrong and Geoffrion conceded that Bissonnette’s Twitter style is completely opposite to the dominant NHLer discourse created by the league and perpetuated by the way most professional hockey players manage their feeds and the impressions they project of their identity. Despite early hiccups with Bissonnette’s provocative tweets, the NHL seems to have come to an agreement to let him carry on with his unique style on Twitter, within reason. Indeed, Bissonnette created a lot of buzz for his small hockey market team, which lacked steady media coverage (Az Vibe, 2010). His ability to
generate attention and provide entertainment along with behind-the-scenes access to the life and mind of a professional athlete beyond what other NHLers disclosed turned out to be an asset for the Coyotes, while his raunchy tweets would have made headline news and would not have been tolerated in a major hockey market like Montreal (Az Vibe, 2010). Outwardly, the NHL has been unmistakably clear about not encouraging other players to take on Bissonnette’s Twitter style, while remaining unusually mum about the identity performed on his revived account. Still, the flexibility afforded to Bissonnette and his Twitter remarks is an indication that the NHL’s Social Media Policy lacks enforcement beyond stern warnings, in public or reportedly behind closed doors. Indeed, when caught in an unfavourable moment on Twitter, players tend to delete the offending tweet, apologise and then claim that their account was hacked, whether by acquaintances taking their fun “too far” or by unknown troublemakers (Stubits, 2013).

Bissonnette’s Twitter success is likely due not only to the sensationalist nature of his tweets but also to the fact that his Twitter style is so divergent from the norm fans have come to expect from professional hockey players. The perceived awkwardness surrounding his tweets creates a paradox of sorts, with some fans expressing disdain at the idea of Bissonnette’s identity being potentially representative of other professional hockey player identities, while at the same time yearning for more controversial content to interact with. This duality is typical of the 24/7 celebrity culture-fuelled curiosity, which seeks to discover the “real,” unfiltered person behind the sports star persona (Sanderson, 2013). However, Andrejevic (2004) purports that “interactive digital culture is portrayed as a means of surpassing the separation between the celebrity artist and the anonymous mass audience” (p. 47). Indeed, as audiences continue to believe that Twitter is a way for professional hockey players to present the “true” self behind the “face” they put on for traditional media interactions, so increases the audience’s willingness to believe that the celebrity identity they are reading on Twitter is authentic rather than performed (Marwick &
This suggests that “the final deception” for fans by athletes who perform an “amped up” identity on Twitter is that this co-construction of a celebrity identity on social media as a measure of authenticity is deceitful, because “in the social-symbolic reality, things ultimately are what they pretend to be” (Zizek, 1990, as cited in Andrejevic, 2004, p. 16). In other words, in both collective and individual identity formation, the more one pretends while performing an “amped up” identity, the more one starts to believe that this enacted identity could be real. As such, one’s own interpretation of one’s own identity might shift towards accepting that “amped up” version of themselves as their identity.

Interestingly, Armstrong’s assessment of Bissonnette’s Twitter feed, and of not being “wired” like him (personal communication, February 1, 2013), suggests that despite his own experience with performing a heightened version of his own identity to engage fans, Armstrong seems to buy into Bissonnette’s identity performance on Twitter, understanding it as a reflection of Bissonnette’s authentic self. In this sense, Armstrong himself falls prey to the “final deception” and contributes to the construction of the discourse surrounding Bissonnette’s heterogeneous performance of professional hockey player identity on Twitter as a simple divergence. By applying Armstrong’s thinking on Bissonnette to his own identity performance, one might therefore conclude that by continuing to enact the “amped up” version of himself publicly on Twitter, Armstrong is signalling to his audience that behind closed doors, he actually is that “amped up” version of himself. In other words, Andrejevic might say that Armstrong purposefully publishes amped up tweets to earn the response he seeks from his followers, and in receiving this response, Armstrong is motivated to keep performing that amped up identity in order to continue to receive the responses he considers to be indicative of successful, meaningful Twitter interactions with his fans. The “final deception,” then, also applies to the celebrity’s understanding of his or her own identity, leading to further questions about the blurring of public
and private identities; when does Armstrong’s personality stop being “amped up” occasionally on Twitter, and when does it simply become an aspect of Armstrong’s personality to perform an “amped up” version of himself on Twitter?

**Exposing athlete identities**

Alongside Twitter, the development of behind-the-scenes reality TV shows in the professional sport context has allowed fans to gain access to intimate moments of the backstage dimension of a professional athlete’s life, even providing insight into their personal lives at times (Sanderson, 2013). For Armstrong, participating in the “HBO: 24/7”-style “24CH” documentary series chronicling the on-ice and off-ice activities of the 2012-2013 Montreal Canadiens provided an opportunity for fans to reconcile the identities they see portrayed in media coverage, on athletes’ personal Twitter pages, and via on-ice action, in order to construct a more accurate and whole representation of that athlete’s identity (C. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013). As Armstrong acknowledged, when athletes tweet each other publicly on Twitter, “for fun,” they present fans with a snapshot of the regular interactions that take place between those players behind the closed doors of the locker room and in other restricted spaces (personal communication, February 1, 2013). Even minimal Twitter usage with limited interactions can provide a glimpse into the behind-the-scenes life of an athlete; and so, whether or not a player elects to disclose specific personal information, tweets about music, restaurants and other sport topics help fans create an impression of that athlete’s identity (Sanderson, 2013).

Athletes who focus on interacting with fans occasionally find the pace of requests for mentions or retweets to be overwhelming, especially as further requests come in as the athlete starts complying (C. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013). Geoffrion’s personal values may lead him to interact with fans more than other players might, as he expressed an understanding for the impact that a small gesture, while it “doesn’t take a whole lot of time to
respond or making someone’s day by retweeting them,” increases fan attachment and identification, thereby boosting his personal brand and identity, and enhancing the perception of the postmodern professional athlete as an approachable, “everyday person” with many of the same life experiences as his followers (B. Geoffrion, personal communication, October 16, 2012; Sanderson, 2013, p. 429). Indeed, Geoffrion pointed out that despite these types of requests “coming with the territory,” he is motivated by the positive reactions he gets from “a simple thanks, hello, how are ya” he sends, as these can “go a long way with someone” (personal communication, October 16, 2012). Armstrong’s personal experience responding to retweets and other requests is rooted in the lived reality of the big hockey market teams with which he has played. As he gained more followers from working in Toronto and Montreal, teams “with huge fan bases” where “everyone has Twitter now,” Armstrong found a need to filter requests, and described his deciding factor for fulfilling them as “awesomeness,” which fits with his approach to Twitter as entertainment and entertaining;

I don’t mind sending out a retweet, but as soon as you do it, it opens the door to like, millions of requests for retweets. I don’t really understand, like, I’ll retweet like a cool tweet. If someone tweets me like a cool tweet, I’d way rather retweet that than someone asking for a retweet. So, I mean. I don’t mind retweeting fans that are excited for stuff and ask me for a retweet if we win, or like, ‘I’m a huge fan, can I get a retweet’, I don’t mind that, every once in a while, but then it just floods in, it just opens up the door to your frigging thing filling up with ‘Can I get a retweet? Can I get a retweet?’ So it’s just kinda like. Like, say something awesome and I’ll retweet it! (personal communication, February 1, 2013)

Sanderson (2013) attempts to elucidate this fan-based desire for a retweet, explaining that it seems to have become a “validation process for fans, and emphasizes an athlete’s identity as an
attention granter by acknowledging a fan’s presence” (p. 432). Likewise, Geoffrion’s generosity with returning tweets appears to be rooted in his personal fandom experiences. Having grown up as a sports fan in the digital age, Geoffrion can better grasp the implication for a fan in receiving a retweet from a favourite player: “I think that would be pretty cool for me to uh, see like a Mike Modano, who I liked, retweet one of my messages, you know, ‘cause I know that he read it and I know that he knows it’s from me” (personal communication, October 16, 2012). Comparatively, Armstrong expressed puzzlement at the idea that a retweet may be the postmodern equivalent of an autograph, providing the example of a fan asking him to sign a physical printout of a screenshot of Armstrong retweeting him (personal communication, February 1, 2013). Armstrong pondered,

Like, is that that big of a deal? I guess, I don’t know. It’s just a retweet. Kinda cool though. Kinda cool that he thought that was such a special thing. I mean, I don’t know.

It's just a retweet (personal communication, February 1, 2013).

As a fan and an athlete, Geoffrion feels that an autograph will always be “a little bit more important, ‘cause you had that actual, face-to-face interaction” (personal communication, October 16, 2012). However, he conceded that if he were to get a retweet from National Football League (NFL) star quarterback Tim Tebow, “I think that’d be awesome. Yeah, that’s pretty sweet. Ya know, but I mean… What… the chances are probably pretty slim” (personal communication, October 16, 2012). Geoffrion’s recognition that obtaining a retweet from a star athlete is not an easy task, especially in the NFL, where the celebrity fandom levels are much higher, is interesting given his own willingness to retweet his fans, indicating that he realises that his approach differs from that of typical professional athletes. Relatedly, Armstrong highlighted the uniqueness of Twitter as a tool to have throughout the limited span of a professional hockey career, in that it is a fun bonus for his fan base because athletes can reach out to fans “the way they never had before”
(personal communication, February 1, 2013). He imagined, “Can you believe if like, Wayne Gretzky had Twitter back in the day? That would be like, insane! […] You could like send a text message, like, virtually to Wayne Gretzky, which is pretty cool” (C. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013). As Geoffrion explained, despite not providing tips or training, teams encourage players to use Twitter because “it kinda shows that the organization is signing good guys, good players” (personal communication, October 16, 2012), indicating an awareness that the professional hockey player identity being enacted through Twitter fits certain prescribed behavioural norms. Additionally, Armstrong suggested that his own Twitter usage “is not really good” due to his personally perceived low number of tweets for the amount of time he has been on Twitter; he points to boredom and life events as justifications for the sporadic nature of his usage (personal communication, February 1, 2013). Nevertheless, Armstrong embodied the evolving description of the typical NHLer nature, which incorporates the existing dominant discourse for the ideal typical professional hockey player persona, when he humbly rationalized, "You know, use [it] every once in a while, and definitely don’t take it for granted and be an idiot on there, but it’s a cool tool, I mean, it really is cool, like I said. You only get to do this for, how many years? And [to] reach out to people like this, I mean if I was, not playing hockey, I wouldn’t have any followers, or I’d have all my friends, you know. It’s a good thing to do to reach out to fans and being in this opportunity and, in this situation, I don’t see why you wouldn’t have it and take advantage of it!" (personal communication, February 1, 2013)

**Twitter as a stage**

On Twitter and on the ice, professional hockey players are subjected to disciplinary discursive forces that encourage media and fans to construct and critique the identities that these
athletes present – and those they fail to present. These identities are highly visible, and scrutiny is heightened by the hero status and related expectations that are accorded to celebrities in the current cultural context. For athletes, Twitter provides a stage through which they can select and present an optimized version of themselves. However, the identity of a professional athlete is a social construct that fluctuates with each public interaction, as collective memories and shared experiences help shape a communal understanding of a celebrity figure’s identity. As such, as players continue to enact the preferred aspects of their identity with consistency over time on Twitter, they are contributing to the collective understanding of their personality. Yet media, fans, and even the athletes themselves are so tied to the discursive idea of a homogeneous good-natured hockey player that as the complexity of the represented identity increases, so do the negative reactions. Both Armstrong and Geoffrion express a deep desire not to offend anyone, admitting that they sometimes manage the impression they put out on Twitter, though they are adamant that they do not censor their tweets or their identities. Similarly, neither player would describe the “amped up” or filtered versions of their identity as an identity performance. Instead, they view these representations as stylistic decisions that reflect the authenticity of the identity they perform in their private lives.

Indeed, Armstrong and Geoffrion truly believe that the divergence of players like Bissonnette stems from a simple difference in personality that enables him to interact with his fans and anti-fans on Twitter with sensationalistic pizzazz. The controversies surrounding Bissonnette’s Twitter success illuminates some of the discomfort created by a professional hockey player whose represented identity does not fit the discursive mould and whose on-ice performance cannot be used as an excuse for his continued popularity. Still, the heightened celebrity culture that typifies the current cultural moment means that fans are anxious to uncover the raw, unfiltered, authentic identity of anyone who is marginally famous, especially in an
industry like professional sport that is stereotypically represented as fostering the allegedly excessive lifestyles of celebrity athletes.

Both media and sport corporations encourage this search for the intimate identity of professional athletes by sharing increasingly revelatory behind-the-scenes footage of various aspects of the industry in a ploy to captivate and retain wandering fan attentions. For athletes, the desire to give back to the fans that elevate them to celebrity statuses can lead to an overwhelming amount of attention, and a struggle to clearly define the line between athletes’ professional and personal lives, or their public and private identities. While Armstrong and Geoffrion both favour face-to-face interactions as a more valuable validation of fandom, they understand fans’ desires for online attention, and acknowledge that Twitter is a tool uniquely suited for this purpose. As such, in their identities as both professional athletes and fans of other athletes, these NHL players are beginning to integrate the expectations of the 24/7 celebrity culture-powered cultural moment in which they currently operate to their performance of the existing typical professional hockey player as rooted in traditional discourse.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the changing context in which professional hockey players operate, fuelled by a heightened celebrity culture and a postmodern labour context prompted by the development of social media technologies, in order to reconsider the typical professional hockey player persona. Indeed, even the possible routes players can take to reach the NHL have evolved since Robidoux (2001) typified the professional hockey player nature, with an increasing number of young hockey players choosing to earn a degree while playing college hockey rather than enacting the traditional route of playing in major junior hockey league to reach their goal of playing in the NHL. In fact, just 10 years ago, only one in five NHLers had a college background; now, college hockey is one of the fastest development paths for the NHL (College Hockey Inc., n.d.). Thus, even prior to reaching the NHL, the once mostly homogeneous professional hockey player identity, which was typically shaped by players’ shared experiences in junior hockey, is provided with several opportunities for diverging from the traditional norm. The difficulty in redefining a generalized persona, therefore, lies in the complexity of discerning between personality traits and personal choices, and a collective identity constructed by existing discourses. However, as shown in this thesis, the ways in which professional hockey players’ personal and professional identities are shaped by Twitter necessarily involves the changing definition of labour and the shifting nature of fan-athlete relationships, both of which are perpetually in flux and therefore hard to describe, let alone define. Nevertheless, it is important to attempt this generalisation, as professional hockey players are role models whose public identities greatly impact the choices of their fan audiences who, particularly at a young age, may be heavily
influenced by those they look up to when shaping their own identities (Barnett, 2009; boyd, 2007).

The NHL as a whole makes an interesting case study in terms of how its athletes use Twitter because the league’s social media policy is lacking compared to those of other major sports leagues in North America. The National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), and the National Basketball Association (NBA) in particular were relatively early to implement comprehensive social media policies with clear rules and consequences. The NFL was the first league to publish a social media policy in 2009; since then, the policy has regularly been enforced by the league and its individual teams (Ortiz, 2011). In 2012, the MLB’s revised social media policy, which encourages athletes to actively engage fans, was included in its Collective Bargaining Agreement (Calcaterra, 2012). The NBA updated its social media policy in 2013, making it more enforceable while increasing accessibility to its players (“NBA,” 2013). These leagues have openly discussed or published their policies, while the NHL’s relatively low impact policy has never been officially released. The “common sense” mandate and undefined fines make the policy subjective and difficult to implement. Additionally, the NHL’s predominantly Canadian context – despite most of its teams operating in the United States – presents a unique perspective, particularly in terms of the legalities of cross-border sponsorship contracts and image rights issues. Thus, the identities of NHL athletes who use Twitter may be shaped by different forces than those of other North American athletes. Still, this thesis can serve as a springboard for similar, more extensive research in other leagues or across professional sports leagues.

In a postmodern context where workplace happiness is closely tied to personal happiness, both Armstrong and Geoffrion conveyed a desire to balance fandom relationships with a semblance of a personal life, expressing some aspects of their personality in private only. As the NHL’s workplace culture continues to adjust to the increasing demands for behind-the-scenes
access to athletes, a standardised social media training program that includes well thought-out guidelines and pre-determined responses to typical troublesome situations might lead to more engaging Twitter use by athletes, as it might erase the fear and/or uncertainty surrounding the presently blurred line between athletes’ public and private lives. While such a social media strategy might seem restrictive, by setting up behavioural boundaries rather than policing for behaviour (as per any corporate contract that outlines standards for public image and representation), the NHL would actually be encouraging divergence. In this scenario, the league would be creating the opportunity for individual personalities to stand out on social media. Additionally, many of the scandals we see today would be prevented, as the established policies and training programs would both protect the players and the NHL’s brand. Indeed, by performing a consolidated, multi-faceted identity, which includes the heightened and filtered versions of what one would describe as the “authentic” identity, an athlete may be able to ensure the balance between public and private life that he or she seeks.

Indeed, the ability of professional hockey players to interact with their fans on Twitter is creating a new fan relationship and producing new norms for the typical hockey player identity, and the additional, new forms of labour this career now involves. By participating in a medium that allows both athletes and fans to actively reshape each other’s identities, a new set of standards is being constructed for professional hockey players in the now prevailing celebrity culture context of professional sport. This developing context includes an ever-increasing demand for and an unprecedented amount of behind-the-scenes access to athletes, as well as an expectation that athletes will choose to forgo any semblance of privacy precisely because their career affords them a life in the public eye. Based on my research, if an athlete does attempt to keep a separate personal life, perhaps by refusing to recognise tweeting and other methods of amplifying athlete availability as labour requirements, fans and media will likely pay that athlete
more attention in the hopes of catching him in a blunder that would expose his true identity in ways that are reminiscent of the often negative representations described by Sanderson (2013) in the early days of athletes expressing their identities via social media. As athletes, leagues and teams continue to endorse active Twitter presences marked by personal and professional tweets as well as fan interactions, they will consequently endorse and in actuality enact the changing discourse fuelled by celebrity culture, therefore further shaping the new typical professional hockey player identity.

By presenting athletes’ motives for using Twitter, their understanding of the impact of their interaction with fans on the perceptions those fans have of their professional identity, and the interplay of their professional and personal identities as they seemingly merge on Twitter, I have provided more material for deeper scholarly investigations into the life of professional hockey athletes and the significance of their understanding of their worlds. Additionally, my findings have industry-wide applications as they enhance the likelihood of developing actionable player branding and social media endorsement initiatives by including the player’s understanding of his identity performance in the process.
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Retrieved from


Appendix A

Tweets & Feeds

As with other individuals on Twitter, the usage of each athlete varies based on his or her personality, engagement in the medium, and ongoing life activities and events. For instance, around the time of our interview, Blake Geoffrion was tweeting on average 4-8 times a week, including retweets and replies (BlakeGeoffrion, n.d.). Conversely, Colby Armstrong was tweeting on average 10-15 times a week, including retweets and replies, at the time of his interview (Armstrong, C., n.d.). By way of comparison, in November 2012, Paul Bissonnette was tweeting over 30 times per week, with his feed being primarily composed of retweets (BizNasty2point0, n.d.).

In the next few pages, I have provided screenshots of both Armstrong and Geoffrion’s Twitter feeds dated April 22, 2014, as well as tweets from Armstrong, Geoffrion, and Bissonnette that are indicative of each player’s typical usage.

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7 Tweets and feeds are publicly available on Twitter.com and can be accessed without signing in or creating an account. Though these histories are theoretically available in perpetuity, users can delete tweets at any time. Other account statistics will also vary over time as users tweet and gain or lose followers.
Figure A1. Blake Geoffrion’s Twitter feed. From Blake Geoffrion [BlakeGeoffrion]. (n.d.).

Figure A3. Blake Geoffrion tweets about golf. From Blake Geoffrion [BlakeGeoffrion]. (n.d.).


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Figure A9. Blake Geoffrion thanks his team and fans. From Blake Geoffrion [BlakeGeoffrion]. 

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Figure A17. Paul Bissonnette tweets appreciation to fans. From Paul Bissonnette [BizNasty2point0]. (2013, June 3). Tweets [Twitter page]. Retrieved April 22, 2014, from http://twitter.com/BizNasty2point0/status/341759772749619200
Appendix B

Interview Questions

*Questions about participants’ attraction to social media*

When did you join Twitter?

Why did you decide to join Twitter?

Did anyone recommend that you to join Twitter? (Recommendation from agent, friends, team administration, other players)

How long after becoming aware of Twitter/starting to think about joining did you actually join?

How did you join Twitter? (mobile, web, on the road, off-season, etc)

Did you have other social media profiles previously? Concurrently? Why did you choose Twitter over Facebook or other tools? (Did you make a conscious decision to use Twitter and for a specific purpose?)

Was someone a key influence in finally getting you to join Twitter? Did someone influence the development of your Twitter style? (other player, reading celebrity tweets, mentor, research)

Who do you look up to on Twitter, if anyone? Amongst other players or athletes specifically?

Whose Twitter feed do you seek to emulate the most? Why? (Why do you value their content?)
Questions about how/why participants use Twitter

What is your motivation for using Twitter?
(Post-career considerations? Endorsements? Building fan relationships?)

What types of activities do you do in your time off? How many hours? (Internet browsing, Twitter, hobbies, movies, etc). Do these vary in-season and in the off-season? How does/did social media integrate your “off” time? Did it take over from another activity (eg Internet) or simply get added to the mix?

How has Twitter integrated your day-to-day life and activities?

Where do you use Twitter? (geographical and physical locations)

Where do you use Twitter the most? On the road or at home? While travelling, at the hotel, or at home? At the rink? When out on the town? Do you have any examples to share?

When do you use Twitter for reading, in an average day or week? (time period, activity type, eg. between morning skate and game, at the airport)

When do you use Twitter for posting, in an average day or week? (time period, activity type)

When do you use it the most?

How much time would you say you spend on Twitter (reading and posting)?

Do you spend more time reading or posting?

Do you read and/or reply to your mentions? Do you check your stats (retweets, etc)?
Do you use web, mobile web, a desktop app, a mobile app most? Which is your favourite app/way of browsing/using Twitter?

What charms or entertains you about Twitter, both in your use and how you see others using it? Excluding technological awe? Do you have any examples to share?

What don’t you like about Twitter or bugs you about it, both in your use and how you see others using it? Excluding technological difficulties? Do you have any examples to share?

How do you feel about fans who ask for a retweet? Do you have any personal “rules” about who you retweet and don’t? Are retweet requests for birthdays different than for a fundraiser/awareness?

What do you think about the idea that a retweet is the new autograph? Have you noticed a change in autograph requests since joining Twitter? Do fans mention your Twitter feed to you?

**Questions about participants Twitter usage decisions**

How do you decide what to tweet and what not to tweet?

Do you censor yourself? Does your agent or a team member track your feed?

What about pictures or location check-ins? Do you have any examples to share?

Did/How did the NHL’s social media policy (11-12 season) affect your usage? (Compare before and after).

How does the NHL’s social media policy compare to the policies of your previous teams/leagues? (eg, AHL, national teams, official or unofficial)
In your opinion, how does the NHL’s social media policy compare to that of other major pro sports leagues? (Equivalent? Too restrictive? Not enough guidelines?)

Does your team have any additional social media guidelines?

Did you receive social media training (officially or unofficially)? From whom?
(team, league, agent, friends, fellow players, other athletes)

Have you received any sponsorship offers since joining Twitter or because of your Twitter/social media presence? What was your reaction? Decision?

Do you have any sponsorship deals or other contracts that include Twitter activation elements?
Did you have a say/discussion about the types of tweets you would be required to post?

How do you feel about athletes or celebrities who post obvious tweets about their sponsors? (eg Cammalleri and BioSteel)

What about the less obvious tweets about sponsors? (eg Love this gym!)

What about the tweets that mention a business without any sponsorship link? (eg Awesome dinner at Globe tonight!)

How would you describe your Twitter style or content?

What type of impression do you try to give off through your Twitter usage?
Which values do you highlight?
What kind of reputation, image or identity are you trying to build or showcase?

What kind of audience are you hoping to attract with this type of content?
How do you think someone else would describe you based on your Twitter content?
Would that be an accurate description?
Would that description be different coming from a fan or player?

Could you describe a professional hockey player to me (in terms of values, personality, image)?
Which words would you use to describe a “typical” or “good”, “proper” hockey player?

Do you think you fit the “typical hockey player” model?
Do you think your Twitter content showcases that?

Do you consider Twitter usage to be an additional “work” task or is it more of a personal hobby?

**Questions about participants’ image**

Have you noticed a change in your relationships with fans or reporters since you started using Twitter? How so? Why do you think this is? Do you have any examples to share?

Do you think your Twitter usage affects perceptions of you as a hockey player? As a person?

What do you think your audience values in your content or Twitter usage style? Do you purposefully try to include this type of content to satisfy their expectations?

Has Twitter use affected your professional relationships? Personal relationships? How?

Have you noticed a change in offline fan perceptions of you since joining Twitter?
In the perceptions of other players who are on Twitter? Of reporters? Of sponsors? Of athletes in different sports?
Do you purposefully tailor your Twitter content to obtain certain reactions and responses? To build a particular image or reputation?

Do you view Twitter use as a personal or professional decision/action? Please explain?

Do you feel that Twitter usage is a bonus (professionally – sponsorship, future opportunities, personally – building your reputation, interactions with fans, other players) or a necessary part of life as a professional hockey player?

Do you feel that NOT being on Twitter would be a professional mistake?

Do you feel like being on Twitter boosts your value, as an athlete?

What do you think about the rise in value of players like Paul Bissonnette (@BizNasty2point0) based on his social media presence while his playing time and skills have remained minimal?

Do you feel that you are truly being yourself when you tweet? Or are you performing a version (professional or otherwise) of yourself on Twitter?

**Other**

Do you think that having more teammates on Twitter affects your rate of usage? Type of usage?

How does Twitter help you stay in touch with and interact with current, former, and new teammates? People from “back home”? Siblings? Is your usage type different with different groups of people?
How would it be different to get a new teammate when that teammate is on Twitter? Especially if you already follow each other? What about joining a new team when you’re on Twitter (and so are your new teammates)?

How do you feel when a current teammate joins Twitter? Does it affect the way you tweet? Do you show him how you use Twitter, and share tips + advice?

Do you find that the “role” you play in the locker room or on the ice transfers to Twitter, when you interact with teammates? Or are you able to be “yourself” rather than you’re your part? (eg: pranksters) Athletic identity within team carry on to Twitter interactions

Do you find Twitter is replacing text messages for casual conversations with your teammates/friends?

How do you think Twitter use will make a difference in negotiating this year’s CBA (as opposed to 2004-2005 lockout)?

Has the NHLPA offered any guidelines, instructions or advice about tweeting about the lockout and/or during the lockout?

Do you feel that having this more direct access to fans/reporters through Twitter gives you an opportunity to have your voice heard?

How do you think Twitter use by players affects fan opinions of the CBA negotiations and the lockout specifically?

In your personal opinion, who do you think is winning the lockout on social media/Twitter?

Is there anything you would like to add about Twitter that we haven’t touched on?
Appendix C

Ethics Documents

November 20, 2013

Ms. Naila Jinnah
Master’s Student
School of Kinesiology and Health Studies
Queen's University
28 Division Street
Kingston, ON, K7L 3N6

GREB Romeo #: 6006474
Title: "GPHE-116-11 Racking up the Twitter Points: How NHL Players' Use of Twitter Affects their Professional Hockey Identities and Digital Fandom Relationships"

Dear Ms. Jinnah:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB) has reviewed and approved your request for renewal of ethics clearance for the above-named study. This renewal is valid for one year from December 15, 2013. Prior to the next renewal date you will be sent a reminder memo and the link to ROMEO to renew for another year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period. An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours. Report to GREB through either ROMEO Event Report or Adverse Event Report Form at http://www.queensu.ca/ors/researchethics/GeneralREB/forms.html.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes in study procedures or implementation of new aspects into the study procedures. Your request for protocol changes will be forwarded to the appropriate GREB reviewers and/or the GREB Chair. Please report changes to GREB through either ROMEO Event Reports or the Ethics Change Form at http://www.queensu.ca/ors/researchethics/GeneralREB/forms.html.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, Ph.D.
Chair
General Research Ethics Board

c.: Dr. Samantha King, Faculty Supervisor
    Dr. Mary Louise Adams, Chair, Unit REB
    Josie Birchall, Dept. Admin.
This research is being conducted by Naila Jinnah under the supervision of Dr. Samantha King, in the Department of Kinesiology (Socio-Cultural Studies of Sport, Health and the Body) at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario.

**What is this study about?** The purpose of this study is to examine the use of Twitter by NHL athletes, how it affects your identity as professional hockey players, and the impact of your Twitter usage on fans. Through interviews with current, active NHL players like you and an analysis of the Twitter content of those players, I hope to discover which values are important to both players and fans when it comes to being an engaging NHL player online.

**What do I have to do?** You will be participating in a semi-structured interview, where I will ask you questions about your social media usage, history, and influences, as well as the tools or devices you use as a Twitter user, and the environment (time, place) in which you access Twitter.

The interview should take no longer than 30 minutes and there should not be any follow-up questions unless needed for clarification purposes.

I will be using a standard voice recorder during the interview, and while only the researcher will have access to the raw interview data, identifying material may be published in my Master’s thesis and will likely be available online upon publication in late 2012.

There are no known risks to participating in the study. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, although you can request that certain anecdotal information be kept confidential to protect your reputation. However, people may be able to surmise your identity. If you do not mind your name being used in the study, you will have the opportunity to initial the consent form giving us full permission to use your name in study materials.

Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time during the research process. You need not answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable, though your honesty and cooperation would be much appreciated.

You will not be compensated for participating in this study, though conclusions will be shared upon request following the successful defence of my Master’s thesis.

Any questions about study participation may be directed to Naila Jinnah at 514.966.5510 or njinnah@gmail.com. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board Joan Stevenson at chair.GREB@queensu.ca or 613-533-6081 or my supervisor, Dr. Samantha King, at kingsj@queensu.ca or 613-929-5998.

This study was granted clearance by the General Ethics Board for compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans, and Queen’s policies.
Consent Form

Racking up the Twitter points: How NHL Players’ Use of Twitter Affects their Professional Hockey Identities and Digital Fandom Relationships

Name: ___________________________

1. I have read the attached Letter of Information and have had all questions answered to my satisfaction.

2. I understand that I will be participating in the study called “Racking up the Twitter points” by taking part in a short interview about my Twitter usage.

3. I understand that my interview will be recorded using a tape or digital voice recorder.

4. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time during the research process.

5. I understand that I can request information to be withdrawn at any time.

6. I understand that I may request a copy of the conclusions of this research, if interested.

7. I give permission for my name to be used in any publications related to this research.
   (INITIAL HERE: ______)

I have read the above statements and freely consent to participate in this research:

Date: __________________________

Signature: ________________________

Any questions about study participation may be directed to Naila Jinnah at 514.966.5510 or njinnah@gmail.com. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board Joan Stevenson at chair.GREB@queensu.ca or 613-533-6081, or my supervisor, Dr. Samantha King, at kingsj@queensu.ca or 613-929-5998.

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