The Online Self-Presentation of Athletes: An Analysis of Twitter Profile Photographs in the Sport Industry

D.O.I:  https://doi.org/10.4127/ch.2018.0132

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Abstract

Athletes who engage in social media have an opportunity to present their respective images in numerous ways. One online self-presentation strategy is the use of social media profile photographs. Such photos, as revealed in research outside the sport context, are often used by the subjects to construct positive self-images. In order to examine self-presentation strategies of athletes, the current study applied the content analytic methodology to the Twitter profile photographs of professional athletes (n = 871) across six prominent leagues. The results of the study revealed several unique findings. For instance, females and males used different approaches with their profile photographs (e.g., WNBA, WTA, and LPGA Tour players were more likely to use casual-themed profile photos in contrast to the more athletic themes used by NBA, ATP, and PGA Tour players). Athletes who had lower social media influence (e.g., Klout scores) were inclined to use action shots while those with more influence used posed shots more frequently. Tennis players and golfers selected a profile photo at a sport facility-

Keywords: Twitter, Profile photograph, Self-presentation, Content analysis
related location more frequently than basketball players, who often used studio photos. Lastly, males were more likely than females to include brand logos in their profile photographs.

Introduction

For sport organizations and athletes, it is integral for a variety of reasons (e.g., promotional, relational, informational) to be engaged in social media (Hambrick and Kang, 2015). Such sport industry stakeholders use social media to establish connections with fans, strengthen the relationship with their supporters and other organizations, share information, promote themselves and their product, and so forth. The unique features provide through social media allow for opportunities to generate active interactions between people, and social media users utilize social networking sites as a tool for presenting themselves in public (Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012; Sauder and Blaszka, 2018). Previous research (e.g., Sanderson, 2010) has suggested that social media platforms provide quality self-presentation opportunities for one (e.g., athlete) to manage a public image. Sanderson noted that, “as fans intervene in athletes’ media narratives, social-media sites become valuable tools for athletes to more directly manage their public presentation” (p. 449). While a number of previous sport-related studies have attempted to analyze social media user behavior and trends, the current study investigated how athletes used one particular social media platform, Twitter, as a strategic marketing tool for self-presentation.

Self-Presentation

An individual’s public image is one way that people see each other and judge each other based on observation. These observations might change due to social interaction. Therefore, people tend to employ strategic actions to control their public images. One of the impression management strategies is the self-presentational tactic. Cunningham (2013) describes self-presentation as “a complex process of selecting which aspects of one’s self to disclose, hide, or fake in order to create a positive impression on the audience” (p. 4). A concept of self-presentation was developed by Goffman (1959) and addressed in his book, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Goffman proposed that individuals want to control their desired images because they are involved in interactions. People want others to see their controlled images when they interact with each other. Goffman introduced the concept of frontstage and backstage, which people utilize to present themselves
with a desired image (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013). In frontstage behavior, people know that other people watch them as audience members, so they tend to follow rules and regulations. Unlike in frontstage behavior, people tend to behave more candidly in backstage behavior.

In the age of the social web, people use various online channels to present themselves to the world, which may involve the strategic selection of self-related information and images when creating their profile on social media. Self-presentation is considered a form of communication, in that people try to communicate a message about who they are to others. Lemert and Branaman (1997) proposed that an individual’s image is constructed from his/her self-presentation actions and the image is evaluated by interacting with other individuals. In an online setting, self-presentation performance become a more unique strategic action.

Papacharissi (2009) argued that social media platforms have introduced a space in which the boundaries between private and public space have become fuzzy and claimed that this imprecision opens up new possibilities for identity formation. Therefore, Internet users can enhance their performances and manage their images more easily than when interacting face-to-face communication. Krämer and Winter (2008) stated that, “users of social networking sites have more control over their self-presentational behaviors than they have in face-to-face communication, which provides an ideal setting for precise impression management” (p. 106). Also, Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) emphasized the usefulness of applying an online version of self-presentation theory and stated that “Goffman’s original framework is not only still applicable, but also of great usefulness as an explanatory framework for understanding identity through interaction and presentation of self in the online world” (p. 110). Moreover, when utilizing an online version of self-presentation, control of verbal and nonverbal approaches is more accessible to individuals so that they can represent themselves in using the most desired image than in face-to-face settings (Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs, 2006).

A limited number of sport-related studies have examined self-presentation and social media. For instance, Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) analyzed professional tennis players’ self-presentational approaches on their Twitter accounts and found that the female and male professional tennis players utilized a similar way of presenting themselves: they performed more backstage self-presentational frames. However, the male players focused more on talking about other athletes while the female players used more brand management performances as their self-presentation strategy. Another study by Sauder and Blaszka (2018) employed the self-presentation approach to analyze professional female soccer players’ Twitter performances over a mega-event timeframe. The results revealed that most players selected backstage performances, as their strategy focused on being viewed as informers, publicists, conversationalists, and sport insiders. Also, the professional soccer players used frontstage performances to express their appreciation to their
fans. However, social-media users’ self-presentation tactics are not only limited to verbal cues; the users also have opportunities to use nonverbal self-presentation approaches.

Photographs may disclose more information than words in social media settings (Van Der Heide et al., 2012). Several prior studies have examined patterns and factors of nonverbal self-presentation (e.g., Coche, 2014a; Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016). On every social networking site, a user can present him or herself via a profile page which includes personal information and a photograph that shows their identity. Users may display the photograph so that they can highlight desired aspects and omit unwanted aspects from their self-presentation (Lebel and Danylchuck, 2014). Also, users show insight into their lives by presenting photographs of themselves and their activities.

Athletes use nonverbal cues in their self-presentation strategies (e.g., Coche, 2014a; Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016; Shreffler, Hancock, and Schmidt, 2016). Geurin-Eagleman and Burch analyzed eight international Olympic athletes’ photographs on Instagram to find out how the usage of Instagram photos and self-presentation tactics differ between female and male athletes. The study found that photographs related to the athletes’ personal lives, which is an example of backstage performance, were more likely to get more comments and likes from their followers. In addition, the female athletes tended to share more private life-related photographs whereas male athletes shared a wider variety of photos. In other words, female athletes used backstage performance more often than their male counterparts.

Self-selected profile photographs are a self-presentation tactic that are typically intended to enhance users’ desired images (Hum et al., 2011). A limited number of studies focused on profile photographs as nonverbal self-presentational cues (e.g., Coche, 2014a; Shreffler et al., 2016). Coche, in examining the difference between how professional male and female athletes frame and represent themselves on their Twitter accounts, found that more than 90% of the athletes had a Twitter profile photo. Also, the results revealed that male professional athletes presented themselves as athletes while female professional athletes described themselves as feminine women. The professional female athletes wore more formal clothes rather than athletic clothes and had more artistic profile photographs than male athletes. Shreffler and colleagues examined how female athletes present themselves. Their investigation involved Twitter profile photos of female athletes from six sports (i.e., basketball, Olympic sports, golf, volleyball, soccer, and auto racing). The results showed that athletic competence—which refers to as a “picture of a sportswoman depicted in an athletic manner, be it a portrayal in uniform, on the court, or in action” (p. 466)—was the most popular theme. Based on these findings, the scholars argued that female athletes decide to focus on their athletic identities when the athletes have a choice when building their images on social media outlets. They
also stated that, “Regardless of the avatar chosen by women in this study, social-media platforms such as Twitter offer female athletes a space to create and reclaim presentation of self” (p. 471).

**Gender and Sports**

Although discrimination has decreased dramatically in modern society, it is still reported that female athletes experience discrimination in the sports industry. Sport media studies over the last couple decades (e.g., Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016; Pedersen, Whisenant, and Schneider, 2003) have continued to reveal gender gaps in the coverage as women and men have received different amounts of media attention and have been portrayed differently in traditional media (e.g., magazines, newspapers, television, radio) and new media outlets. Moreover, it has been found that men’s sports and male athletes have more media coverage than women’s sports and female athletes (e.g., Pedersen et al., 2007). These gender gaps have been constantly found in traditional media channels. Similar to the traditional media, gender gaps have been found in new media platforms (e.g., Coche, 2013, 2014b). Coche (2013) analyzed the coverage of the Australian Open on ESPN’s website. The results revealed that ESPN framed the men’s competitions as more important by producing more content about men’s events than women’s events. However, the results also showed no gender difference in terms of production value. Another of Coche’s (2014b) study examined the social media engagement of the U.S. women’s national soccer team through the official Twitter account of the U.S. Soccer Federation. Three different time frames were measured, including immediately before, during, and immediately after the 2011 World Cup. The results of the content analysis revealed that the U.S. Soccer Federation treated the women’s team as less important than the men’s, even though the timeframe tweets retrieved were from were during the women’s international event. The author concluded that a gender gap remains in sports social media, similar to traditional media.

A recent study by Shreffler et al. (2016) examined the Twitter profile photographs of female athletes in six sports (i.e., auto racing, AVP, LPGA, Olympic sports, WNBA, and WPS). Scholars found that female athletes utilized the profile photographs in an athletic manner, such as presenting themselves in uniform, on the court, or in action. The authors concluded that female athletes decided to present their athletic identities when they had choices regarding their images on social media. Given this fact, the athletes have a chance to maintain and create public images that are distinctive from the images portrayed in traditional media.
Marketing Communications through Social Media

Every company creates marketing communications (marcoms) strategies that help boost the distinct competitive advantage of their products or services. Social media is one of the key platforms that almost every company utilizes to advertise and promote themselves (e.g., Wood and Burkhalter, 2014). For example, Twitter has become a popular marketing tool to expose users to a brand and to expand brand awareness (Hutter et al, 2013). Related to endorsements, brand logos are important in order to build identity and also to create awareness and recognition, which are expected to have positive influences toward brands (Keller, 2003). The use of athlete endorsements is one of the more common marcoms strategies companies use as effective promotional achieve their goals and objectives (Brison et al., 2016).

Over many decades, it has been found that a positive affiliation between endorsements and athletes generated more favorable attitudes toward endorsed brands, more positive influences on word-of-mouth techniques, and more positive influences on purchase intentions (e.g., Lee and Koo, 2015). Given this research, it can be seen that it is vital for companies to build effective marcoms tactics with athlete endorsements. Because of frequent interaction with fans, an athlete’s image is a very important factor for a company’s brand image, which can be influenced by an athlete’s positive or negative image (Brown et al., 2016). Therefore, athletes’ media portrayals and self-presentation strategies in social media are very important factors that are possibly have a direct impact on companies.

Most social networking sites provide users with the ability to add a photograph of themselves on their profiles, and these photos are strongly connected with the online self-presentation strategy. Previous research has revealed several strategies that are frequently adopted by social media users to construct positive self-images (e.g., Hum et al., 2011) through the use of their profile photographs. Therefore, this study examined how professional athletes portray themselves in Twitter profile photographs and which visual self-presentation tactics they use to construct online identity.

Research Questions

The current exploratory content analysis was intended to answer the following five research questions so as to examine the online self-presentation strategies of in both women’s and men’s professional golf, tennis, and basketball players’ Twitter profile photographs.

RQ1: How active are the professional athletes on Twitter?
RQ2: How do the professional athletes present logos in their Twitter profile photographs and are there any differences between the two genders, among three sports, and two social media activeness groups for the presentation of logos?

RQ3: What style of photograph did the professional athletes use for their profile photographs and are there any differences between the two genders, among three sports, and two social media activeness groups for the style of photograph presented?

RQ4: Where were the professional athletes’ Twitter profile photographs taken and are there any differences between the two genders, among three sports, and two social media activeness groups for the location of the photos?

RQ5: What kind of clothes did the professional athletes wear in their profile photographs and are there any differences between the two genders, among three sports, and two social media activeness groups for the outfits in the photos?

Method

This research employed the methodology of quantitative content analysis, focused specifically on professional athletes’ Twitter profile photographs. Specifically, the study focused on the photos of players in the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA), the National Basketball Association (NBA), the Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) Tour, the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) World Tour, the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) Tour, and the Professional Golf Association (PGA) Tour. To analyze gender and online self-presentation strategies, basketball, tennis, and golf were chosen because these three sports have large fan bases and are based in the same geographical location (i.e., the United States). These three sports have both women’s and men’s professional leagues and year-round competitions and basketball, tennis, and golf belong to the gender-neutral sports category (Koivula, 2001).

Only profile profiles from verified Twitter accounts were examined. A verified account, which is marked by a small check mark next to the account name, indicates that the accounts of key individuals and brands on Twitter are authentic. A list of 1,393 professional athletes in total (i.e., 141 WNBA players, 452 NBA players, 200 WTA players, 200 ATP players, 200 LPGA golfers, and 200 PGA golfers) were obtained for the current study on the same date. A WNBA team may have up to 12 players on its roster and there are 12 teams in the the league. Three teams (i.e., the Connecticut Sun, Minnesota Lynx, and Washington Mystics) only had 11 players
on their rosters. The total number of WNBA players was 141. In addition, two NBA teams (i.e., the Dallas Mavericks and Philadelphia 76ers) had 16 players on their rosters, although those are exceptions (e.g., listing active and inactive players, listing two-way players) because the typical active NBA roster is set at 15. The total number of NBA players was 452. For tennis, a list of players based on both the WTA and ATP single world rankings on April 24th, 2017 was obtained. Only the top 200 WTA and ATP players were included in the sample. Likewise, the top 200 golfers in the tour eligibility rankings of the LPGA and PGA Tours were included in the sample.

All 1,393 professional athletes’ Twitter accounts were investigated, and the current study found 871 verified accounts in total. Of the 871 accounts, 215 female professional athletes’ verified Twitter accounts were included in the final sample. These accounts represented 25% of the final sample. Among the 215 female athletes, there were 61 WNBA players (28.4%), 106 WTA players (44.6%), and 58 LPGA Tour golfers (27.0%). In addition, 656 male professional athletes’ verified Twitter accounts were collected for the final sample. These 656 accounts make up 74.2% of the final sample. Specifically, 399 NBA players (60.8%), 124 ATP players (18.9%), and 133 PGA Tour golfers (20.3%) were represented amongst the male professional athletes.

For the female professional athletes, WTA tennis players (48%) made up the majority of the verified accounts, followed by WNBA basketball players (43.3%) and LPGA Tour golfers (29%). For the male professional athletes, ATP tennis players (62%) had the fewest verified accounts compared with NBA basketball players (88.3%) and PGA Tour golfers (66.5%). Tennis was the only sport that had verified accounts for more than 50% of both the men and the women. There was only a 9% difference between the WTA and ATP players (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>43.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennis</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golf</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Percentage values are based on the number of verified accounts out of total number of each sample. For example, 141 WNBA players were registered in each team’s roster. But only 61 players’ Twitter account were verified.
Coding and Measures

Coding materials (i.e., coding protocol, codebook, and coding sheet – all of which are available by contacting the lead author) were developed for the data collection and facilitated the investigation of the six research questions presented in chapter two. In line with Riffe et al.’s (2014) suggestion, the study used two trained coders who were experienced and knowledgeable regarding the requirements of the content analysis procedure. In addition, Krippendorff’s alpha was calculated to assess intercoder reliability (Freelon, 2013). To check intercoder reliability, 176 (20.2%) of the 871 professional athletes’ accounts were selected. The results of the intercoder reliability test showed that all variables had higher alpha values than the acceptable cutoff of .70 (De Swert, 2012). The lowest percentage of agreement was 83.52% and the highest was 100%, while the lowest Krippendorff’s alpha value was .74 and the highest was .98.

This study included a descriptive analysis of professional athletes’ social media activeness, which considers quantitative information such as the number of tweets, the number of accounts followed, the number of followers, and the number of likes. In addition to the information on the front page of each athlete’s account, any available Klout scores were recorded. Klout gathers user information from other social networking sites such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, then calculates the user’s social influence based on their algorithm. According to Turban, Strauss, and Lai (2016), Klout scores measure more than 400 variables from 9 different SNSs. In addition, Klout scores rank SNS users based on three main areas, including the number of other users they reach; the influence of the account holders’ followers; and the influence of the accounts that the account holder follows. Klout scores range from 1 to 100. A higher score indicates that the account holder has greater social media influence among the network users.

There were three independent variables in the current study: gender (both female and male professional athletes were involved); type of sport; and social media activeness. Regarding type of sport, the three sports chosen (i.e., basketball, tennis, and golf) are considered gender-neutral sports with professional leagues and tours in the United States (Koivula, 2001). Regarding social media activeness (i.e., active and inactive), in order to create groups of active and inactive social media users the study utilized a top 25th percentile (active) and a bottom 25th percentile (inactive) group for each category related to social media activeness on Twitter (i.e., number of tweets, number of accounts followed, number of followers, number of likes, and Klout score). For the number of tweets, the active group \( n = 218 \) included accounts that had more than 5,974 tweets, while the inactive group accounts \( n = 218 \) had fewer than 835 tweets. For the number of accounts followed, users in the active group \( n = 218 \) followed more than 494 accounts, but users in the inactive group \( n = 220 \) followed fewer than 144 accounts. For
the number of followers, the active group’s accounts ($n = 218$) attracted more than 131,610 followers, while the inactive group’s accounts ($n = 218$) had fewer than 11,460 followers. In terms of posts liked, the active group users ($n = 218$) liked more than 1,009 tweets, and the inactive group users ($n = 218$) liked fewer than 57 tweets. Finally, regarding Klout score, the top 25th percentile group ($n = 219$) scored higher than 78, whereas the bottom 25th percentile group’s accounts ($n = 218$) were rated lower than 53 (see Table 2).

### Table 2

Cutoff Range of Social Media Activeness Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentiles</th>
<th>Number of Tweets</th>
<th>Number of Following</th>
<th>Number of Follower</th>
<th>Number of Likes</th>
<th>Klout Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>835</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>11460</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75</td>
<td>5974</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>131610</td>
<td>1009</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Klout scores range from 1 to 100.*

Other than the five social media activeness variables in Twitter, there are four key variables (i.e., style of the photograph, outfit, location, and brand exposure) that measured the professional athletes’ self-presentation tactics. First, the current study measured the style of each profile photograph. The first category was action, such photographs that present the user’s dynamic activeness. For example, users are considered active if shown exercising, playing a sport, or working. The second category was business; for example, such photographs included official and public profile photographs, such as passport photographs, photographs on a company’s staff directory page, or LinkedIn profile photographs. Third, there was pose: users in such photographs were shown posing as if they were at a professional photo shoot. Fourth, there was casual, in which the users presented their daily lives; for instance, the users took the photographs in the car, at home, or while they were travelling. Fifth, there were other photographs, which could not be categorized under any of the four options.

The second key variable was outfit. This variable represented the outfit that the athlete was wearing in their profile photograph. The photographs were coded for
one of the following categories: uniform (e.g., jersey, game outfit, team-related clothing), professional (e.g., suit, tuxedo, dress), casual (e.g., jeans, T-shirt, tank top), and other (e.g., non-human subject). The third main variable was location. There were four location categories: facility, with photographs showing the user at a job-related location (e.g., arena, tennis court, locker room, clubhouse, training facility, golf course); portrait, with the location hardly visible because of effective lighting and backdrops; casual, with photographs showing users at home, by a pool, at a bar, or at another common location that is frequented as a part of daily life; and other, where the location was absent from the profile photograph. The last key variable was brand exposure, which indicated whether any brand logo(s) was/were presented in the athlete’s profile photograph. In addition, brand name(s) was/were recorded, if any.

Results

The first research question asked to find out the professional athletes’ Twitter usage. It was found that male professional athletes ($M = 444,068.97, SD = 1,961,177.72$) attracted more Twitter users than female professional athletes ($M = 106,233.73, SD = 592,041.87$); $t(865) = -3.90, p < .001$. While males ($M = 64.15, SD = 13.04$) had more influential social media accounts than females ($M = 59.56, SD = 13.04$); $t(862) = -4.46, p < 0.001$, females ($M = 1,517.07, SD = 3,064.89$) had more liked tweets on average than males ($M = 1,013.46, SD = 2,300.63$); $t(297) = 2.21, p = .028$ (see Table 3). This study compared the Klout scores of professional athletes of three sports (i.e., basketball, golf, tennis). The results revealed that professional basketball players ($M = 64.88, SD = 13.21$) owned more influential Twitter accounts than the professional athletes of the other two sports included in this study [i.e., tennis ($M = 59.85, SD = 11.86$) and golf ($M = 62.09, SD = 13.85$)]; $F(2,861) = 11.52, p < .001$. Also, the average number of tweets of basketball players ($M = 7,243.35, SD = 9,573.99$) was significantly higher than that of golfers ($M = 4,230.45, SD = 7,613.45$) and tennis players ($M = 2,001.13, SD = 2,508.88$); $F(2,868) = 34.65, p < .001$ (see Table 4).
### Table 3

**Independent Group T-Test for Gender and Twitter Social Media Activeness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Twitter Activeness</th>
<th>Female M</th>
<th>Female SD</th>
<th>Male M</th>
<th>Male SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Tweets</td>
<td>5900.14</td>
<td>9401.95</td>
<td>5048.29</td>
<td>7792.97</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Following</td>
<td>364.15</td>
<td>393.46</td>
<td>577.84</td>
<td>2949.79</td>
<td>-1.06</td>
<td>869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Followers</td>
<td>106233.73</td>
<td>592041.87</td>
<td>444068.97</td>
<td>1961177.72</td>
<td>-3.90***</td>
<td>865.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Likes</td>
<td>1517.07</td>
<td>3064.89</td>
<td>1013.46</td>
<td>2300.63</td>
<td>2.21*</td>
<td>297.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Klout Score</td>
<td>59.56</td>
<td>13.10</td>
<td>64.15</td>
<td>13.04</td>
<td>-4.46***</td>
<td>862</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. * = p ≤ .05, *** = p ≤ .001. M = Mean. SD = Standard Deviation.

### Table 4

**ANOVA Test for Type of Sports and Twitter Social Media Activeness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Twitter Activeness</th>
<th>Basketball M</th>
<th>Basketball SD</th>
<th>Golf M</th>
<th>Golf SD</th>
<th>Tennis M</th>
<th>Tennis SD</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Tweets</td>
<td>7243.35</td>
<td>(9573.99)</td>
<td>4230.45</td>
<td>(7613.45)</td>
<td>2001.13</td>
<td>(2508.88)</td>
<td>34.65***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Following</td>
<td>697.27</td>
<td>(3158.31)</td>
<td>503.09</td>
<td>(2423.73)</td>
<td>184.16</td>
<td>(164.38)</td>
<td>2.99*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Followers</td>
<td>487903.22</td>
<td>(2203075.46)</td>
<td>165563.71</td>
<td>(577369.69)</td>
<td>264051.59</td>
<td>(1179892.30)</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Likes</td>
<td>1097.77</td>
<td>(2383.10)</td>
<td>1263.36</td>
<td>(3196.42)</td>
<td>1112.38</td>
<td>(2100.52)</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Klout Score</td>
<td>64.88</td>
<td>(13.21)</td>
<td>62.09</td>
<td>(13.85)</td>
<td>59.85</td>
<td>(11.86)</td>
<td>11.52***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. * = p ≤ .05, *** = p ≤ .001. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below means. Means with differing subscripts within rows are significantly different at the p < .05 based on Scheffe post hoc comparisons.
Research question 2 analyzed brand exposure in athletes' Twitter profile photographs. The results of the cross tabulation analyses showed that male professional athletes (68.3%) were likely to select profile photographs that contain brand logo(s) than their female counterparts (58.6%), $\chi^2(1, N = 871) = 6.73, p < .01$. In the lower Klout score group, 69.9% of users showed brand logo(s), while 58.3% of users in the higher Klout score group displayed brand logo(s), $\chi^2(1, N = 437) = 6.39, p < .05$. There was no difference among the three different sports, and 65.90% of athletes picked profile photographs that included brand logo(s).

Research question 3 examined the style of photograph, which was one of the photograph characteristics. The results of chi-square tests revealed that male professional athletes used more action shots (32.5%) while female professional athletes selected more casual shots (17.4%), $\chi^2(4, N = 871) = 31.74, p < .001$. While posed shots was the most popular choice for athletes of the three sports, professional tennis players used action shots more often (37.3%), $\chi^2(8, N = 871) = 32.18, p < .001$. In addition, users who had more followers tended to select action shots (37.6%), $\chi^2(4, N = 436) = 21.99, p < .001$. Users who had a lower Klout score inclined to use action shots (37%) while users who had a higher Klout score used posed shots more frequently (38.5%), $\chi^2(4, N = 437) = 13.32, p = .01$.

Research question 4 focused on location in the professional athletes’ Twitter profile photographs. Female professional athletes (30.2%) were presented in a casual location more often than their male counterparts (21.8%), $\chi^2(3, N = 871) = 13.85, p = .003$. Both tennis players (44.5%) and golfers (52.4%) selected profile photographs at a sport facility-related location more frequently than basketball players, who picked profile photographs that were taken at studios (28.7%), $\chi^2(6, N = 871) = 46.70, p < .001$. Moreover, users who had smaller number of followers (45.4%) tended to choose profile photographs which were taken at a sports facility related-location, $\chi^2(3, N = 436) = 15.92, p = .001$. Likewise, the athletes in the lower Klout score group (40.6%) were likely to use photographs that show a sports facility related-location, $\chi^2(3, N = 437) = 8.55, p < .05$.

Research question 5 analyzed the outfits in the professional athletes’ Twitter profile photographs. Male professional athletes (61.6%) represented themselves in sport-related outfits while female professional athletes were shown in non-sport-related outfits (37.3%), $\chi^2(3, N = 871) = 13.58, p = .004$. Similar to the results of the locations in the profile photographs, 67% of users who had less followers utilized profile photographs where they were shown in a sport-related outfit, while 49.1% of users who had attracted much more followers were more likely to be depicted in a sport-related outfit, $\chi^2(3, N = 436) = 28.33, p < .001$. Also, 67.1% of users in the group with Klout scores higher than 78 were less likely to select photographs that they were presented in a sports-related outfit to compare with the group with Klout scores lower than 53 (52.3%), $\chi^2(3, N = 437) = 11.95, p < .01$. 
Discussion

Twitter and Professional Athletes

The key findings from the first research question showed the similar issue that sport industry has had. The issue was directly reflected in the percentage of verified accounts for each gender. Male professional athletes tended to be regarded by Twitter as public figures compared to female professional athletes. For example, Twitter had verified 88.3% of NBA players’ Twitter accounts were verified, while it had only verified 43.3% of WNBA players’ Twitter accounts. Furthermore, 66.5% of PGA Tour golfers’ Twitter accounts were verified, but only a few female golfers’ accounts (i.e., 29%) were verified. Despite the increasing popularity of the LPGA Tour or the fact that it serves as the world’s primary professional female golf tour, there were huge gaps between female and male professional golf tours with regard to the number of verified Twitter users. For example, the Twitter account of Inbee Park, the former number one player in the world and an Olympic gold medalist, was not verified even though she manages her own Twitter account. Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) noted that, “despite the relative gender equity in the sport of tennis and the opportunities inherent in Twitter as an uncensored broadcast medium, hegemonic values appear to persist” (p. 473).

Both female and male professional athletes created similar numbers of tweets and followed similar numbers of other Twitter users, but female professional athletes liked more tweets from other users than male professional athletes. Female athletes also engaged more with other users, and these athletes attempted to create two-way communication. Along with celebrities, professional athletes are often categorized based on who is involved in para-social interaction (e.g., Frederick et al., 2012). However, the current study found that female professional athletes engaged in social interaction more frequently than male professional athletes. Due to social interaction through Twitter, female athletes may receive positive feedback from fans. Frederick et al. proposed that, “the more social an athlete is on Twitter the more media users may feel as if they are engaged in a normal social relationship with that athlete” (p. 493). Scholars (e.g., Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012) have suggested that Twitter as a social media platform can facilitate more social interaction that involves two-way communication than para-social interaction between athletes and fans (e.g., followers), and female professional athletes have attempted to employ this feature more than male professional athletes.

Visual Self-Presentation in Twitter Profile Photographs

First, the current study found that every professional athlete in the final sample ($N = 871$) used profile photographs (e.g., their own photographs, other people’s photographs, personal brands logos, objects) in their verified Twitter accounts.
Moreover, the profile photographs of Social Network Sites (SNSs) are the primary feature visible to other users, and it serves as a means of allowing users in order to build their online social identity (Hum et al., 2011). Humphreys (2006) found that social networking sites users who used profile photographs were approximately seven times more likely to attract audiences than the users who did not select profile photographs. If a professional athlete seeks to be seen as a public figure, therefore, it is vital that he or she select a profile photograph to associate with his or her social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) to increase interest from other users. According to Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013), individuals utilize computer-mediated communication (CMC) to create an ideal representation of themselves utilizing a desired image.

Further, the action-style photographs were a popular choice among professional tennis players. These athletes were depicted smashing the tennis racket, chasing the ball, or throwing the serve ball. In addition, the casual-style photographs were used more for professional basketball players. These athletes’ self-presentation strategy is an example of Goffman’s (1959) backstage performance while the tennis players used the frontstage strategy. Followers of professional basketball players were able to glimpse aspects of these professional basketball players’ personal lives (e.g., restaurants, vacations, outfits).

Approximately half of professional golfers and tennis players used photographs that were taken in sports-related facilities (e.g., tennis courts, golf courses, training facilities). The strategy that professional golfers and tennis players utilized in their Twitter profile photographs was sound. According to Lebel and Danylchuk (2014), professional athletes are rated more favorably when they present themselves in a sports context. Moreover, Shreffler et al.’s (2016) found that women participating in individual sports were more likely to have avatar photos reflective of athletic competence.

This study found that approximately two-thirds of professional athletes’ Twitter profile photographs contained brand logo(s). Xie and Lee (2015) found that brand exposure to social media activities has a significant and positive impact on consumers’ purchase intentions with regard to brands. The goal of most companies is to maximize media exposure in order to aggregate as many consumers as possible (Stelzner, 2015). Because of the global popularity and increased media coverage of golf, endorsing professional golfers is an effective marketing strategy. Moreover, because of the wide range of ages among golfers, it is easier to target a specific audience by choosing the most appropriate golfers (Jang et al., 2015).

The characteristics identified in the Twitter profile photographs revealed that female professional athletes utilized an overall ‘casual’ theme compared to their male counterparts. For example, female professional athletes wore casual clothes (e.g., jeans, khaki trousers, t-shirts, button down shirts, sweatshirts). The finding is in line with a study conducted by Li et al. (2017), which found that female student athletes were more likely to wear casual clothing rather than athletic clothing in their Twitter profile photographs. In addition, the photographs were taken in casual daily...
life settings such as at home, at a restaurant, at the mall, landscapes such as a park, the beach, a mountain, and attractions. The style of shots further indicated that these photographs assumed a more casual theme. Female professional athletes used casual-style shots, which depicted these athletes wearing casual attire and in casual locations. Female professional athletes selected photographs that they took by themselves (i.e., selfie) and that displayed overall social-oriented features. Coche (2014a) argued that female professional athletes visually portrayed themselves as women rather than as athletes. This is an indication that female professional athletes were more likely to use backstage communicational performances.

Male professional athletes, however, selected photographs that were more characterized by an ‘athletic’ theme. Li and colleagues (2017) explained that male athletes use action shots because they desire to be represented via their athletic abilities. Coche (2014a) that male professional athletes visually present themselves primarily as athletes. Regarding Goffman’s (1959) self-presentation theory, the current study found that male professional tennis players and golfers used frontstage performance by presenting themselves as athletes. This finding contradicts Lebel and Danylchuk’s (2012) finding, which suggests that male professional tennis player often used backstage performance when presenting themselves via their Twitter accounts.

Because of the ‘athletic’ theme that characterized male professional athletes’ Twitter profile photographs, brand logo(s) were more likely to appear in male professional athletes’ Twitter profile photographs. Because brand logo(s) were more likely to be found in photographs characterized by ‘athletic’ themes, there were three main forms of brand logos found (i.e., jersey sponsor, athlete endorsement, and signage in facilities). For nearly a decade now the WNBA has allowed corporate jersey sponsorship and more recently, and in a limited way, the NBA has given permission for team jersey sponsorship. Both non-sports-related corporate logos (such as those belonging to Verizon, Boost, Mayo Clinic, and Finish Line) and sports-related corporate logos (e.g., Nike, Adidas, Spalding) were seen in the photographs. Likewise, professional tennis players and golfers have apparel sponsorships. Along with big sporting goods companies (e.g., Nike, Adidas, Under Armour), golf and tennis industry related brands’ logos (e.g., Fila, Asics, Ellesse, Lacoste, Lotto, New Balance, Slazenger, Hugo Boss, Ralph Lauren, IZOD, Vineyard Vines) were shown in the photographs. The second form of brand exposure in the Twitter profile photographs was athlete endorsement. Logos were shown not only through equipment endorsement (e.g., Head, Wilson, PXG, Yonex, Taylormade, Titleist, Callaway, Ping), but also via personal endorsement (e.g., Lexus, CJ, Shaw, Valspar, Toyota, Red Bull, Mercedes-Benz). Lastly, brand exposure was depicted via signage at the sports facilities. The logo(s) were not directly attached to the professional athletes’ bodies, but they were visible in the photographs. Various corporations and organizations from many different industries (e.g., financial institutions, automobile,
health, insurance) invest their money in sports facilities’ signage. For example, Kia, State Farm, Bud Light, Tissot, and Calvin Klein logos were depicted in the professional athletes’ Twitter profile photographs.

To deliver more accurate and genuine public presentations of professional athletes, it would be beneficial to use the ‘athletic’ theme profile photographs during that sport’s season so that the athletes can emphasize their public presentations. However, the professional athletes might select the ‘casual’ theme for profile photographs during non-seasons to reflect a more accurate image. Moreover, using ‘casual’ themes for profile photographs during non-seasons facilitates Goffman’s (1959) backstage portrayals of the athletes’ images, and it allows followers to see more of an informal self-presentation.

**Limitations and Suggestions**

This study examined professional athletes’ self-presentation strategies and characteristics as depicted in their Twitter profile photographs. In order to apply Goffman’s (1959) self-presentation theory, the current study assumed that every verified account was owned, maintained, and controlled by the professional athletes under study. In other words, this research presumed that all Twitter profile photographs included in the final samples were self-selected so that an online version of Goffman’s self-presentation theory (e.g., Coche, 2014a; Shreffler et al., 2016) could be utilized as a theoretical framework in the study. Due to these assumptions, a limitation exists regarding the authenticity of the professional athletes’ Twitter accounts. Although the final samples were comprised exclusively of verified accounts, there was no such guarantee that the professional athletes in question actually operated the accounts examined. It might be the case that the athletes’ agents or management teams own the accounts and controls the accounts and their content (and thus while not a personal strategy, by having an approved liaison involved it could still be considered a de facto online self-presentation strategy by the athletes). As posited by Lebel and Danylchuk (2014), “regardless of who actually posts material on a Twitter account, it behooves professional athletes to ensure that they are represented in appositive light, and, ultimately, the onus of this presentation falls on the shoulders of the athletes” (p. 474).

As this investigation focused only on accounts with a Twitter verification, another limitation of the study is that female professional athletes had fewer verified accounts than the accounts of their male counterparts. For example, only 29% of the female professional golfers’ Twitter accounts while 66.5% of the male professional golfers’ Twitter accounts were verified. Similarly, verified accounts for the professional basketball players were found to be at 43.3% for females and 88%
for males. Another limitation in the current study relates to the generalization of the findings across the various sports contexts. This study examined three sports (i.e., basketball, tennis, and golf) and as such it is suggested that future research investigate other professional sports (e.g., soccer, softball, baseball). Also, Shreffler et al. (2016) suggested conducting comparisons of self-presentation strategies between individual sport athletes and team sport athletes. The current investigation only examined basketball as a team sport, thus future studies should include other sports. In addition, the present study only examined one social media platform, Twitter. Future studies should seek to examine the profile photographs of other platforms such as the highly popular Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, etc. Further, it is suggested that future research conduct cross-cultural comparisons to allow for a better understanding of individuals’ online self-presentation behaviors.

References


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