Facing off on twitter:
A generation y interpretation of professional athlete profile pictures

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The innovations of social media are revolutionizing the sport media landscape. At its core, the technological platform exists as a self-presentation tool. It is an opportunity for athletes to extend their brand beyond the borders of traditional media and reach a broader audience. The purpose of this study was to delve into the largely unexplored terrain of social media self-presentation in sport. Specifically, this exploratory study investigated how professional athletes are presenting themselves photographically on Twitter and how this form of self-presentation is interpreted by a Generation-Y audience. The research question posited how Twitter profile pictures impact audience perception of athletes. Goffman's theory of self-presentation was used to direct the analysis, with all athlete photos critically analyzed using Goffman's front and backstage performance framework.

The social media platform provides an intriguing twist to both the study of photographic representation and new media research—it offers athletes themselves the opportunity to select their own photographic exposure in the construction of their brand. This is in stark contrast to the years of research that has documented and relied upon the mainstream media's photographic selection (e.g., Cuneen & Sidwell, 1998; Duncan, 1990). The pervasive strength of visual images has been found more powerful than the written word in that they catch the eyes of even the most casual readers and allow them to create impressions (Bishop, 2003; Cuneen & Spencer, 2003). While social media is a largely content based medium, the profile picture that accompanies all posts exists as the literal face of the brand.

The top 20 most followed female and the top 20 most followed male professional athletes on Twitter served as the data set for this study. From this sample, each athlete's Twitter profile picture was examined (e.g., setting, relation to sport, camera angle) with the purpose of selecting a diverse compilation of photos. A final collection of 10 female and 10 male athletes was established for interpretation. Each athlete's Twitter profile picture was provided to a sample of Generation-Y Kinesiology students (N=120) for interpretation. This audience was deemed suitable as research indicates that the most active Twitter audience falls within the Generation-Y age frame (Smith, 2011). Further, audience interpretation studies in sport have found that a "targeted, invested audience" tends to be best suited to studies of this nature (Bruce, 1998, p. 379). It is assumed that Kinesiology students enjoy a heightened interest in the sporting realm and are equipped with a familiarity of professional athletes.

Participants were asked to complete a brief written survey as they viewed athlete photos on a computer screen. For each photo, participants were asked to provide the first words that came to their mind. Participants were urged to name each athlete if they were able and identify the sport in which the athlete is active. A collage of all female athletes was provided after each individual photo was viewed and participants were asked to identify their favourite and least favourite image, as well as the images they believed were the most and least effective in terms of the athletes' brand. The same process was then repeated with the collection of male photos. To conclude the survey, participants were shown the entire collection of both female and male photos and again asked to identify their favourite and least favourite image and make note of the images they believed were the most and least effective in terms of athlete brand.

Descriptive statistics, frequencies, and cross-tabulations were run to interpret and report results. Results indicated that participants were largely unable to identify the female athletes presented to them. Male athletes proved to be far more recognizable among the audience. A distinct preference for athlete images that provided a sport context was reported. Action shots were preferred over posed or passive photos. Athletes that presented themselves without some reference to their sport were consistently ranked among the least favourite and least effective photos.

These findings illustrate important implications for the self-marketing strategies of professional athletes and their brand development teams. Goffman's framework indicated this audience had a distinct preference for athletes that presented themselves photographically through a front stage performance. This is contrary to commentary based social media studies that have linked success with a focus on backstage performances (e.g., Pegoraro, 2010). This study highlights the power of profile pictures to communicate information to audiences, while underscoring the significant role profile photos can have in shaping audience perception of athletes' digital brands.

Selected references

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