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Management Whitepaper

An Audience Interpretation of Professional Athlete Self-Presentation on Twitter

Katie Lebel and Karen Danylchuk

I. Research Problem

The purpose of this paper is to explore audience interest in the self-presentation strategies of professional athletes on Twitter and ascertain the self-presentation strategies that are perceived as most important to an athlete's digital image. This research is important because it indicates not only what Twitter users are interested in, but also what types of content potential non-users might be enticed by. The study offers evidence of broad Twitter awareness among a varied demographic of sport consumers and suggests that sport fans may not be as interested in the personal details of their favourite athletes' lives as previously proposed. The research also highlights an apparent disconnect between how athletes are electing to present themselves on Twitter and what audiences report being most interested in. This article would be useful to media and communication practitioners, particularly those involved with the development of social media strategy or athlete branding. Other sport managers attempting to keep up with the rapid growth of social media and its impact on their business may also find this article useful.

II. Issues

In a competitive marketplace, understanding audience interest in the different ways in which athletes elect to present themselves on Twitter exists as an important and practical research extension—to build a loyal audience, one must listen to one's audience. By benchmarking the preferences of sport consumers, both Twitter users and non-users, we establish a compass with which to direct the development of best practices.

This research is based on Erving Goffman's theory of self-presentation and the premise that individuals compose preferred versions of themselves for public consumption. While performance exists as a critical component in any public figure's identity, the primary performances of professional athletes have traditionally revolved around their role as a sport competitor on the field of play and extended into extra-textual dimensions such as interviews and advertising/sponsorship endorsements. These traditional outlets for self-presentation have all tended

toward relatively formal performances, or what Goffman would refer to as *front stage performances*. With the onset of social media, athletes have been introduced to a new and increasingly intimate performance dimension centered on their everyday lives and the provision of insider perspectives. Goffman would consider this type of self-presentation a *backstage performance*. While some athletes have been able to flourish and grow their brands using the more personalized means of self-presentation available through Twitter, headlines abound detailing the ill-advised blunders committed by many athletes and little research exists that is able to inform effective social media strategy on the very public Twitter stage.

We argue that as the popularity of Twitter has intensified, the digital self-presentation of athletes has not only become more important to an athlete's overall brand, but that the information presented by athletes is now consumed by a much larger and more diverse audience not necessarily limited to Twitter users. Both traditional and new media news outlets now regularly report on and reference the information shared by athletes on Twitter. This journalistic practice has in many cases allowed sport consumers that may be non-Twitter users to be just as familiar with the digital self-presentation tactics of athletes as sport consumers who attain their information directly from Twitter.

Building on the idea that Twitter is an extension of athlete brand, this research uniquely acknowledges that sport consumers' perceptions of athletes are now influenced by digital performances regardless of whether or not sport consumers are interacting with athletes face-to-face or reporting as Twitter users or non-users. The purpose of this research is to develop a better understanding of overall audience interest in ten different self-presentation strategies employed by athletes on Twitter and establish which self-presentation strategies are perceived as most important to an athlete's digital image. We hope this new approach will allow us to better inform marketing initiatives and establish best practices relative to athlete content production and digital self-presentation strategy.

III. Summary

A self-administered online survey was created to measure audience interest in ten different athlete self-presentation strategies (see Table 1). The survey was sent to a snowball sample of 405 golf consumers. The most noteworthy athlete self-presentation strategy reported was that of the *sport insider*, a term used to denote the presentation of behind-the-scenes sport specific information. The audience perceived sport-related self-presentation strategies as most effective to an athlete's overall brand. Overall, the study suggested that fans may not be as interested in the personal details of an athlete's life outside of sport as previously suggested. A disconnect between the self-presentation strategies being employed by athletes on Twitter and the strategies sport consumers reported being most interested in was also identified.

Table 1
Athlete Self-Presentation Strategies

Type	Definition	Example
Backstage Performances		
The conversationalist	Interaction with fellow athletes, celebs, friends, and family.	"@JustinRose, I saw you shank it on 14 today. Welcome to the club, mate."
The sport insider	Insider sport information.	"All packed and ready to go to Augusta National in the morning. Very excited as per normal like a little school kid. It just has that buzz."
The behind-the-scenes reporter	Behind-the-scenes information about an athlete's life.	"So excited for my kids to wake up. Seeing them off to school, then going to the new house as furniture starts to go in. 2 weeks to install."
The super fan	Discussion of an athlete's personal sport interests.	"Come on Arsenal! A win would be so huge. So glad my mum is sitting in my seats today. Enjoy the game mummies. Bring them luck!"
The informer	Sharing of information that an athlete believes is important or interesting.	"There's a great new golf app by @mastercard that you guys can download on iTunes. Instructional & fun. You will love it."
The analyst	Sharing of athlete opinions or life musings.	"Can Johnny Miller actually say anything positive? Er no."
Front Stage Performances		
The publicist	Sharing of athlete promotional information.	"Just done my column in the @huffingtonpost. Check it out at the link http://tinyurl.com/c3sd2b5 . Enjoy."
The superintendent	Checking in with followers via short athlete updates.	"Good morning tweeps! How is everyone today?"
The fan aficionado	Athlete engagement in fan interaction.	"Friends it's been a lot of fun on twitter today! I look forward to answering more of your questions tomorrow. To answer Ross' question about the last time I flew coach, it was today."
The brand manager	Athlete provision of formal acknowledgements.	"Happy Mother's Day to all that celebrate today. I hope you have a really nice day!"

Greater audience interest was highlighted in the less formal backstage performance strategies of athletes when compared to more formal front stage athlete performances. Significant gender variance was identified for only the *sport insider* strategy, with males reporting greater interest in the sport preferences and fandom of athletes than females. Significant age variance was found in all ten self-presentation strategies with 18- to 34-year-olds reporting consistently greater interest in all content than those aged 55 and older.

A commanding 96% of the audience surveyed reported being aware of Twitter with a further 42% noting that they come across Twitter references in the sport media on a daily basis. Interestingly, there were no significant differences in interest reported between Twitter users and non-users. The broad spanning Twitter awareness reported by this audience accompanied by comparatively low Twitter usage rates is evidentiary of the fact that other media outlets (aside from Twitter) appear to be extending the social networking site's overall reach—sport consumers may not necessarily need to have a Twitter account to be aware of Twitter happenings or form perceptions of the digital brands being established on the site. This finding underscores the importance of digital self-presentation to athlete brand as audiences may be expanding beyond identified Twitter followers.

IV. Analysis

By breaking down Twitter self-presentation into specific strategies, we are able to deconstruct behavioural tendencies. The interpretive nature of this work allows us to make strides toward the development of more strategic online self-presentation techniques. Our findings offer evidence to suggest that individuals invest meaning in the impression management techniques digitally employed by athletes and illustrate that sport consumers have content preferences relative to the information they learn about athletes.

From a practical standpoint, these results are important because they indicate not only what Twitter users are interested in, but also what types of content potential non-users might be enticed by. Twitter enables athletes to paint a far more detailed picture of their life; however, it also endeavours athletes to express their personality for greater public consumption. Self-presentation theory helps us to better understand this new dynamic of performance. While Twitter provides sport consumers with increased information with which to shape their perceptions of athletes, it also forces athletes to evolve their self-presentation habits from a primarily front stage performance to what is now a more focused backstage performance. While our audience reported relatively low interest in the self-presentation strategies under investigation, a clear preference was identified for the discussion of sport. Given this finding, it would appear to behave athletes negotiating their digital self-presentation strategy to carefully consider the publication of backstage performances that include personal opinions and details of their life. If audiences are most interested in learning about the insider details of an athlete's sport, athletes may be best served to play to their strengths and focus their time on Twit-

ter around sport-related content. Ultimately, this research teaches us that athletes may not need to divulge the personal details of their lives in order to be relevant. According to our sport consumer sample, athletes who are able to cultivate their Twitter presentation around sport and cater content specifically to the sport fan experience will enjoy loyal Twitter followings and grow their brands based on the knowledge and skills that brought them their initial success.

V. Discussion/Implications

Social media has forced great change on the presentational culture of professional athletes. Images that were once tightly controlled by public relations professionals are now largely shaped by athletes themselves and expected to include far more diverse and personal dimensions of self. This makes it all the more important to develop an understanding of what drives online sport consumption and what content best attracts the interest of sport consumers. This type of knowledge might assist both athletes and sport communication professionals in appropriately tailoring self-presentation strategies to develop positive fan engagement and establish brand equity. In a similar manner, audience research of this nature can inform the development of social media strategy by highlighting potential brand benefits and best practices while potentially avoiding damaging missteps.

While a limited sample, this research serves as a first step in providing audience feedback specific to the digital self-presentation employed by athletes on Twitter. Our findings might be used to direct social media education programs for athletes/teams or serve as a point of reference in the development of athlete social media strategy or digital branding initiatives. Based on our findings, practitioners might find it productive to promote athlete reflection on sport performance, discussion of fitness routines, the provision of information regarding sport equipment developments, behind-the-scenes tournament information, and expert sport advice by way of tips and practice drills. Audience interest was also comparatively high with regard to athlete interaction with fellow athletes, the provision of general sport information, sport opinion, and sport analysis while the incorporation of both humour and multimedia were also noted as important components of athlete tweets.

As the social media platform becomes increasingly saturated and competition mounts, success on the exceedingly public Twitter stage will require more calculated performances by athletes. This research contributes to the digital construction and refinement of professional athlete self-presentation by confirming the value of authentic backstage performances among a sport audience, providing evidence of a broader potential audience, and offering quantitative support for a greater interest in sport-specific Twitter content.