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An Audience Interpretation of Professional Athlete Self-Presentation on Twitter

Katie Lebel
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Abstract

This study explored how sport consumers interpret athlete self-presentation on Twitter and distinguished the perceived importance of digital self-presentation on athlete image. A self-administered online survey based on Goffman's (1959) theoretical framework of self-presentation was created to measure audience interest in the digital presentation strategies used by athletes. A definition and specific example were provided for 10 self-presentation strategies, after which participants were asked to rate their level of interest ($N = 377$). The most salient strategy reported was that of the sport insider. Participants reported greatest interest in the discussion of athlete performance, athlete fitness, and an athlete's sport expertise. The study suggests 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 report being most interested in was also identified.

Keywords: *self-presentation; Twitter; professional athletes; digital marketing; audience interpretation*

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The technological innovation of social media has revolutionized the world of sport. A study conducted by the sport medicine company KT Tape suggested that as many as 83% of sports fans now check sports social media sites while watching sport on television; a further 63% of fans have reported browsing sport social media sites while in attendance at live sporting events (KT Tape, 2012). The Perform sports media group noted that more than 26% of sport fans now use social media to follow leagues, teams, and players (Laird, 2012). The revolutionary communication tool has completely transformed traditional sport consumption practices (Hambrick, 2012) and become a central instrument in the brand management strategies employed by sport professionals around the world (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012).

Within the social media landscape, the microblogging site Twitter is widely recognized as the sport industry's social network of choice (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). With many of Twitter's most momentous occasions tied to sport, athletes may even deserve credit for spurring the broader popularity of Twitter (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). As of January 2014, there were 8,171 verified professional athlete Twitter accounts according to the website *tweeting-athletes.com*; an increase of more than 55% from numbers gathered in January 2012. Well-followed Twitter athletes have come to enjoy unprecedented power and influence through the Twitter medium. For example, the current social media monarch among athletes, Cristiano Ronaldo, can now connect with more than 17 million followers. While perhaps initially a novelty, even a toy, there is little doubt that the upsurge in Twitter use across all major sport constituents and stakeholders has seen the communications tool strategically evolve into an impactful marketing maneuver.

Twitter's overwhelming success in sport is largely linked to the novel opportunity it offers athletes to interact directly with their fans (Pegoraro, 2010). It is the ultimate peek behind the curtain—Twitter removes the filtered communication traditionally associated with professional athlete interaction and allows athletes to present themselves as they wish to be perceived. This as opposed to how a sport journalist elects to portray them. Fundamentally, this sets social media up as a tool for athlete self-presentation. Self-presentation can be defined as a process by which people convey to others the type of person they are or the kinds of characteristics they possess (Leary, Tchividjian, & Kraxberger, 1994). In its original interpretation, Goffman (1959) theorized that individuals compose preferred versions of themselves for public consumption, strategically emphasizing some characteristics while de-emphasizing others.

Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) applied Goffman's self-presentation framework to assess professional athlete-produced Twitter commentary; however, research has yet to examine audience interest in the self-presentation strategies employed by professional athletes. In a competitive marketplace, this exists as an important and practical research extension—to build a loyal audience, one must listen to one's audience. As a new approach to mass media communication, exploring the

interpretation of social media messaging is an equally important endeavor. This research, therefore, attempts to address both of these challenges by exploring how sport consumers interpret athlete self-presentation on Twitter, and further, how a sport audience distinguishes the perceived importance of self-presentation on an athlete's image. By benchmarking these preferences and including the viewpoints of both Twitter users and non-users, this research establishes a compass with which to direct the development of best practices and uniquely adds an interpretive element to the larger body of sport communication literature. Further, the application of a self-presentation framework to the digital landscape provides an opportunity to advance self-presentation theories and extend their traditional face-to-face utility.

In addition to gauging sport consumer interest in the self-presentation strategies employed by professional athletes on Twitter, this study offers a broad sample of gender and age demographics in order to establish differences among sport consumers. The Pew Internet Project's social networking report from November 2012 suggested that 63% of all males and 75% of all females use social networking sites with more than half of all female Internet users reporting daily social media consumption (Brenner, 2012). Social media consumption has also increased dramatically across all age demographics since reporting began in 2005—92% of those aged 18 to 29 report active social media consumption, followed by 73% of those aged 30 to 49, 57% of those aged 50 to 64, and 38% of those aged 65 and older according to data gleaned in August 2012 (Brenner, 2012). While young adults continue to exist as the heaviest social media users, it is interesting to note that their actual rate of growth pales in comparison to the upsurge in social media use by older adults (Madden, 2010). From April 2009 to May 2011, social media use among Internet users over the age of 65 was found to be especially enthusiastic, growing 150% (Zickuhr & Madden, 2012). One in five Internet users between the ages of 50-64 reported daily social media use (Madden, 2010). Further, unlike younger demographics, females and older adults have been found to exhibit increased loyalty (Schultz & Sheffer, 2011), which may make these sport consumers valuable commodities moving forward.

Review of Literature

Self-Presentation

In the highly influential *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1959) suggested that individuals compose preferred versions of themselves for public consumption. Goffman analogized his theory through the dramaturgical reference to an actor's management of on and off-stage performances. On-stage, an actor is charged with the task of performing a carefully scripted, formal performance. Contrastingly, when the actor is backstage, among friends and out of the spotlight, he/she is likely to conduct him/herself in a more relaxed and less

formal manner. Goffman suggested that it is in the backstage where real, behind-the-scenes living is experienced and personality is revealed (Papacharissi, 2002). It is in the differentiation between front and backstage performances that Goffman bases his theoretical framework; the designation of a *front stage performance* signifies individual self-presentation that is considered more formal in nature, while use of the term *backstage performance* is used to capture self-presentation that is less measured and more familiar.

Performance exists as a critical component in any public figure's identity (Marshall, 2010). Traditionally, the primary performance of professional athletes has revolved around their role as a sport competitor and extended into extra-textual dimensions such as interviews and advertising/sponsorship endorsements (Marshall, 2010). These traditional outlets for self-presentation have all tended toward relatively formal performances, or what Goffman would refer to as *front stage performances*. Through the burgeoning tool 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*. Marshall (2010) argued that in the staging of our digital world, the props and accoutrements of Goffman's original theory are translated into the profiles, images and messages now produced in online environments. Marshall further contended that Twitter is but "a construction of character for a kind of ritual of the performance of the self," while labeling social-networking practitioners "highly conscious of a potential audience" and social media engagement "a careful preening and production of the self" (p. 40).

Athlete Twitter Use

Three studies should be recognized for their efforts in establishing Twitter as a subject area in sport. Pegoraro (2010) pioneered this branch of research in an investigation of professional athlete presence on Twitter. A content analysis of the top five most-followed athlete twitter accounts was conducted across a selection of nine different sports. Data were collected over a 7-day period. The resulting analysis exposed six types of content categories: relating to personal life (29%), relating to business life (27%), relating to their sport (4%), relating to another sport/athlete (16%), responding to fans (46%), and pop culture/landmark references (9%). Similarly, Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, and Greenwell (2010) conducted a content analysis to categorize a random sample of the 20 most recent tweets of 101 professional athletes from a variety of sports. Six content classifications were again developed through this research: interactivity (34%), diversion (28%), information sharing (15%), content (13%), promotion (5%), and fanship (5%). Finally, Kassing and Sanderson (2010) examined the Twitter content produced by English-speaking cyclists competing in the 2009 Tour of Italy. This analysis highlighted the utility of Twitter for athletes through its identification of three

prominent themes that saw athletes providing commentary and opinions, fostering interactivity, and providing insider perspectives for fans.

In a more recent work, Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) explored athlete image construction by taking a brand-centric approach to the analysis of athlete Twitter commentary. By way of Goffman's pivotal theory of self-presentation (1959), the authors established 10 classifications for athlete digital self-presentation and contended that Twitter exists as an extension of the professional athlete's brand. Lebel and Danylchuk found that 77% of the athlete tweets in their study were "backstage performances," or less formal audience interaction. While the study produced similar findings to the initial work conducted on professional athlete Twitter use, the use of a self-presentation framework emphasized the capacity of Twitter to build, frame, and promote athlete brands. Browning and Sanderson (2012) further contributed to the understanding of athlete Twitter use by focusing on a population of student-athletes. Results revealed that Twitter was enlisted by this demographic for three primary purposes: keeping in contact, communicating with followers, and accessing information.

Why Followers Follow

In the analysis of a retired female athlete's Twitter followers, Clavio and Kian (2010) learned that fans were attracted to the athlete's Twitter feed largely based on perceptions of the athlete as an expert in their sport. The athlete's writing style was also recognized as a salient factor in attracting Twitter followers. Witkemper, Lim, and Waldburger (2012) likewise contributed to our understanding of the motivations and constraints of Twitter users in research that found consumers envision Twitter as an information source, a form of entertainment, and a way to enhance the fan experience.

Clavio, Burch, and Frederick (2012) employed a systems theory framework to examine user characteristics of a Big Ten football team's social network on Twitter. Their research found that media representatives were an active group of Twitter participants and hypothesized that the media may serve as agenda setters in sport networks on Twitter. Frederick, Lim, Clavio, and Walsh (2012) proposed a heightened interpersonal closeness among Twitter followers depending on the interaction style of an athlete. In their analysis of the followers of both a social and parasocial athlete, they found the development of parasocial interaction (PSI) was significantly higher among the followers of the social athlete and demonstrated that common PSI correlations can be applied to the followers of professional athletes who use Twitter.

Research Contribution

As the social dimension of Twitter has tended to reward athletes who are able to provide the right mix of entertainment value, genuineness, and engagement (Zimmerman, 2012), performance indicators to date have largely judged Twitter success based upon metrics of follower volume. Accordingly, research has focused

on Twitter users. This study looks to expand current scholarly contributions by offering an alternate measure of Twitter success in sport from a more diverse sport audience.

As the popularity of Twitter has intensified, the digital self-presentation of athletes has become available to a much larger and broader audience. 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. As such, this research examines the viewpoints of sport consumers, a demographic inclusive of both Twitter users and non-users, in order to better understand not only what Twitter users are interested in, but also what type of information might entice non-users to join Twitter. In so doing, this work builds upon Lebel and Danylchuk's (2012) assertion that Twitter is an extension of athlete brand. This research also 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 the self-presentation strategies employed by athletes on Twitter while establishing which self-presentation strategies are perceived as most important to an athlete's digital image. It is hoped 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.

Method

Research Context

The microblogging tool Twitter served as the platform for this study. As previously noted, the social media network has come to enjoy particular influence in sport and is widely recognized as the industry's social network of choice (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Beyond this, a research decision was made to focus this study around the sport of golf due to its diverse demographic of both gender and age representation. Golfers exist as one of the most sought after target audiences on the Internet due to the diversity that they offer (GolfADS Global, 2010). Additionally, the sport of golf has received significant social media buy-in from many of its top players; as of December 2012, there were 220 professional golfers with verified Twitter accounts according to the website tweeting-athletes.com. The most followed players all boasted well over a million followers.

Survey Design

Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) explored the digital self-presentation of professional athletes through the lens of Goffman's original framework and theatrical

analogies. This work resulted in the creation of six backstage athlete content strategies—the conversationalist, the sport insider, the behind-the-scenes reporter, the super fan, the informer, and the analyst. Four front stage athlete content strategies were also created. They included the publicist, the fan aficionado, the superintendent, and the brand manager (see Table 1 for a description of each category). With the purpose of the current study to investigate audience interest in the digital self-presentation of professional athletes, these 10 athlete self-presentation strategies were utilized to guide the development of audience interest scales. Participants were provided with a definition and golf-specific example of each self-presentation strategy and then asked to rate their level of interest in each of the items. For example, the sport insider strategy was exemplified by tweets that discussed a player's experience at the Masters, a tip on how to re-grip a golf club, a reaction to a disappointing round of golf, and a sneak peak at a new pair of golf shoes. Interest in each strategy was measured using a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from a rank of 1 that signified no interest in the content, to a rank of 5, which was indicative of very high interest.

In order to elicit more specific insight into audience content preferences, each strategy was further broken down into corresponding subcategories for each of the 10 strategies. The subcategories investigated the qualities that defined the original self-presentation strategies outlined in Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) (see Table 1). For example, within the super fan strategy, participants were asked to rate their level of interest in learning about an athlete's favorite sport personalities and teams, sport knowledge, and opinions about sport. Each sub-category was also assessed using a 5-point Likert scale measuring interest.

Upon the evaluation of each of the 10 self-presentation strategies and their corresponding sub-categories, participants were asked to provide a rating of how important they believed each strategy might be with regard to its potential impact on an athlete's public image. They were also asked to rate the importance of humor and multimedia in athlete tweets, and to provide any advice to professional athletes that they might have relative to their Twitter self-presentation. Rounding out the survey, participants were asked to comment on their awareness of Twitter in a brief section that asked participants how often they came across Twitter references in various media outlets and whether or not the participant was a Twitter user themselves. Finally, demographic information pertaining to gender, age, education and employment was collected. The 49-item survey was published online via the survey-software site SurveyMonkey.com and required approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Procedure

The survey instrument was reviewed by a panel of four experts with varied experience in the fields of sport psychology, sport management, and sport philosophy. Their feedback was incorporated before testing the survey in a pilot study ($N = 20$) that included representation from a group of recreational golfers diverse

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!"

in age, gender, and Twitter experience. Minor revisions were made with regard to item wording and layout before the survey instrument was submitted and subsequently approved for distribution by the University Research Ethics Board.

The survey link was sent out via email to a convenience sample of golfers, golf courses, and golf governing bodies across both Canada and the U.S. The link

was also posted on various golf-related Facebook and Twitter pages. A short message accompanied all emails and social media posts which encouraged snowball sampling by asking participants to forward the link along to anyone they believed might also be willing to participate in the research. The study was live for a two-month time period and yielded a total of 407 responses of which 377 surveys were deemed usable.

Data Analysis

All data were cleaned and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Software Package (SPSS). Gender, age, education, employment and Twitter awareness were included as control variables. Age was treated as a categorical variable and was reflective of the demographic breakdown documented in existing Twitter research. Descriptive statistics and frequencies were used to interpret and report the results. T-tests were run to explore the function of gender on each of the strategies and multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) tests were conducted to ascertain whether there were significant differences in means based on participant age, education, employment and Twitter awareness. Reliability tests were conducted to ensure that the data were normally distributed. Cronbach alpha scores for the entire collection of athlete self-presentation strategies ranged from 0.89 to 0.95, illustrating strong scale reliability.

Results

Audience Demographics

The gender breakdown of our audience included a demographic that was 58% male and 42% female. The greatest response was garnered by those aged 25 to 34 (40%). The audience was well-educated with 38% reporting possession of a university degree and a further 24% reporting post-graduate education.

Twitter Awareness

When asked to comment on Twitter awareness, 96% of the population reported in the affirmative. In a follow-up question, 44% reported having seen the social media tool referred to on TV; 51% reported having seen it mentioned in news articles or magazines; 50% reported having seen it mentioned online; 44% reported having heard it referenced on the radio; 47% reported having heard friends discuss it; 38% reported having seen it used for advertising purposes; and 23% reported having their own Twitter account. Slightly more than 40% of all respondents reported being aware of Twitter through all of the above-mentioned media outlets.

When asked specifically about seeing the @ sign or # hashtag symbol associated with Twitter use, 31% of the population reported having seen one or both mentioned on TV; 28% reported having seen it used in advertising; 30% reported having seen it in news articles/magazines; 32% reported having seen the Twitter symbols in their online media consumption; 19% reported hearing Twitter

referred to on the radio; and 20% reported having heard their friends talk about Twitter. A combined 58% of those surveyed reported noticing Twitter references in all of the above mentioned media outlets with only 6% reporting that they had not seen Twitter references used in the media. Participants were also asked to comment on the frequency with which they saw Twitter references in sport media. Responses to this question found 42% of respondents came across Twitter references on a daily basis. A further 28% reported seeing or hearing about Twitter regularly, but not daily. There were no significant differences between media consumption habits and interest in Twitter content, nor were there significant differences in interest levels among Twitter users and non-users.

Audience Feedback of Athlete Self-Presentation Strategies on Twitter

Participants were asked to rank their level of interest on a 1 to 5 scale for 10 athlete self-presentation strategies and their corresponding subcategories (see Table 2). Of the 10 athlete self-presentation strategies, the *sport insider* received the highest overall rating from participants ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 2.8$) while the *superintendent* strategy was ranked the lowest ($M = 2.0$, $SD = 1.0$). The overall mean for backstage performance strategies ($M = 2.6$) was higher than the overall mean for front stage performance strategies ($M = 2.3$), though not statistically significant. The audience reported higher interest in the combined means of the subcategories for the *sport insider*, *behind-the-scenes-reporter*, *super fan*, *informer*, and *fan aficionado* self-presentation strategies compared to their reported interest in each of these overall self-presentation strategies.

Audience Interest in Athlete Self-Presentation Strategies by Gender

T-tests were used to determine significant differences in audience interest relative to gender (see Table 2). Due to the large number of tests, Bonferoni adjustments were used (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007) to mitigate the risk of Type I errors and ensure the integrity of the results. Male participants reported significantly greater interest in the *sport insider* subcategories of athlete reflection on their sport performance ($t = 3.8$, $p = <.000$), discussion of sport equipment ($t = 3.3$, $p = <.001$), tournament preparation ($t = 3.7$, $p = <.000$), and technical expertise ($t = 4.4$, $p = <.000$) than their female counterparts. Similarly, male participants reported greater interest in the *super fan* subcategory of athlete sport opinions ($t = 3.3$, $p = <.001$), the overall analyst strategy ($t = 3.3$, $p = <.05$), as well as its sport opinion analyst subcategory ($t = 4.2$, $p = <.000$). Male and female participants reported combined means of 2.6 and 2.5, respectively, for interest in backstage athlete performances; both genders indicated a mean interest of 2.3 for front stage athlete performances. Neither of these findings was statistically significant.

Table 2*Audience Interest in Self-Presentation Strategy by Gender*

		Overall		Male		Female	
Strategy		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Conversationalist	overall	2.6	1.1	2.6	1.1	2.6	1.1
	athletes	2.8	1.3	2.9	1.3	2.6	1.2
	celebs	2.4	1.2	2.4	1.2	2.4	1.2
	friends	2.4	1.2	2.4	1.2	2.4	1.2
	family	2.3	1.2	2.3	1.2	2.4	1.2
Sport insider	overall	2.8	1.2	3.0	1.2	2.7	1.2
	performance	3.0	1.2	3.2*	1.2	2.7	1.2
	fitness	3.0	1.2	3.1	1.2	2.9	1.2
	equipment	2.9	1.2	3.1**	1.2	2.7	1.1
	tournament	2.9	1.2	3.1*	1.2	2.6	1.2
	expertise	3.1	1.2	3.3*	1.2	2.8	1.2
Behind-the scenes reporter	overall	2.4	1.2	2.4	1.2	2.4	1.2
	routine	2.4	1.2	2.5	1.2	2.3	1.1
	personal	2.4	1.2	2.3	1.2	2.5	1.1
	interests	2.6	1.1	2.6	1.1	2.6	1.2
Super fan	overall	2.5	1.2	2.5	1.2	2.4	1.2
	sport interest	2.5	1.2	2.6	1.2	2.3	1.2
	sport info	2.7	1.2	2.8	1.2	2.4	1.2
	sport opinion	2.7	1.2	2.8*	1.2	2.4	1.7
Informer	overall	2.3	1.1	2.4	1.1	2.3	1.1
	promotions	2.4	1.1	2.3	1.1	2.4	1.1
	websites	2.5	1.1	2.5	1.1	2.5	1.0
	articles	2.6	1.1	2.6	1.1	2.6	1.1
	current events	2.6	1.1	2.6	1.2	2.6	1.1
	multimedia	2.7	1.2	2.7	1.2	2.6	1.1
Analyst	overall	2.7	1.1	2.8	1.1	2.4	1.1
	sport	2.8	1.2	3.0*	1.2	2.5	1.1
	life	2.5	1.1	2.5	1.1	2.4	1.1
	world issues	2.4	1.1	2.4	1.1	2.4	1.1
Publicist	overall	2.3	1.1	2.4	1.1	2.2	1.1
	schedules	2.5	1.1	2.7	1.1	2.3	1.1
	sponsorship	2.1	1.0	2.2	1.1	1.9	1.0
	updates	2.2	1.1	2.3	1.1	2.0	1.1
	contests	2.3	1.1	2.3	1.1	2.2	1.1
Superintendent	overall	2.0	1.0	2.0	1.0	2.0	1.1
	frequency	2.8	0.7	2.8	0.7	2.9	0.8
Fan aficionado	overall	2.4	1.1	2.5	1.1	2.3	1.2
	questions	2.7	1.2	2.8	1.2	2.6	1.2
	advice	2.5	1.2	2.5	1.2	2.4	1.2
	special offers	2.5	1.2	2.4	1.2	2.5	1.2
Brand manager	overall	2.4	1.2	2.4	1.1	2.5	1.2

Note. * Denotes males reported significantly greater interest than females, $p < .000$; ** denotes $p < .001$

Audience Interest in Athlete Self-Presentation Strategies by Age

MANOVA were used to determine if there were significant differences in audience interest relative to age (see Table 3). Bonferoni type adjustments were again used in follow-up ANOVAs (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007) to moderate the risk of Type I errors and ensure the reliability of the results. Significant age variance was calculated for all 10 self-presentation strategies ($p = < .000$): *conversationalist* ($\lambda = 0.74$, $F = 3.7$); *sport insider* ($\lambda = 0.67$, $F = 4.3$); *behind-the-scenes reporter* ($\lambda = 0.78$, $F = 4.2$); *super fan* ($\lambda = 0.74$, $F = 4.8$); *informer* ($\lambda = 0.78$, $F = 2.6$); *analyst* ($\lambda = 0.83$, $F = 2.9$); *publicist* ($\lambda = 0.77$, $F = 3.2$); *superintendent* ($\lambda = 0.86$, $F = 3.2$); *fan aficionado* ($\lambda = 0.76$, $F = 4.4$); and *brand manager* ($F = 10.4$). A full breakdown of these results can be found in Table 3.

Audience Brand Interpretation

Participants were asked to comment on how important they perceived each of the 10 self-presentation strategies to be relative to an athlete's overall brand or public image (see Table 4). The *super fan* and *fan aficionado* self-presentation strategies were rated as the most important categories to an athlete's brand, both with overall means of 3.0 ($SD = 1.0$ and 1.2 , respectively). The *conversationalist* followed closely with an overall mean of 2.9 ($SD = 1.1$). Male participants were found to find the *sport insider* strategy significantly more important to athlete brand than females. Participants aged 18 to 24 and 25 to 34 believed each of the 10 categories to be more significant to an athlete's brand than those aged 55 to 64 and those 65 and older. Those aged 35 to 44 reported higher brand importance than those over age 55 for the *sport insider*, *behind-the-scenes information*, and *super fan* categories. Significant variance was also highlighted for the 18 to 24 and 25 to 34 age demographics which ranked the importance of both the fan update and fan interaction categories significantly higher than those aged 35 to 44 and 45 to 54.

Audience Advice for Athlete Self-Presentation

To conclude the survey, the audience was asked to rate the importance of humor and multimedia in athlete tweets and then given the opportunity to offer any advice they might have relative to athlete content they believe would be particularly effective on Twitter. The incorporation of humor received a mean importance of 3.1 ($SD = 1.2$). The incorporation of personal pictures or videos in an athlete's Twitter feed received a mean importance of 2.9 ($SD = 1.2$).

A number of participants (21%) took advantage of the opportunity to provide additional advice to athletes on Twitter. Audience advice to athletes was critically analyzed and reviewed for emergent themes. This process entailed extensive discussion among the researchers in order to adequately capture the perceived sentiments of the participants. Three themes were ultimately constructed to reflect participant views: personality, respect, and quality. With regard to personality, participants urged athletes to produce authentic content that revealed aspects of their character, believing this made them more interesting and relatable. The

Table 3*Audience Interest in Self-Presentation Strategy by Age*

Strategy	18-24		25-34		35-44		45-54		55-64		65+	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Conversationalist	3.2 ^{5,6}	0.9	2.8 ⁵	1.1	2.7	1.0	2.4	1.1	2.1	0.9	2.1	0.9
athletes	3.4 ^{5,6}	1.1	3.1	1.2	2.8	1.2	2.5	1.1	2.0	1.0	1.8	1.0
celebs	3.2 ^{5,6}	1.2	2.7 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.3	0.9	2.2	1.1	1.7	0.8	1.7	0.9
friends	3.1 ^{5,6}	1.2	2.5	1.2	2.2	1.0	2.3	1.2	1.8	1.0	1.8	0.9
family	2.8 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.4	1.2	2.2	1.1	2.3	1.3	2.0	1.1	1.9	1.0
Sport insider	3.5 ^{4*,5,6}	1.0	3.2 ^{5,6}	1.2	2.9 ^{6*}	1.2	2.4	1.2	2.2	1.0	1.9	0.8
performance	3.5 ^{5,6}	1.1	3.3 ^{5,6}	1.2	3.1	1.2	2.8	1.1	2.2	1.0	2.1	0.9
fitness	3.7 ^{5,6}	1.1	3.3 ^{5,6}	1.2	3.1	1.1	2.9	1.1	2.3	0.9	2.3	1.0
equipment	3.5 ^{5,6}	1.1	3.0	1.2	2.9	1.1	2.9	1.1	2.6	1.0	2.2	1.0
tournament prep	3.5 ^{5,6}	1.1	3.1 ^{5,6}	1.2	3.0	1.2	2.9	1.1	2.2	1.0	2.2	1.0
expertise	3.5	1.1	3.2	1.2	3.1	1.2	3.0	1.2	2.9	1.2	2.7	1.0
Behind-the-scenes	3.0 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.7 ^{5,6}	1.2	2.5	1.2	2.1	1.1	1.8	1.0	1.7	0.9
routine	3.1 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.6 ^{5,6}	1.2	2.4	1.2	2.3	1.1	1.7	0.8	1.7	0.8
personal	3.2 ^{4*,5,6}	1.2	2.6 ⁵	1.1	2.3	1.1	2.2	1.1	1.8	1.0	1.8	1.0
interests	3.4 ^{3,4,5,6}	1.1	2.8 ^{5,6*}	1.0	2.4	1.2	2.3	1.0	2.0	1.0	1.9	0.9
Super fan	3.2 ^{4,5,6}	1.1	2.7	1.1	2.7	1.2	2.2	1.1	1.2	0.9	1.6	0.7
sport interest	3.2 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.6 ^{5,6}	1.2	2.6 ^{5*}	1.1	2.4	1.0	1.7	0.9	1.8	0.8
sport knowledge	3.2 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.9 ^{5,6}	1.2	2.8	1.2	2.6	1.1	2.0	1.0	1.9	1.0
sport opinion	3.4 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.8 ⁵	1.1	2.8	1.1	2.5	1.0	2.0	1.0	2.1	1.1
Informer	2.8 ^{5,6}	1.0	2.5 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.6 ^{6*}	1.1	2.4	1.2	1.7	0.9	1.6	0.7
promotions	2.7 ⁶	1.1	2.5	1.1	2.4	1.1	2.3	0.9	2.1	1.1	1.9	0.9
websites	2.9	1.1	2.7	1.1	2.5	1.0	2.4	1.1	2.3	1.0	1.9	1.0
articles	3.0	1.0	2.7	1.2	2.7	1.0	2.5	1.1	2.2	1.0	2.1	1.1
current events	3.1 ⁶	1.0	2.7	1.1	2.8	1.1	2.5	1.1	2.3	1.1	2.0	1.0
multimedia	3.3 ^{5,6}	1.3	2.9 ^{5,6}	1.2	2.7	1.3	2.5	1.0	2.1	1.0	2.0	0.9
Analyst	3.1 ^{5,6}	1.0	2.9 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.8	1.2	2.6	1.1	2.2	1.1	2.1	1.1
sport	3.3 ^{5,6}	1.1	3.0 ^{5,6}	1.2	2.9	1.2	2.6	0.9	2.2	1.0	2.1	1.1
life	2.9 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.6	1.1	2.7	1.2	2.2	0.9	2.0	1.0	1.8	0.9
world issues	2.9 ^{5,6}	1.0	2.5	1.1	2.4	1.3	2.2	1.0	2.0	1.0	1.8	0.8
Publicist	2.8 ^{5,6}	1.0	2.6 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.4	1.1	2.2	0.9	1.7	0.9	1.6	0.7
schedules	2.9 ^{5,6}	1.2	2.6	1.1	2.5	1.1	2.4	0.8	2.2	1.0	1.9	1.0
sponsorship	2.7 ^{5,6}	1.0	2.2	1.1	2.2	1.1	2.0	0.9	1.7	0.8	1.5	0.8
updates	2.7 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.4 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.4	1.1	1.9	0.9	1.7	0.9	1.5	0.7
contests	2.8 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.4	1.1	2.5	1.1	2.1	0.9	1.7	0.9	1.5	0.8
Superintendent	2.6 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.1	1.1	2.1	1.0	1.8	0.8	1.5	0.8	1.5	0.8
frequency	2.6	0.7	2.7	0.8	2.8	0.7	3.0	0.7	3	0.6	3.0	0.7
Fan aficionado	3.1 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.7 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.4	1.0	2.1	0.9	1.7	1.0	1.6	0.9
questions	3.5 ^{5,6}	1.1	3.0 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.7	1.1	2.6	1.1	2.0	1.1	2.0	1.0
advice	3.1 ^{5,6}	1.2	2.7 ^{5,6}	1.1	2.3	1.0	2.2	0.9	1.8	1.0	1.8	0.9
special offers	3.2 ^{5,6}	1.0	2.6 ^{6*}	1.1	2.4	1.2	2.3	1.1	2.0	1.1	1.7	1.0
Brand manager	3.3 ^{5,6}	1.0	3.3	1.1	3.2	1.2	2.7	1.3	2.4	1.1	2.2	1.0

Note. Superscript indicates significant differences between age, $p < .000$; * $p < .001$; 3 = 35-44; 4 = 45-54; 5 = 55-64; 6 = 65+

Table 4
Importance of Self-Presentation Strategies on Athlete Brand

Strategy	Gender		Age						Overall	
	Male	Female	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+		
Conversationalist										
	<i>M</i>	2.9	2.9	3.3 ^{5,6}	3.2 ^{5,6}	2.8	2.8	2.4	2.1	2.9
	<i>SD</i>	1.04	1.2	1.1	1.0	1.1	1.0	1.0	0.9	1.1
Sport insider										
	<i>M</i>	2.9*	2.7	3.2 ^{5,6}	3.1 ^{5,6}	3.3	2.6	2.1	2.0	2.8
	<i>SD</i>	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.0	0.8	0.9	1.1
Behind-the-scenes										
	<i>M</i>	2.6	2.6	3.3 ^{5,6}	2.9 ^{5,6}	2.7 ^{5,6}	2.3	1.8	1.8	2.6
	<i>SD</i>	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.1	1.1	1.0	0.9	1.2
Super fan										
	<i>M</i>	3.0	2.8	3.2 ^{5,6}	3.2 ^{5,6}	3.2 ^{5,6}	2.9	2.4	2.3	3.0
	<i>SD</i>	1.0	1.1	1.1	1.0	1.0	0.9	0.9	0.9	1.0
Informer										
	<i>M</i>	2.6	2.6	3.0 ^{5,6}	2.8 ^{5,6}	2.7	2.3	2.1	2.1	2.6
	<i>SD</i>	1.0	1.1	1.1	1.1	0.9	0.9	1.0	1.1	1.1
Analyst										
	<i>M</i>	2.2	2.2	2.6 ^{5,6}	2.4 ^{5,6}	2.2	2.0	1.8	1.7	2.2
	<i>SD</i>	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.1	1.0	0.8	0.9	0.8	1.0
Publicist										
	<i>M</i>	2.3	2.2	2.8 ^{5,6}	2.4 ^{5,6}	2.3	2.1	1.8	1.6	2.3
	<i>SD</i>	1.1	0.9	1.2	1.0	1.0	0.8	0.8	0.7	1.0
Superintendent										
	<i>M</i>	2.7	2.6	3.2 ^{3,4,5,6}	3.0 ^{3,4,5,6}	2.6	2.4	2.0	2.0	2.7
	<i>SD</i>	1.1	1.1	1.0	1.1	1.0	0.8	0.8	1.0	1.1
Fan aficionado										
	<i>M</i>	3.0	2.9	3.5 ^{3,4,5,6}	3.5 ^{3,4,5,6}	2.8	2.6	2.2	2.1	3.0
	<i>SD</i>	1.2	1.2	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.0	1.0	1.2
Brand manager										
	<i>M</i>	2.6	2.6	2.9 ^{5,6}	2.8 ^{5,6}	2.7	2.4	2.2	2.2	2.6
	<i>SD</i>	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1	0.9	1.0	1.1	1.1

Note.* Denotes males reported strategy significantly more important to athlete brand than females.

Note. Superscript indicates significant differences between age groups, $p < .000$; 3 = 35-44; 4 = 45-54; 5 = 55-64; 6 = 65+

theme of respect was evidenced by frequent recommendations for athletes to be courteous with their online presence at all times. Comments within this theme suggested athletes avoid the discussion of both religion and politics; some participants even suggested that athletes should keep their personal lives personal. One participant recommended that athletes stay positive and avoid controversy by “cramming your foot in your mouth in an attempt to seem cool or edgy.” Participants also highlighted the fact that athletes have a responsibility to present themselves as role models on the Twitter medium within this theme. The quality of athlete tweets exists as the final theme expressed by participant feedback. This theme was evidenced by frequent recommendations that athletes provide quality content

over content volume. Participants seemed to place a premium upon uniqueness, innovation, and humor. Participants also encouraged athletes to be relevant, honest, and humble with one participant going so far as to say, “Sometimes the less a professional athlete says, the better.”

Discussion

This research sought to explore audience interest in the self-presentation strategies of professional athletes on Twitter and ascertain which self-presentation strategies are perceived as most important to an athlete’s digital image. By way of Goffman’s (1959) conceptualization of front and backstage performances and Lebel and Danylchuk’s (2012) framework for athlete self-presentation strategies, this research indicated that our sport consumers were fairly ambivalent to the Twitter practices employed by professional athletes with the exception of sport related self-presentation which received the greatest interest ratings.

The most salient athlete strategy reported was that of the *sport insider* with participants reporting particular interest in the discussion of athlete performance, athlete fitness, and an athlete’s sport expertise. Greater audience interest was highlighted in the less formal backstage performance strategies of athletes ($M = 2.6$) when compared to more formal front stage athlete performances ($M = 2.3$). Significant gender variance was identified for only the *sport insider* strategy, with males reporting greater interest than females. Significant age variance was found in all 10 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. That is, 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 Twitter audiences may be expanding beyond identified Twitter followers.

This research provides support for self-presentation as an effective framework for scholars to understand online behavior through a theoretical lens. This approach expands self-presentation literature beyond face-to-face interaction and establishes Twitter as a digital performance of self. By breaking down Twitter self-presentation into specific strategies, we are able to deconstruct behavioral tendencies. The interpretive nature of this work allows us to make strides towards 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 endeavors 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 (Hambrick et al., 2010; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010).

Twitter has created successful public identities for many athletes and established individual brand awareness that will outlive athletic careers and provide ranging financial potential. It has also become a very public stage for missteps, however, and exists as an ever-looming threat for athletes. Twitter gaffes and blunders by athletes are painfully compounded by the current popularity of social media, its fast-paced nature, and the media scrutiny to which public figures are subjected. While this 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 behoove 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 Twitter around sport-related content.

Specific to the identification of best practices on Twitter, this data promotes 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 with the incorporation of both humor and multimedia also noted as important components of athlete tweets. These results are in line with the findings of Clavio and Kian (2010) who suggested audiences follow athletes on Twitter primarily as sports fans and are most interested in athlete sport expertise. The work of Witkemper et al. (2012) also found audiences access Twitter as a way to enhance their sport fan experience. As the borders of Twitter brands continue to permeate into alternate media outlets, it will become increasingly important for athletes to strategically connect with their audiences. While our results are by no means conclusive, they exist as an initial step toward better understanding the interests

of a sport audience with respect to digital self-presentation and providing athletes with insight into how they can best meet their fans' needs.

Specific to the potential impact of Twitter self-presentation strategies on an athlete's public image, the *super fan* and *fan aficionado* strategies were perceived to be of greatest importance by this audience, followed closely by the *conversationalist* and *sport insider* strategies. The *analyst* and *publicist* strategies were deemed least important to the development of an athlete's image. While previous research has promoted social media as a tool to broadcast views on a variety of subjects (Sanderson, 2011), these findings again suggest that athletes might be better off focusing their Twitter self-presentation around sport-related topics.

Prior research documenting athlete use of Twitter is mixed when it comes to how much time athletes currently spend producing sport-related Twitter discussion. In line with the golf context of this research, Pegoraro (2010) noted professional golfers tweeted about golf only 3.5% of the time and referenced other sports or athletes just 16% of the time. Content pertaining to personal life (29%) and fan interaction (46%) were found to account for the majority of professional golfer tweets according to Pegoraro. Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) found athletes were most active within the conversationalist strategy spending 30% of their time engaging in this type of dialogue while spending just 23% of their time performing within the *sport insider* strategy and a mere 6% of their time within the *super fan* strategy. While it is recognized that the digital practices of athletes are constantly evolving, these studies suggest that athletes may not be spending as much time participating in the sport-related self-presentation that was advocated for in this study. This highlights a possible disconnect between athletes and their fans and stands as one of the most important outcomes of this work.

This research further informs our understanding of athlete digital self-presentation strategies based upon gender and age demographics. Male participants reported greater interest than their female counterparts, while younger participants were consistently more interested in all content than older participants. These findings are important to take into account as gender and age have been identified as strong predictors of sport-related social media use (Schultz & Sheffer, 2011). While the gender variance found in our study might be explained by broader socialization tendencies, the greater interest in Twitter content by our younger participants might be explained by this generation's enhanced familiarity with social media and the fact that this audience was closer in age to the athletes studied. We recommend based on our results that athletes be considerate of a very diverse audience in the publication of all Twitter content, recognizing again that their digital-presentation may be reaching an audience that extends beyond Twitter followers.

Overall, this 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 favorite athletes' lives as previously suggested.

The apparent disconnect between how athletes are electing to present themselves on Twitter and what their audiences report being interested in is one of the more critical findings. Relatively low overall interest in athlete self-presentation coupled with audience advice that implored athletes to be respectful, responsible, and recall their function as role models could be indicative that the initial fascination with the personal lives of professional athletes may be waning. While we caution against strong conclusions due to our limited sample, it is interesting to reflect on the possibility that Twitter may actually humanize athletes too much for their audiences' taste. Perhaps sport consumers prefer to elevate their sport heroes to the esteemed pedestals that traditional media once created and public relations professionals were able to maintain. It could be that the raw Twitter dialogue that has tarnished the names of so many diminishes our ability as fans to create lasting sport idols that society can celebrate. Conceivably, the all-access pass Twitter initially championed prevents athletes from living up to our expectations. 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 athletic knowledge and skill that brought them their initial success.

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. 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 and fan engagement initiatives.

Conclusion

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.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Limitations to this study are recognized. Survey instruments are dependent upon the capacity of participants to provide accurate responses. Generalizability of these results is also limited to the audience that elected to partake in this research. This survey was targeted toward a golf-minded demographic. The findings might vary if different sports were investigated or if different Twitter examples had been used to clarify the self-presentation strategies. Future research should address these concerns by investigating both the self-presentation tactics of a more diverse collection of athletes as well as the self-presentation interests of more diverse audiences. Specifically, research might investigate sport consumer digital content preferences between fans of team sports and individual sports, as well as possible interpretive differences between fans of college and professional sport. Studies that gauge the deeper impact of Twitter self-presentation on audiences that do not identify as Twitter users are also likely to become increasingly relevant. As Twitter becomes a part of mainstream sport consumption, assorted audience views and interpretations will be crucial to sport communications professionals, sport marketers, and athletes of all levels.

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