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Twitter as barometer of public opinion on the female athlete: The case of Caster Semenya

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Abstract

Twitter is a social platform that has become well-known for the controversial opinions posted by politicians and celebrities. Caster Semenya became an overnight topic on Twitter with an overwhelming number of people posting opinions about whether she is male or female, and how that affects her participation in international athletics. This research utilised the gender controversy around Caster Semenya to explore how Twitter can be used as a barometer of public perceptions of the female athlete in sport. Thematic analysis of Tweets around the Caster Semenya controversy did not only illustrate a deep divide in public opinion on the female athlete but also highlighted an often hidden, racial classification. It concludes, however, that even though perceptions are still influenced by entrenched cultural beliefs, gender stereotypes are being questioned.

Keywords: Caster Semenya, female athlete, Twitter, social media.

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Introduction

Caster Semenya is well known as an outstanding athlete. Semenya, a female track and field athlete from rural Limpopo, South Africa (Cooky, Dycus, & Dworkin, 2013), has been the centre of a gender controversy that has played out in the media. As Sloop (2012) fittingly stated, “*those who follow popular culture know at least the bare outlines of the Caster Semenya story*” (pp. 81). The Semenya narrative started long before the race that changed her life and made what was private, public knowledge. Her story of humiliation in the media, however, started on the night of 19 August 2009.

Hours before the race in Berlin, Germany (August 2009), in which Semenya won the gold in the 800 metre race at the World Championships in athletics, news broke that the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) decided

to submit Semenya to both drug and gender testing. Semenya was simply too fast and too masculine looking to be a female (Sloop, 2012). Directly following her victory, questions were raised about her gender. Her muscular appearance and extraordinary performance prompted the media to question whether she was “really” a woman (Young, 2015). Aspects such as her deep voice, flat chest and masculine appearance fed media commentary about the young runner. This controversial race in Berlin unavoidably started a media frenzy. Reporters from around the world reported on the sensational topic, throwing young Semenya into a sea of suspicion. This resulted in several media events that pushed the “action” button on social media platforms. Headlines such as “*Rumours are swirling that Semenya might be a man,*” and “*Is She a He?*” (Sloop, 2012, pp. 84) utilised gender signifiers to pull the general public into the story.

Kook Lee, Choi, Kim, and Kim (2014) confirmed that the use of social media platforms is mediated by the news and media-related activities with the media thereby activating responses on Twitter. This is what happened in the case of Semenya. The explosion of responses on Twitter from people around the globe happened almost instantaneously. The number of tweets on Twitter indicated that this was an issue that people had strong views about. Whereas the reports in the media focused on the suggestion that Caster could not be female, responses on Twitter were more complex. It ranged from severe conviction that she is male, with the notorious tweet by comedian Amy Schumer (@AmySchumer) tweeting, “*Which part of that South African chick crossed the finish line first? Her dick or her Adam's apple?*” to responses such as one by @Dkadu that emphasised that she is definitely female, “*She's still biologically female; she can run in women's races. It's also insulting to solely attribute Caster's wins to testosterone.*”

This study proposes that the relative anonymity provided by Twitter presents the sociologist with the opportunity to have insight into existing gender ideologies. The study will explore public opinion on how the female athlete is perceived. It asks the questions: How did the public react in response to media discourses around Semenya as female athlete; and, to what extent did the anonymity provided by Twitter reveal gender ideologies otherwise hidden? The author suggests that social media platforms, such as Twitter, may serve as a barometer of public opinion on the conceptualisation of not only the female but also the female in sport.

The female athlete in sports

Gender ideology is a systematic set of beliefs through which a society constructs and enacts its gender relations and practices. Gender ideology contains legends, narratives, and myths about what is seen as appropriate gender behaviour in society (Hussein, 2005). Within Western society, masculinity and femininity are positioned as opposites and not as two sides of a continuum (Alley & Hicks,

2005) with female athletes being categorised on the opposite side of male athletes, for example in terms of body size. Society's belief in the binary gender classification contributes to the difficulty in transcending traditional assumptions that feminine- and masculine-appropriate sports are in the natural order of life (Hargreaves, 2015). Travers (2008) explained the hierarchical gender perception by emphasising that it is in the measuring of the capacity and limitation of the body itself that the sports nexus underscores its cultural role in the demarcation of both sex and race boundaries.

Very little is known about the different types of femininity that are present in sport. A series of cultural assumptions and stereotypes underlie how female athletes are perceived (Kane & Maxwell, 2011) in society. People know about—and sometimes rather of—exceptional sportswomen, usually women who have either broken world records or behaved in disregard of the binary gender system, and therefore have been labelled as unfeminine (Hargreaves, 2003), or women who have posted as “cover girls” in sport (Sloop, 2012).

The cultural definitions of femininity and the masculinised nature of hegemonic sports are often oppositional and are not equally valued within sport cultures (Esmonde, Cooky & Andrews, 2015) and society. In their groundbreaking book on the unevenness of gender and social change in sport Cooky and Messner (2018) emphasises this binary perception of gender by adding that sport has played an important ideological role in gender relations through its symbolic conversion of average bodily differences. Images in the media continue to fail to represent the reality of women's sport performance with images de-emphasising athleticism through the use of sexualised frames (Sherry, Osborne & Nicholson, 2015).

Media portrayals have had an immense impact on how the public perceives the female athlete. Media trends in the representation of females in sport are remarkably universal in that it routinely focuses on the athletic exploits of males versus the physical—and sexualised—appearance of females (Kane & Maxwell, 2011). Vincent (2004) stressed the fact that the media is instrumental in shaping cultural attitudes and values. The gendered nature of sports coverage in the media actively defines normalises and influences mainstream societal beliefs about female athletes. Female athletes who excel are therefore not just competing in a race but are simultaneously disproving a number of stereotypes about females (Bertozzi, 2003).

Promotional strategies that encourage female sports and female athletes often use a sexualised approach to portray the athlete. An example of this strategy was the 10 September issue of the *YOU* magazine, which used the strategy of feminising Caster Semenya in an attempt to make her more palatable to the public. A “make-over”; implying that something flawed had to be recreated to achieve a

new sense of empowerment. For this make-over, Semenya had to shed her “masculine” identity and embrace “femininity” through the assumption of a more gendered performance of what being female should look like (Winslow, 2012). Hoad (2010) agreed and added that the image produced was that of a “thoroughly Westernised young women,” which clearly was not an image that Semenya was comfortable with.

Athletics has historically and culturally been a male domain, and consequently, a site for the construction of the male identity. In positioning the male identity as dominant within sports, it positions women as “the other” (De Haan, Sotiriadou, & Henry, 2015). The inequality in gender in the sports arena and the fact that sport is not a level playing field is emphasised by various authors (Cooky & Dworkin, 2013; Schultz, 2011; Travers, 2008). The authors portray sport as a site where broader forms of social inequality are accepted, tolerated, and ignored. According to these authors, sport plays a definitive role in normalising and reinforcing the ideology of the gender binary and therefore male supremacy.

Sloop (2012: 82) asked the question, “Should female athletes therefore just not go too fast? Should they just not be too strong, too muscled?” It seems that the better a black female athlete is, the more likely it is that society will question her gender. This was confirmed in a study by Cooky, Dycus, and Dworkin (2013), in which the authors found that female athletes that are too muscular and do not fit into the white, Eurocentric ideals of femininity, find themselves subjected to suspicion about their gender. It is therefore not only about biological determinants, but about what an athlete should look like, how she should behave outside of sport and how she should perform when competing (Schultz, 2011).

Twitter as space for public opinion

The public has always expressed opinions about sporting events, athletes, and sports in general. These expressions of opinion used to be localised and contained to friends, family, and co-workers (Smith & Smith, 2012). With the advances in communication, however, a shift in the sports communication paradigm was created (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010), in which the public now has a platform to voice their opinions and become active participants in the creation of content. The exponential growth of social media and the increase in the number of people expressing their opinions online have resulted in public voices being part of a global network (Ceron, Curini, Iacus & Porro, 2014). Social media platforms, such as Twitter, now link sports fans around the world surrounding common interests, which in sport, includes the athlete.

Twitter is a free micro-blogging platform that can be accessed by anyone with online access. Messaging on Twitter allows the user to express opinions in a

limited 140-character message (Hambrick et al., 2010). Messages can be posted on the user's own page or on other pages. Athletes and sports teams have utilised Twitter, and the interest in that person or team can be seen in the number of followers they have. The interest in Caster Semenya can be seen in the number of followers that she has. On her original page, @Caster800m, her Twitter followers exceeded 45 000 people. Her follow-up page, @TheMightyCaster, now has a following of 6 181 people. Public opinion on Twitter has, however, not just been in support of the athlete. In reaction to media reports, Twitter users voiced their opinions and created an identity of who Semenya, as a female athlete (or non-female athlete) was.

Smith and Smith (2012) suggested that the social identity of a Twitter user must be taken into account, as it includes, amongst other elements, a person's interests and ideologies. This follows that the social identity theory may shed light on why Twitter users hold more favourable attitudes towards members of their own group whilst casting groups with different opinions as inferior. It must further be stated that people are emotionally invested in what they put on social media—a fact that was illustrated in the Semenya gender controversy. Exploiting this fact allows social media platforms to stimulate exchanges amongst people who share common interests or opinions (Woo-Young, 2005; Kook Lee et al. 2014).

Kook Lee et al. (2014), however, pointed out that, even though users tend to seek out information consistent to their own pre-existing opinions, users do not actively shy away from contact with challenging opinions. Twitter provides the structural characteristics that facilitate the encountering of diverse views and opinions, which expose people to information and opinions that are not necessarily consistent to their existing belief system. It is exactly this characteristic of Twitter that makes it an ideal tool for social researchers to gain an understanding into people's true beliefs and opinions, as responses to other people's beliefs often expose hidden opinions.

Methodology

This research note adopted a qualitative, case study research design. A sample of tweets was drawn from posts related to Caster Semenya. The chronological perimeters were set from 19 August 2009 to 1 January 2017. Content analysis was utilised to categorise and analyse tweets into themes related to how users perceive Semenya as a female athlete, and consequently, how female athletes are conceptualised. It is suggested by Hambrick et al. (2010) and Cooky, Dycus, and Dworkin (2013) that content analysis is an appropriate tool to analyse various types of communications and that this method is commonly used in sport, for example, to study the relationship between male news personnel and the sports coverage of female athletes.

Results and Discussion

Analysed tweets were categorised into five themes emergent from tweets analysed: 1) Females should not be too muscular - If you look like a man, you are a man; 2) If you are female your gender will be questioned; 3) If you are female people will try to control you; 4) It is time that gender stereotypes change; and 5) It's not about gender; it is about being African.

Females should not be too muscular – ‘If you look like a man, you are a man’

Female athletes are often encouraged to be empowered through toned bodies, while still continuing to reinforce traditional concepts of femininity. Media portrayals of female athletes habitually emphasise the athlete's physical appearance. Even though female athletes are “allowed” to be muscular, they continuously have to ensure that their bodies are commodified, objectified and sexified to ensure heterosexual desirability (Young, 2012). The result of not fitting into this category is expressed by @charulife: “*You are NOT female & can't EVER be female. Call it whatever you like, DNA doesn't lie.*”

Tweets in this theme clearly stem from culturally embedded perceptions of what a female should look like. A post by @drtlaleng illustrates this point: “*Semenya certainly showed his dominance against the female Olympians.*” Semenya clearly did not fit into the traditional concept of femininity for the Twitter users categorised into this theme.

The existence of the binary model of gender classification clearly still exists in the public's perception of the female athlete. Posts such as one by @helengrantley, “*New Caster Semenya controversy after she missed urinary drug test. Apparently she couldn't fit her dick in the bottle...*” this one by @Hnaima17, “*Bolt and Semenya both have testes rather than ovaries and a womb, so...*” and this one by @halftimebreak45, “*Caster has a pair of undescended testicles, no ovaries and male amounts of testosterone. She should not be able to race women*” confirms that sport reaffirms the sex/binary as inherent, natural and inevitable (Cooky, Dycus & Dworkin, 2013).

If you are female your gender will be questioned

According to posts categorised under this theme, the only reason why Caster's gender was questioned was because she is a female as is expressed by @PeterMersch, “*Males are not discriminated against. No one has ever questioned Bolt's ability. Why Semenya. A woman running with other women,*” and by @chiefMlu, “*some people just have superhuman strength. Why didn't they talk about Bolt who sees no competition with any human?*” The twitter user @richj61 agreed with this line of thought in his post: “*a man would not compete in a women's race, but in competition with other men he would not be tested.*”

According to Cooky and Dworkin (2013: 108), there is a reason why only female athletes are tested for sex, and why sex is the only naturally occurring advantage that is tested. This is due to the underlying belief held by sport governing bodies that *“all biological males are stronger, bigger, faster, and thus superior athletes when compared to biological woman in the same sport.”* A post by @GirlFallSeasons, *“Sad, an athlete's performance is questioned as they don't fit hetero-normative ideals, no one questions a 7ft tall NBA player,”* questions this practice of only questioning female sex as an unnatural advantage. The user @calla63620 raised a valid point that emphasises that women should simply not be too fast: *“Caster 2nd 2012 & 3 years since London results NOT so great (with respect), no complaints. Gold in Rio - people cry foul.”*

Posts in this theme raised various additional concerns about the attack on Semenya's gender and on the attack on the female athlete. The user @larapawson highlights that attacks on Semenya is not conducive to gender equity and posts that this situation is a *“High speed reverse on women's progress.”* A post by @Dkadu questions the reasons provided by the media and the IAAF to show that Semenya is not a female: *“There shouldn't be an issue, slightly higher testosterone doesn't make Caster a man as higher estrogen would make a man a woman.”*

Discrimination against strong, muscular female athletes is further built on the assumption of female frailty (Cooky, Dycus & Dworkin, 2013) as highlighted in a post by @DulcieCormack, *“the increased scrutiny is reserved for women perceived as not feminine enough.”* The user @Namz_Godlo resolves that: *“It's ludicrous that a sportswoman is attacked for excelling in a sport she trains in because the competition can't keep up!”*

If you are female people will try to control you

A prominent theme that emerged was that one knows Caster is female due to the fact that she is being controlled. An overriding opinion amongst tweets in this theme was that females, and therefore female athletes, are still oppressed and controlled. For example, @RatoK states, *“I know Caster Semenya is a woman because people are trying to control her body.”* The user @theotherche blames classification systems: *“Classification is a tool of oppression, at once meaningful & meaningless.”* An interesting comment regarding what is perceived as feminine was provided by @Michera: *“Funny how Semenya is not woman enough but Bruce/Caitlyn, Laverne Cox and the other transwomen are woman enough!”*

When female athletes receive media coverage, it is often done within socially constructed sex-role stereotypes in which the athlete is portrayed as a wife, mother, or girlfriend in a heterosexual relationship. This familial portrayal of the

female athlete is questioned in a post by @yashiks: *“Oh did you expect Caster or the rest of the female team to look like they just baked a tray of muffins?”*

Coverage of female achievements is often framed within their physical appearance and heterosexual attractiveness (Vincent, 2004). The importance of physical appearance is highlighted in a post by @Jess_Lock, who posed the question, *“Who knew it would be so easy to be considered a man?”* The fact that the physical appearance of Semenya, as a female athlete, is different, is emphasised in a post by @ddesperado: *“Athletes who win medals always have exceptional physiques.”*

It's not about gender; it's about being African

Responses to gender testing emphasised the racial basis thereof (Cooky, Dycus & Dworkin, 2013), as is clear in a post by @honest_creative, *“Gender variance has always incited scrutiny, and this scrutiny is often racialised.”* The user @Mailandguardian succinctly phrased Semenya as *“Too powerful, too black”* and therefore under question.

South Africans, in support of Semenya as a national hero, reframed the gender controversy as an example of racial bias. The user @Neo_Semoko expressed that the Caster controversy is not actually about gender *“because when they realise they not winning they always try intimidate us Africans in anyway[sic] they can.”* Posts in this theme blamed the media for promoting the Western concept of female and making inferior the African athlete. For example, take the post by @NangamsoKoza, *“Shame, they can't help themselves. That's western media and their white supremacy tendencies for u,”* and @AimsTarryn, who questioned Western media by asking, *“Would you feel better if there was an Olympics event for slow white women?”* The user @Gradeablack summarises this theme with his post, *“no, there is also a narrative that any masculine/athletic black female is a man. Stop denying it exists too.”*

It is time that gender stereotypes change

Society, through the media, continues to perpetuate a dominant Western scientific myth of gender based on a strict male/female binary that actively denies space to alternative conceptualizations of the female in sport (Young, 2012). Posts in this theme emphasised the restrictiveness of the dominant, culturally embedded gender binary. This move towards a change in stereotyping is visible in posts like @Fremancourt's, *“Hands off #CasterSemenya! Stop seeing the world through your stereotypes,”* and @Independent's, *“Caster Semenya's problem isn't that she's intersex – it's that her femininity doesn't look how we want it to.”*

Ignorance about the diverse forms femininity can take in various countries and cultures is often ignored. The user @TheRealKwizera expressed this in his post

"Opposition to #Semenya is invariably a product of convenient ignorance." Certain beliefs are so deeply embedded in cultural belief systems that it is often hard to impact and change as @Mzoytoy asserted, "She challenges patriarchy and misogyny systems, it's sad when some women perpetuate these destructive outdated power systems."

Conclusion

This study attempted to explore the public's reaction in response to media discourses around Caster Semenya as female athlete on Twitter; and to what extent the anonymity provided by Twitter may reveal gender ideologies that are otherwise not publicly expressed.

Caster Semenya broke both the traditional notions of femininity and heterosexuality and as a result, threatened the conventional norms of what is perceived and accepted as a female athlete which is evident in the emerging themes on Twitter. Responses on Twitter revealed that people still perceive the female in opposite to the male in terms of physical appearance and that, if you do not fit into the female persona accepted by society, your gender will be questioned.

However, two other themes that emerged were unexpected. One theme, "It is not about gender; it is about being African," illuminated the divide between the Global North and Africa. Contributors supporting this theme exposed another layer of discrimination that is often hidden as it is not a politically correct point of view. The other theme emphasised that being female often entail being controlled by external forces.

Gender in Sport is a much debated and contested area. It is an area of study in which people are often not honest about how they perceive the female in sport. This research note started by asking whether Twitter can be used as barometer to ascertain public perception of the female athlete. The case of Caster Semenya was ideal for the purpose because of the attention that it received in the media and the subsequent response of the public on Twitter. The themes that emerged from the tweets illustrated that the relative anonymity of Twitter facilitate a space in which people feel comfortable enough to express their honest opinion.

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