
IS ALL ENGAGEMENT GOOD ENGAGEMENT? A CLOSER LOOK AT FEMALE ATHLETE SELF-PRESENTATION ON INSTAGRAM

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Synopsis:

The purpose of this research is to explore the concept of social media engagement with regard to the personal branding strategies of female athletes on Instagram. Specifically, this research investigated the effectiveness of the self-presentation strategies used by female athletes in an effort to establish what inspires fan engagement and more importantly, what impact fan engagement can levy upon athlete brands.

Abstract:

Social media affords athletes extensive opportunity for brand building initiatives. While sport practitioners are beginning to harness the power of social media platforms to enhance marketing strategies and even exploit the profitability of engaged customers, measurements judging the success of social media campaigns have largely relied on simplified measures such as the quantity of likes a post receives, or the number of comments it provokes. Recently there has been a call for more advanced metrics (Billings, 2014). The purpose of this research was to explore the concept of engagement with regard to the personal branding strategies of female athletes on the social media platform, Instagram. Specifically, this research investigated the effectiveness of the self-presentation strategies used by female athletes in an effort to establish what inspires fan engagement and more importantly, what impact fan engagement can levy upon athlete brands.

Research is replete with regard to the visual portrayal of female athletes by the mass media (e.g., Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Hardin, Lynn, & Walsdorf, 2005; Knight & Giuliano, 2003; Krane et al., 2011). New media research has investigated the portrayal of female athletes in sport blogs (Clavio & Eagleman, 2011), as well as the social media platforms of Facebook (Hum, et al., 2011), Twitter (Lebel & Danlychuk, 2014), and Instagram (Lebel & Harman, 2014).

Findings have suggested that female athletes are largely reflecting traditional media practices in their social media self-presentation. Lebel and Harman submitted that female athletes on Instagram tend toward the digital curation of personal photos and hinted that sexualized self-presentation seems to be reinforced by audiences.

With regard to digital branding, social media platforms have been found to pose an interesting twist to the traditional concepts of brand equity. Parmentier and Fischer (2012) dubbed the term “person brand”, a phrase used to ascribe the associations one makes to a particular person. Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014) adapted this concept to sport with the creation of the term “athlete brand”, defined as “a public persona of an individual athlete who has established their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face or other brand elements in the market” (p.98). Given the growth in personal branding opportunities for athletes and the potential of digital platforms to drive brand equity, it is important that we also adapt our understanding of personal branding success. This research hopes to add to this discussion through an exploration of the meaning of fan engagement.

A purposeful sample of ten female athletes was determined for examination based upon the athlete’s active use of the Instagram application. A random sample of 100 photos were analyzed for each athlete using an adaptation of the framework established by Kane, LaVoi, & Fink (2013). Each photo was categorized based upon the self-presentation of athletic competence, wholesomeness, mixed messages, sexy/classy lady, or soft porn. The second stage of the analysis investigated the fan engagement motivated by each photo. Descriptive statistics detailing the number of likes and comments garnered by each image were recorded. Fan comments were then thematically analyzed in order to determine the impact of fan engagement on the athlete’s overall brand.

Descriptive statistics, frequencies, and cross-tabulations were run to interpret and report the results of our content analyses. Results indicated that sexualized self-presentation tactics were reinforced by fans through increased fan engagement. However, the thematic analysis revealed differing forms of fan engagement. Sexualized images, for example, tended to evoke comments focused on the “beauty” of the athlete, while images depicting athletic competence were linked to inspiration and respect for the athlete. This suggests that increased fan engagement may not necessarily equate positive brand exposure. While sexualized images may receive the greatest number of likes and comments, objectification is unlikely to enhance the credibility of the female athlete’s “athletic brand”. Conversely, self-presentation strategies that feature images of athletic competence may be of significant benefit to female athletes looking to authenticate their brands based upon their athletic prowess. These findings provide a deeper understanding of fan engagement on Instagram, while also generating insight into the negotiation of gender in the digital landscape. Given the rise of visual culture, these findings also illustrate important implications for the personal branding strategies of female athletes in the construction of their digital brands.

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