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For Better or for Worse: The Impact of Social Media on Chinese Sports Journalists

Bo Li¹, Sarah Stokowski¹, Stephen W. Dittmore¹, and Olan K. M. Scott²

Abstract
The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of social media in Chinese sports journalism. After distributing an online survey using a snowball sampling technique, a total of 133 Chinese sports journalists working in print media participated in this study. The results indicated that news gathering was reported as a primary motivation to use social media. Weibo and WeChat, two localized social networking tools, were the most commonly used tools among participants. Nearly half of participating sports journalists admitted that monitoring information on social media increased their pressure level and created workloads. The majority of sports journalists believed social media had weakened their gatekeeping role due to the increase in citizen journalists and the increase in channels and sources that users obtain news and information. The study also found that the relationship between journalists and athletes has also been altered with the advent of social media.

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Chinese sports journalists, social media, Weibo, WeChat, journalist–athlete relationship, gatekeeping

The rise of the Internet has fundamentally impacted newspapers’ sports departments through the way it delivers the news (Butler, Zimmerman, & Shutton, 2013). New technology, especially social networking sites (SNS), has particularly impacted the industry. To gain more instant news and live updates, sports consumers started to shift their content consumption from newspapers to online media, such as SNS, online portal websites, and a variety of mobile applications. This change greatly impacted newspaper industry, resulting in declining circulations, loss of revenues, and even bankruptcy (Kian & Murray, 2014).

Journalists are adapting to technological changes in order to keep their jobs and save the profession. To meet the demand of readers and also expanding readership, more and more sports journalists are incorporating social media into their jobs. Scholars (Pederson, 2013; Reed, 2011; Reed & Hansen, 2013; Sanderson, 2011a; Schultz & Sheffer, 2010; Sheffer & Schultz, 2010; Sherwood & Nicholson, 2012) have begun to understand how sports journalists use social media throughout their works and also how SNSs have impacted news production. Twitter, for instance, is used by sports journalists to gather information, express opinions, break news, and promote self (Reed, 2011; Reed & Hansen, 2013; Schultz & Sheffer, 2010; Sheffer & Schultz, 2010; Sherwood & Nicholson, 2012). Other SNSs, such as Facebook and Fan Forums, have also been used by sports journalists in gathering information and generating public opinions (Sherwood & Nicholson, 2012).

The majority of current academic research regarding the impact of social media on sports journalists has been conducted from a North American perspective; however, there is a need to explore the geographic diversity due to the increasing penetration of social media in other areas, especially in Asia Pacific region (Chan & Guillet, 2011; Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the impact of social media on Chinese sports journalism.

China has the most Internet users in the world with more than 640 million people engaging in social media (Kemp, 2014). However, the social media market in China differs from other countries. With the concern of national security, international mainstream SNSs, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, are inaccessible in China (Shrader, 2014). Thus, it is not a surprise that Chinese localized social media platforms dominate in this market and have 6 of top 10 social media sites in the world (Shrader, 2014).

Sina Weibo and WeChat are two main social media platforms utilized by Chinese social media consumers. Similar to the microblogging platform Twitter, Sina Weibo, launched in 2009, creates a platform where people are able to follow other users, expand messages, and express opinions in the length of 140 characters (Hewitt, 2012; Wu & Wang, 2011). As of August 2013, the number of users on Weibo exceeded 500 million,
25% of whom spent more than two hours a day searching news, interacting with friends, and killing spare time on this platform (Suyu Research Center, 2013).

WeChat, known in Chinese as Weixin, is a messaging application where people can privately send video and text messages and share text photos and small audios with individuals and small groups (Barboza, 2014). Launched in 2012, WeChat has nearly 400 million active users (Levin, 2014). The SNS facilitated with this social media tool, WeChat Moment, known in Chinese as Pengyouquan (Friend Zone), provides a platform where users could share their thoughts, photos, and articles with friends from their private networks (Wu, 2014).

Unlike the majority of their Western counterparts who mainly engage with Twitter and Facebook, Chinese sports journalists embrace different social media platforms for information gathering, news breaking, and social interaction. Therefore, it is worthwhile investigating if Chinese sports journalists have different perceptions toward social media compared to their Western counterparts. The current study is one of the first attempts to examine Chinese sport journalists’ perceptions toward social media. Through administering an online survey to Chinese sport journalists, the study aims to examine whether their journalistic routines, gatekeeping roles, and relationships with interviewees (especially athletes) have been impacted by engaging with social media.

**Literature Review**

*Sports Journalism and Social Media*

The emergence of SNSs creates an actual social interaction between fans and athletes (Sanderson, 2013). Traditional media provide a platform that “parasocial relationships” was established between fans and athletes (Sanderson, 2013). Introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), a parasocial interaction describes how media consumers in traditional media, such as radio, developed a bond of intimacy with media personalities. Through watching TV programs and reading their stories on traditional media, sports fans may feel that they have established parasocial relationships with their favorite athletes and teams. However, social media presents opportunities that allow sports fans to develop a closer relationship than a parasocial relationship with athletes since they not only directly follow and interact with athletes but also receive direct responses from them (Hull & Lewis, 2014). Therefore, social media not only expand parasocial interactions, but also create real social interactions between fans and athletes (Sanderson, 2013).

Even though athletes are not required by their sport organizations to engage in social media, the benefits (i.e., interaction with fans and managing information on their own terms) affiliated with social media exposure inspire them to be an active player, embracing these ever-increasing popular platforms (Bowman & Cranmer, 2014). Social media have become one of the main platforms for athletes to increase their brand awareness (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010). Social media even play a more important role for athletes who are competing in a lesser-known sport since these
athletes are given more chances to market themselves and increase their exposures (Sanderson, 2011a).

Under a traditional journalism model, sports journalists used to be a mediator of athletes, sports organizations, and fans (Bowman & Cranmer, 2014). Social media platforms now empower athletes and sports organizations to bypass sports journalists and directly disseminate their information to the fans (Pederson, 2013). Also, with the majority of traditional media incorporating new technology in their operations and media practices, social media have impacted news production and sports journalists’ working routines (Pederson, 2013). Twitter, for example, has become a new media platform used by sports journalists to search information and disseminate news and sources due to its live nature (Bowman & Cranmer, 2014; Sherwood & Nicholson, 2012).

Previous literature indicated sports journalists were mainly engaging in social media to participate in gathering information, monitoring news, breaking news, self-branding, and expressing opinions (Deprez, Mechat, & Hoebeke, 2013; Price, Farrington, & Hall, 2014; Reed, 2011; Reed & Hansen, 2013; Sheffer & Schultz, 2010; Sherwood & Nicholson, 2012). However, there is an absence of a concrete rule which explains why sports journalists are motivated to embrace social media in the media production process. For instance, Australian sport journalists reported using social media to monitor and research the news in their jobs (Sherwood & Nicholson, 2012), while journalists who cover American professional sports were more likely to use Twitter to express their opinions rather than to promote oneself, break news, and interact with followers (Sheffer & Schultz, 2010). British soccer journalists demonstrated various perceptions toward social media, as most of them were required or recommended by their organizations to use Twitter for work purposes (Price et al., 2014). Sports reporters in Flemish, one of the leading media organizations in Belgian, mainly utilized Twitter to break and distribute news, rather than search information (Deprez et al., 2013).

Scholars also identified the distinctions between different sports journalists groups’ perceptions of using social media. Younger sports journalists appeared more likely to embrace the new media trend than older journalists since younger journalists grew up with new technologies and easily accepted fresh things (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010). Sports journalists from print press were more frequently using Twitter to break news than their counterparts from other media outlets such as TV and radio (Sheffer & Schultz, 2010). Reporters from smaller media outlets more frequently interacted with their followers than other journalists, while writers from larger media outlets were more likely to refer to themselves as the first person than those from medium size media outlets (Sheffer & Schultz, 2010).

**Gatekeeping and Social Media**

Whether sports journalists’ gatekeeping role has changed with the introduction of social media has also been examined by scholars (Reed & Hansen, 2013). Gatekeeping theory was introduced by Lewin (1947) when he named housewives
“key gatekeepers” since they determined the food purchased for a household. After the idea of “gatekeeper” was introduced into mass communication research, Shoemaker and Reese (1996) developed theoretical categories by constructing the hierarchy of influences model. They summarized its impacts into five levels: individual, media routines, organization, extra media, and ideological levels.

From the majority of scholars’ perspectives, social media, especially Twitter, diminishes the gatekeeping role that traditional media used to play in a media landscape and also changes the sport business hierarchy. Gibbs and Haynes (2013) stated that Twitter provided sport media relation professionals a platform to circumvent sports journalists and directly interact with fans. The process effectively reduces the risk of miscommunication and misunderstandings. The researchers also addressed that Twitter offered a chance for the sport media relation staff to obtain fans’ inquiries and change strategies for satisfying their needs (Gibbs & Haynes, 2013). In addition, McCarthy (2011) indicated that fans could also act as gatekeepers on social media by selecting articles they were interested in, essentially, filtering media information.

However, Reed and Hansen (2013) found that American sports journalists might have different opinions about the impact of social media toward their gatekeeping roles. The researchers indicated that more than half of surveyed American professional sports journalists denied that their role as a gatekeeper of information has changed due to the popularity of the social networks. The results echoed with the Sheffer and Schultz’s (2010) study where surveyed sports journalists argued that social media not only provided a platform that the audiences could bypass journalists’ gatekeeping but also a tool of gathering news that has changed journalists’ working routines (Reed & Hansen, 2013). However, one of the limitations of this study is the researchers failed to disclose the reason why more sports journalists did not feel the change of their gatekeeping roles (Reed & Hansen, 2013). In this study, we attempt to collect voices from both sides of this discussion.

**Journalist–Athlete Relationship and Professionalism**

The journalist–athlete relationship or media–athlete relationship is a symbiotic relationship in which journalists chase athletes for obtaining more news sources and athletes need journalists to increase their publicity and exposure (Kristiansen & Broch, 2013; Kristiansen & Hanstad, 2012). However, media members and athletes may experience tension as some messages from athletes are inaccurately reported by the media. Sanderson (2011b) observed that negative framing and media inaccuracies also motivated athletes to engage with social media. He further explained that athletes can directly disseminate messages to the public on social media without relying on media members, which could reduce the risk of misinterpretation, being framed and exaggeration (Sanderson, 2011a). With this change, there is a need to investigate whether the intimacy between athletes and journalists has altered as social media become an important tool for athletes to increase publicity.
In addition, sports journalists are also given more chances to access to the content of elite athletes through a variety of social media platforms, raising a new challenge for them on how to separate their professional and private relationships with athletes (Reed, 2011). Facebook, for instance, has provided more opportunities for journalists to gather information from athletes’ private contents including their pictures, opinions, and videos. Sports journalists now face a new dilemma as to whether or not they should use the readily available information on social media as news sources (Sherwood & Nicholson, 2012).

Even though more and more sports journalists embrace new technology, Schultz and Sheffer (2010) noted that current reporters still accepted traditional norms and principles of professionalism. For instance, a majority of newspaper journalists refuse to break news on social media because it is not in the best interest of the organizations they are working for (Sherwood & Nicholson, 2012). Additionally, some sports journalists acknowledge that it was unethical to include information from athletes’ private profiles in their reporting when it was not permitted from athletes themselves (Sherwood & Nicholson, 2012).

Social Media and Newspapers in China

As mentioned previously, the inaccessibility of international mainstream social media (i.e., Facebook and Twitter) has resulted in the popularity of localized social media platforms, such as Weibo and WeChat. Therefore, Chinese social media users have shown different usage habits compared to Western customers. Even though Weibo and Twitter have similar functionalities (i.e., both services restrict users’ messages within 140 characters and create a follower–followee network), the user’s behavior differ. Gao, Abel, Houben, and Yu (2012) revealed that Weibo users were less likely than Twitter users to utilize a hashtag which might help their messages receive more attention and raise possible discussion. Additionally, Chinese social media users preferred using a by-product of their social web activities to generate their messages and mentioned less about organization’s information than Twitter users. With regards to the motivation of Chinese sports fans who follow athletes on Weibo, Park, Li, and Ditmore (2015) asserted that fans were motivated by obtaining specific knowledge of rules, skills, and strategies from the athletes, spending free time, and expressing support to their favorite athletes.

Weibo has been used as a tool for Chinese journalists to break news, to search information, and for self-branding (Bei, 2013). Zhang (2011) argued that the Weibo had a limited impact on Chinese sport journalists since it was not used to promote their works. A majority of surveyed journalists stated that searching for information and news sources were the main reasons for them to use Weibo (Zhang, 2011).

Besides Weibo, WeChat is a messaging application which allows individuals to privately text and send video messages, share text photos and small audios with individuals and small groups, follow brands, and connect with new users through location services (Barboza, 2014; Breiner, 2003). Compared to Weibo, WeChat’s
messages are private, but it does not have zombie accounts (like Weibo) since all accounts are linking to an actual phone number (Breiner, 2003). Marketers enjoy using WeChat due to the fact that the messages they send are more likely to be viewed by their subscribers (Breiner, 2003).

WeChat has been defined as a cross-platform communication tool that contains the main functions from both Facebook and WhatsApp (Wu, 2014). Similar as the features of Whatsapp, WeChat can be utilized by users to send voice and text messages with either individuals or groups. WeChat also provides a social networking service called “WeChat Moment” that incorporates the main features of Facebook, where users could share their thoughts, pictures, videos, and articles or links from other websites with friends of users’ personal network (Wu, 2014). Different from Facebook, which invites both strong and weak connections, WeChat’s network is based on strong ties since all contents of WeChat Moments can only be viewed and accessed by user’s friends, rather than all WeChat users (Wu, 2014).

News organizations have begun to incorporate WeChat into their reporting. For instance, the BBC used WeChat as it reported on the 2014 Indian general election (O’Danovan, 2014). Since WeChat allows users to create personal profiles or subscription profiles, it benefits the media’s distribution (O’Danovan, 2014). WeChat has also been proven as an effective tool to reach users or subscribers because these messages “ping” straight onto users’ mobile phones and appear as a notification, therefore users can read messages immediately (Breiner, 2003; O’Danovan, 2014).

The increased popularity of social media among Chinese media consumers has also significantly jeopardized the traditional media industry, especially print media. As of the end of 2013, China was considered as one of the biggest newspaper industries in the world with 1,915 newspapers (All-China Journalists Association [ACJA], 2014). Among all newspapers, more than 400 were Communist Party newspapers, 20% of the total. Over 300 newspapers were mainly focused on different local markets, 15% of the total. Additionally, there were 700 newspapers reporting certain industry news and more than 200 newspapers were covering life services (ACJA, 2014).

The entire print media industry has been experiencing a dramatic decline in recent years, including decreasing readerships and dropping circulations. The revenue of the entire industry has dropped by 6% from 2011 to 12 billion dollars in 2014 (Deloitte, 2014). In addition, the number of circulation and sales of entire newspapers industry in 2014 has decreased 30.5% compared to 2013 (Chen, 2015). With the new media involved and the challenges it brought, this study will examine how Chinese sport journalists look upon the impacts of social media in their jobs.

**Research Questions**

As Kim, Sohn, and Choi (2011) suggested, SNSs users in different countries may have different purposes and motives of adopting new technology due to their unique social and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, since Chinese sports journalists are engaged with different social media platforms, they may have different perceptions
toward the impact of SNSs in their work. This study attempts to measure how social media have impacted Chinese sport journalists’ working routines. To better measure Chinese sport journalists’ perceptions toward social media, this study is driven by three research questions.

**Research Question 1:** What are Chinese sports journalists’ overall perceptions toward the role of social media in their jobs?

**Research Question 2:** Has the journalist’s gatekeeping role changed after engaging with social media?

**Research Question 3:** Has the relationship between journalists and interviewees (such as athletes, coaches, and professional team members) altered since social media now provide interviewees a platform to break news, make announcement, and interact with fans directly by themselves?

**Method**

**Participants and Procedure**

Snowball sampling was used in this study. Researchers contacted 15 directors of mainstream newspapers in China and asked the directors to distribute an e-mail to sports journalists containing a hyperlink of an online survey.

Snowball sampling is a recruitment strategy that utilizes participants’ networks to gain access to a specific population (Thomson, 1997). This sampling technique is an efficient method to reach a specific target group in a short period of time and with minimal costs (Sadler, Lee, Lim, & Fullerton, 2010). Since the contact information of Chinese sports journalists is inaccessible to the public, contacting the directors of sport sections in mainstream newspapers is critical to reach this target population easily and effectively.

The data collection procedure lasted for 3 weeks in September, 2014. A total of 133 sports journalists from 18 provinces in China participated in this study. However, due to the snowball sampling procedure used in this study, a response rate was not available to report because researchers were unsure how many journalists have received the e-mail. All of the collected surveys were effective since no missing information existed during the data collection.

**Measurement**

An online survey consisting of 25 questions was conducted in this study for measuring Chinese sport journalists’ overall perceptions toward the impacts of social media in their jobs. The survey consisted of 10 demographic items (i.e., gender, age, years of working experiences, role, type of printed media, the amount of circulation, main responsibilities, and so forth), 12 multiple choices questions with measuring their attitudes toward social media. These questions consisted of the frequency of social media
usage, job security, motivation, main purposes of using Weibo and WeChat and social media policies. Questions included, “What kinds of social media do you use for your jobs?” “What is the motivation of setting up your social media accounts?” “Does your media outlet encourage you to use social media for your work?” “What are main purposes of using Weibo/WeChat in your job?” and “What is the most effective way to get the source of the news?” Possible answers to the questions were created based on findings from previous literature, and each question also contained an “other” option that allowed users to provide other thoughts to the questions.

This online survey also contained three open-ended questions to measure sports journalists’ opinions regarding the impacts of social media in the gatekeeper role that journalists used to play, the relationship between journalists and interviewees (athletes, coaches, sports officials, and public relations staffs) as well as their overall attitudes toward the impact of social media to their jobs.

Since the survey was provided both in Chinese and English, back translation was employed based on Brislin’s (1990) suggestion. The questionnaire was developed in Chinese first and then translated into English by a researcher who was fluent in both Chinese and English. The English questionnaire was then checked by an American professor in sport management for quality assurance. To ensure the accuracy and equivalence of the translation, the translated survey was then converted back into Chinese by the first scholar. This process ensured that there were no discrepancies between the Chinese version and the English version.

Data Analysis
Data were analyzed by using SPSS Version 22.0 for Windows. Descriptive statistics for demographic information was employed to understand the distribution of participants in this study.

Content analysis was also conducted in this study for analyzing three open-ended questions and addressing Research Questions 2 and 3. Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicated that member checking, which means the subject reviews the transcript for authentication before the analysis process, is the effective method for increasing trustworthiness and reducing bias. The answers from respondents were coded and analyzed separately by two Chinese native speakers who majored in journalism and sport management, respectively, and they reached an agreement in categories after the discussion. After categorizing from data, a Chinese researcher translated contents into English first, and the other native Chinese researcher translated them back into Chinese to test the equivalence of both contents. The comparison of contents in both Chinese and English was conceptually equivalent.

Results
A total of 133 participants completed the survey, gender was made up of 78.2% male ($n = 102$) and 21.8% female ($n = 21$). The mean age of participants was
31.93 (SD = 4.73) with an average 8.66 (SD = 4.63) years of media industry working experience. The results indicated the majority of participated sports journalists worked for provincial newspapers (56.4%) and used both Weibo (94.21%) and WeChat (99.17%). Among all participants, 90.23% had their major duty as writers or journalists, 9.77% indicated their main duty as editors. For a more comprehensive look at these samples’ demographic, refer to Table 1.

### Overall Perceptions Toward the Roles of Social Media

The first research question looks into the overall perceptions of Chinese sports journalists toward social media. The results indicated that checking their social media was a part of Chinese sports journalists’ routines, with more than 88% of participants utilizing a social media on a daily basis. Gathering news (n = 97, 80.2%) was

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (N = 133)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>31.93 (4.73)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience (years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>8.82 (4.63)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (N = 133)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>78.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duty (N = 133)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>90.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columnist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of circulation (N = 133)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 300,000</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>31.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300,000–500,000</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>30.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500,000–800,000</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 800,000</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>20.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of media (N = 133)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>58.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evening paper</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>25.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sports newspapers</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazine</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main sports coverage (N = 133)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional football (soccer)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional basketball</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olympic sports</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>38.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International sports (tennis/golf)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounts verified (N = 133)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>60.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>39.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
reported as the primary motivation for using social media, followed by promoting their news works ($n = 12, 9.9\%$), being requested by their news organizations ($n = 10, 8.3\%$), and self-branding ($n = 2, 1.7\%$).

**Perceptions toward verified social media accounts, social media policies.** With regard to the main benefits of owning a verified social media account, 72.9\% of respondents ($n = 97$) mentioned that reification enhanced the trustworthiness and reliability of news and information they posted on social media and 42.11\% ($n = 56$) revealed that it was beneficial for personal promotion. Meanwhile, another 7.5\% of participants ($n = 10$) reported other. Seventy-one percent of respondents proposed that the media outlets they work for encouraged them to engage in using social media, while 8.3\% of sports journalists noted that their organizations did not encourage them to use social media. Nearly 21\% of participants were unsure about the attitudes of their organizations toward social media. In terms of related social media regulations and rules enforced by news organizations, 81\% of candidates indicated that they were clear about these rules, while 11.6\% of participants were not familiar with rules. There were also 7.4\% of sports journalists unsure if their news outlets have such regulations.

Weibo (85.7\%) and WeChat (90.2\%) have been recorded as the most commonly used social media platforms among Chinese sports journalists. Other SNS, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Weishi, and Renren, were also mentioned by 14.28\% of the respondents. The results also indicated that Weibo and WeChat were used for different purposes within the workplace (see Table 2).

**Impacts toward traditional media.** The impact of social media toward sports journalists’ working environment was also reported in this study. More than 80\% of respondents felt social media threatened the traditional print media, and 48\% of journalists admitted that their pressure level was higher than before due to the fact that monitoring information on social media increased their workloads. Only 14\% of participants noted that “social media make my job easier” since they are now able to access more information and obtain more news sources on this platform.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. The Different Purposes of Using Weibo and WeChat.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weibo</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main Purposes in Jobs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Gather information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Share personal opinions</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Interact with followers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Break news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Contact athletes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Weibo (85.7\%) and WeChat (90.2\%) have been recorded as the most commonly used social media platforms among Chinese sports journalists. Other SNS, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Weishi, and Renren, were also mentioned by 14.28\% of the respondents. The results also indicated that Weibo and WeChat were used for different purposes within the workplace (see Table 2).
The majority of surveyed Chinese journalists indicated that their working routines and lives had been altered by the involvement of social media, even though nearly 68% of respondents still insisted that accumulated sources and personal contacts remained the most effective approach to gather the first-hand news resources, compared with news sources provided on social media (26%) and other channels (6%).

The content analysis of one open-ended question revealed that more than 81% of participants demonstrated a positive attitude regarding the impact of social media. However, some newspaper journalists expressed their concerns of “the loss of readership” for newspapers, and “potential job insecurity” for themselves in the future.

**Impacts on Journalists’ Gatekeeping Role**

The second research question assessed whether the gatekeeping role that sports journalists used to play has been changed by social media. Among all participants, more than 77.44% of surveyed sports journalists \( n = 103 \) felt that social media diminished their news gatekeeping role, while 30 respondents (22.56%) said it did not.

**More news sources and channels.** Among the respondents who insisted that their roles of gatekeepers had changed since they began to use social media, most responses referenced the work-related influence brought on by social media. For instance, Respondent 55 mentioned, “We could get access to more news sources than before, but we also have to learn how to identify the authenticity of these online sources.” Some participants acknowledged the change in the content they produce. “Journalists’ role of publishing news may have been diminished, but we have more channels where we could express our opinions on certain issues now.”

**A lowering threshold of being a journalist.** Some mentioned that “the traditional media is no longer the only platform that disseminates news to the public” (Respondent 65), and “the appearance of the self-media creates a new chance for everyone” (Respondent 28). With more and more people able to disseminate news on social media, Respondent 120 voiced that “the threshold of being a journalist is lower nowadays with the increasing number of citizen journalists.” The respondent continued to explain, “Some sports fans know some athletes and professional players personally, and they could always obtain updated information from them and share them on SNSs.”

**Job security.** Some participants emphasized that sports journalists were forced to improve their skills and abilities in regard to social media use in their jobs. As Respondent 35 noted, “Journalists nowadays are required to master more skills in the new media era. Since we have fewer opportunities to break news, we are required to quickly adjust to the change and publish more in-depth reports.” Some sports journalists were also concerned about their job security. For example, Respondent 73 said, “we now have a lot more pressure than before, and we are concerned that some of us may lose our jobs one day.”
For the journalists who did not perceive any change had taken place in their work practices, they argued that “the authenticity of news sources on social media cannot be guaranteed” (Respondent 97), and “media members still are responsible for helping the general public to identify the authenticity of news source on social media” (Respondent 21). Respondent 43 considered that “journalists and news media are still the subject of news publication.” According to Respondent 55, “traditional media still have an advantage over the new media as audiences are willing to obtain the most accurate information.”

**Impacts on Journalist–Athlete Relationships**

The third research question aimed to interpret if the relationship between interviewers and athletes has been altered by social media since athletes, coaches, and sports organizations are now able to bypass traditional media and directly disseminate information to the public.

*Distance from athletes becomes widener.* The results indicated that more participants \( n = 74, 55.64\% \) felt that the journalist–athlete relationship was altered with the involvement of social media since the interviewee played a more active role in interacting with the public. The majority of journalists in this group explained, “We can feel that we start to have some distances with some athletes nowadays since they rely less on us to disseminate their information” (Respondent 17). As Respondent 112 said, for instance, High profile athletes, in particular, are empowered on social media. These athletes seem more likely to break news on social media, and journalists are harder to obtain more news sources from them directly. These high profile athletes could now completely get rid of counting upon traditional media to communicate with fans.

Respondent 90 shared an example stating “athletes sometimes tell us to gather information from their social media, rather than share with us directly.”

*Intimacy enhancement.* Nonetheless, some participants disclosed that at times social media could enhance the bond of the intimacy between journalists and athletes since it provides a new channel for journalists to connect with athletes. As respondent 27 explained, “when Chinese male chess team won the World Championships last year, the head coach created a new WeChat discussion group between athletes and journalists where we could conduct after-game interviews with athletes directly.” Respondent 54 mentioned, “Social media could help me to contact some athletes whom I was unable to access in the past and provide an opportunity for me to schedule an interview with them.”

*Irreplaceable of face-to-face interview.* Fifty-five participants (41.35%) argued that their relationships with athletes has not changed due to social media. The majority of
journalists in this group mentioned that “social media only influence the way we work, but it has not impacted the journalist–athlete relationship. It cannot replace traditional face-to-face interviews.” Some participants believed that “only few Chinese athletes understand how to use social media to disseminate news” (Respondent 58) and “more athletes still prefer disseminating their messages through a face-to-face interview with a reporter from the traditional media” (Respondent 102). Respondent 88 explained,

China is a conservative country where people do not normally express their true feelings on social media platforms. Furthermore, considering the potentially uncontrollable risks associating with social media, the majority of Chinese athletes are not using these new platforms to disseminate news.

From Respondent 35’s opinions, although journalists sometimes obtain the news sources from athletes’ social media, journalists will still contact them to gather more in-depth information about the news. “Journalists and athletes are mutually dependent on each other, and our relationship will not be changed fundamentally because of social media” (Respondent 35).

Discussion

As one of the first attempts to evaluate how Chinese sports journalists’ perceive the impact of social media in their job practices, this study helps push forward an understanding of a variety of social media platforms in Chinese market. Since the majority of traditional research has focused on the impact of Twitter and had a North American perspective, this study fills a gap of providing insights on how Weibo and WeChat, two Chinese localized social media platforms, impact on sports journalism.

The results of this study indicated that gathering news is a primary motive for Chinese sports journalists to engage with social media, compared to other motives, such as self-promotion and interacting with followers. This finding is different from Schultz and Sheffer’s (2010) study which mainly surveyed American sports journalists. Schultz and Sheffer found that American print media journalists mainly utilized Twitter for news breaking and work promotion. As mentioned previously, sports journalists from different countries display different purposes for engaging with social media. Therefore, it may explain why Chinese sports journalists have different purposes of using social media from American counterparts. However, even though social media have been considered as the main tool to gather information, participants in this study felt that accumulated personal contact is still the most effective approach to gather the first-hand news. Similarly, their Australian counterparts also considered making phone calls or face-to-face interviews as the most reliable approach to obtain news sources (Sherwood & Nicholson, 2012).

The results also mentioned that Chinese sports journalists are under more pressure than before since social media were introduced. The pressures that sports
journalists face could come from both inside and outside of a news organization. From inside the news organization, “the interdependent parts all have specific and standardized functions and roles” (Laucella, 2013, p. 95), and outside the organization, news sources, revenue sources, and economic environment may impact the content they contribute (Laucella, 2013; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). The pervasiveness of social media accelerated the process. For instance, social media brought journalists more pressures to break news than their competitors in traditional media market (Kian & Murray, 2014) due to its features of high-speed dissemination. Thus, traditional journalists may find harder to obtain exclusive news sources and break news due to social media.

While Weibo and WeChat have been reported as the two most commonly used SNSs among Chinese sport journalists, the results of this study revealed that both tools were utilized for different purposes among participated journalists. Weibo is mainly used to gather information, interact with followers, and share personal opinions. The findings are supported by a survey, conducted in 2010 by PR Newswire, in which more than two thirds of the 2,503 Chinese journalists who work as print, broadcast, and online media considered Weibo as a main tool to obtain information and conduct interviews (Dowell, 2010). Bei (2013) explained the process of how Weibo could be used by Chinese journalists in their works: Professional journalists often obtain the news sources on Weibo first and then conduct follow-up interviews to expand the story. Bei also insisted that the way journalists used Weibo differ from casual social media consumers, who just pass stories around and attempt to increase their awareness.

Compared to Weibo, this study has shown that WeChat is used primarily by Chinese sports journalists to share opinions, gather information, and contact athletes. As a new, fast-growing social networking application, few studies have examined the motivation and gratification of WeChat users. Lien and Cao (2014) found that WeChat users were motivated by the following three factors: entertainment, sociality, and information. As mentioned previously, WeChat has combined characteristics of many other social networking tools, including Facebook and WhatsApp. WeChat users to send out text and voice messages to other friends, which are similar as the functions of WhatsApp, and it also allows users to set up personal pages where customers can share thoughts with friends within the WeChat networks through its function—WeChat Moments (Wu, 2014). The intimacy and privacy WeChat incubates may trigger sports journalists to demonstrate their thoughts on WeChat Moments since the application cannot to be accessed by unknown users (Wu, 2014). Moreover, since the majority of members in their WeChat networks are likely to be their friends, colleagues, peers, and the athletes, WeChat also provides journalists a platform to gather information from the contents shared by other users (such as their peers). In addition, journalists could also use WeChat to contact athletes if they need to do follow-up stories with them due to its basic features (i.e., mobile messaging application).

Chinese sports journalists displayed a serious concern about their journalistic roles and their career prospects with the proliferation of social media. The results
showed that over three fourths of the participants in this study acknowledged their gatekeeping role had changed, which was much higher than that of a previous study targeting their American counterparts. In Reed and Hansen’s (2013) study, less than half of 77 surveyed professional American sports journalists believed that their gatekeeper role was diminished in the Web 2.0 period. Chinese participants provided three reasons that perhaps contributed to their pessimism toward their future career with the advent of new technology: (1) media consumers have more channels to gather information and news sources, (2) the threshold of being a journalist is lower with the increasing number of “citizen journalists,” and (3) their positions require more skills including how to use social media effectively. Similar concerns have also been revealed in other studies. Kian and Murray (2014) noted that the rise of Twitter negatively impacted the quality of professional sports reporting since sports journalists still prefer to be the first ones to disseminate the information. Even if a journalist is the first to break news on Twitter, such efforts could be ignored since the news could be retweeted and resent multiple times in few minutes, and the initial news breakers will not be noticed (Kian & Murray, 2014). In addition, social media allow sports fans to act as gatekeepers since fans are empowered to select articles and videos that satisfy their personal interests (McCarthy, 2011). Therefore, during the media production process, journalists’ gatekeeping role has been diminished.

Chinese sports journalists shared different perspectives in regards to whether the athlete–journalist relationship had been impacted, even altered, with the advent of social media. Some believed that their intimacy with athletes has become closer since they are able to assess more athletes’ private information, while others admitted that they felt the distance with some athletes is wider because elite athletes are no longer depending on media to disseminate their messages. More than one third of Chinese sports journalists still believe that their relationship with athletes has remained the same. That being said, although athletes are given more power to disseminate messages and break news on social media, traditional media will still be the main channel for them to explain their decisions and provide in-depth information.

In this study, Chinese sports journalists acknowledged social media regulations applied in their news organizations but also believe that there is a lack of training regarding best practices in social media. Such concerns have also been shown in other studies. Price, Farrington, and Hall (2014) revealed that sports journalists now face a problem of when and how much information they should reveal on Twitter since they have the ability to access athletes and information.

**Conclusion and Implications**

With an increasing number of sports journalists embracing new technology, this population is encountering different challenges and opportunities. The significant challenges for print media professionals contain utilizing the newest technology to product, write and interview; identifying accurate information from a variety of sources, as well as increasing the difficulty of breaking news (Pederson, 2013).
Tech-savvy sportswriters could also obtain more opportunities including expand their readership and obtain additional chances and sources to conduct in-depth story reporting (Pederson, 2013). The findings from this study assist us to deeply understand the impact of social media on sports journalism from a Chinese perspective. It has also displayed obstacles, pressures, and new challenges that Chinese sports journalists are dealing with as the advent of social media. The results could assist news organization administers have a better understanding of a greater impact made by social media to the traditional printing media industry in China. The study has showed that the majority of Chinese sports journalists still only utilize social media as a news gathering tool, rather than a self-promotion tool. Since the popularity of the concept of “We Media” on Chinese social media, especially WeChat, journalists should consider how to use this free media platform to help achieve their professional goals.

As with all research, this study has its caveats. Even though the snowball sampling method can be used access to our target population, findings of this study may not be generalized to the overall population. Also, the study only explores attitudes of Chinese newspapers journalists toward social media, and further research should be conducted on how Chinese sports journalists from other media outlets such as websites, television, and radio observe the impacts of social media in their working routines.

The results of this study indicated that Chinese sports journalists utilized Weibo and WeChat differently throughout their work practices. However, the similarities and differences between Chinese social media consumers who utilized Weibo and WeChat have yet to be identified. The future research should continue to investigate the uniqueness of these two Chinese social media tools for assisting sport marketers in better understanding Chinese social media users’ motives, preferences, and gratifications. Through understanding the uniqueness of Chinese mainstream social media platforms, international sport marketers can apply more effective social media strategies to enhance overall awareness and generating economic benefits.

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