
THE 'PRESENTATION OF SELF' ONLINE: THE CASE OF CANADIAN PARALYMPIC ATHLETES

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Abstract

Athlete identities are becoming increasingly more complex in social media (Sanderson, 2008). Twitter in particular has provided new venues for athletes to express themselves on a wide range of topics (Hambrick et al., 2010). Paralympic athletes are becoming increasingly seen as public figures and have the potential for multilayered identities (Huang & Brittain, 2006), however little research has been conducted into their online identities. In this study, a multi-method research approach was adopted to investigate the online presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) of Paralympic athletes as they prepared for the 2012 Paralympic Games to determine characteristics of their online persona.

Identity Theory and online Presentation of Self

Identity can be described as a set of socially distinguishing traits, comprised of personal characteristics and attributes (Fearon, 1999). The social aspect of identity is how individuals define themselves by those with whom they interact and affiliate with, and while individuals may seek to define their perceived individual identities, they only gain validity if the identity attributes are recognized and confirmed by others (Buckingham, 2008). Building off social identity theory, Erving Goffman's presentation of self (1959) is becoming increasingly popular as a means to explain differences in meaning and activity online (Lewis, Kaufman, & Christakis, 2008; Tufeki, 2008). This theoretical framework uses the notions of the "front stage" and "back stage" self as a metaphorical technique to explain how an individual presents an idealized version of themselves to others. This idealized self is the "front stage" of an individual's personality, where one plays the role expected of them in a particular situation by their audience while, "back stage" is the authentic, alone self (McCliments & Gordon, 2011). Goffman's theory in an online context (Kramer & Winter, 2008) postulates the author (actor) intends for others to view their

information in a contextually appropriate manner to their online social circle (audience), a front stage characteristic (Hogan, 2010).

Method

To discover how Paralympic athletes identify themselves in an online environment the study adopted a two-stage approach, content analysis and interview. Two athletes were selected based on the following criteria: medalled at least one Paralympic Games, planned to compete in the London 2012 Paralympic Games, and identified as active Twitter users by the Canadian Paralympic Committee. In the first stage, 156 Tweets made by two Canadian Paralympic athletes over a six-month period leading up to the Games were collected and entered into NVivo 9. Then, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the athletes based the findings of the content analysis to triangulate preliminary findings and gain additional insights.

Results

Three identity themes were discovered: identity as an athlete, identity as an advocate, and identity as a person with a disability. Identity as an athlete: athlete identity Tweets included stories about training, competitions or their athletic accomplishments. This identity was found in the vast majority of Tweets (87%). Identity as an advocate: these Tweets included themes that touched on political or social issues of any nature. An interesting note is that in these Tweets, there was very little advocacy for general disability issues outside of sport, instead focussing on fundraising for other causes or the Paralympic team. Identity as a person with a disability: these Tweets mentioned their disability directly or indirectly, but often as part of the narrative of their competition or training endeavours.

Discussion

Results indicated that Canadian Paralympians identify themselves first and foremost as athletes, not as disabled persons or social advocates. It is also found that while athletes do not centre their Tweets on their disability, they also do not isolate it from their online image. This implies that in online contexts, Paralympians are not averse to revealing their disability but, at the same time, do not want their condition to define their sense of identity.

Interview data asserted that the Paralympians view their online presentation as an honest extension of their offline selves. Yet, they acknowledged that tension exists between the two identities to present a more idealized “front stage” online self, especially in regards to using their online identities as a promotional tool for their athletic careers.

In addition to furthering the literature of self identity online, this study also implies a two-fold ramification for Paralympic sport marketers, first when

promoting the Paralympics athletes will be more supportive when promotion focuses on the elite sport rather than social responsibility (Dottori et al., 2014), and second, Paralympians display a strong awareness of how they portray themselves online indicating the probability of their online activities causing controversies or unwanted media attention is reduced.

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