How Tweet It Is: A Gendered Analysis of Professional Tennis Players’ Self-Presentation on Twitter

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One of the most profound impacts on the sport media industry in the 21st century has been the advent of social media technologies. Social media tools have had a loud and fast impact on society, rapidly becoming standard infrastructure while revolutionizing the way people interact with one another. In the world of sport, this innovation has transformed the way sports are reported (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010) and consumed (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010), while recasting athletes as the rulers of their own domain—free to interact on a much more direct level with their audience (Pegoraro, 2010).

Within the mediasport landscape, the micro-blogging site Twitter has been particularly influential. This communication phenomenon has been embraced by the sporting world at an extraordinary pace, shattering our traditional views of athlete interaction and redefining how athletes practise their roles as celebrities. There appears to be a distinct power in the opportunity for direct communication that Twitter affords—it is allowing athletes to build more authentic brands and have much more exposure than traditional outlets. The website tweeting-athletes.com reflects this thought, reporting more than 5,000 verified professional athlete accounts on Twitter as of March, 2012. This figure is up nearly 60% from data collected in March, 2011 and represents roughly half of all professional athletes worldwide (Wertheim, 2011). Twitter is evolving into a strategic marketing tool, enabling athletes to cultivate their own brands through diverse engagement with a broad audience.

There have been a variety of studies that have begun to analyze data patterns and trends on Twitter. Specific to sport, Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhaigh, & Greenwell (2010) found professional athlete tweets tend to be direct and address topics beyond sport. Kassing and Sanderson (2010) described how Twitter is able to enhance the immediacy between athletes and their fans. Pegoraro (2010) also declared Twitter a powerful tool for increasing fan-athlete interaction while finding that athletes predominantly chat about their personal lives. It was the intention of this study to take stock of professional athlete use of Twitter as a tool for self-presentation, with a specific concentration on the differences that exist between genders.

While the online coverage of women’s sport has found mixed results, gender has not yet been examined with regard to a social media context in sport. A cursory glance of the most followed athletes on Twitter suggests extreme discrepancy in the volume of followers male and female athletes have been able to attract. At the time of data collection, no female athletes were ranked in the top ten most followed athletes. In a recent ode to Twitter, Sports Illustrated acknowledged the site’s influence on the sport landscape by releasing its “Twitter 100”—a collection of the sport mavens deemed the most intriguing producers of content. Only 11 females made this list (Wertheim, 2011). The absence of female presence among the most popular Twitter athletes raises questions regarding the production of content. Do athlete authors present themselves to their audiences in a manner that differs so dramatically it warrants such discrepancy in influence, or is the Twitter platform merely another way to perpetuate female inequality in sport?

Tennis was selected as the springboard to begin gendered social media research as it is the only professional sport in which females register in the top ten most followed athletes on Twitter. Both quantitative and qualitative content analyses were used to compare male and female athlete tweets relayed by all professional tennis players with a verified Twitter account. Profile details and messages were scoured for themes and patterns of use during the time period surrounding the 2011 U.S. Open Tennis Championships.

Goffman’s seminal 1959 theory of self-presentation guided the analysis. All athlete tweets were critically analyzed using Goffman’s ideology of front and backstage performances. Ten new frames were then constructed within this framework in an effort to help explain the strategies athletes use to navigate their audience on Twitter. The
backstage frames that emerged from the data included: the conversationalist, the sport insider, the behind-the-scenes reporter, the super fan, the informer and the analyst. Front stage performances included: the publicist, the superintendent, the fan aficionado and the brand manager.

By and large, male and female athletes were found to post messages at a very similar frequency and in fundamentally the same manner. An average of 77% of all athlete tweets were distinguished as backstage performances. While this sample made use of similar self-marketing strategies, male athletes were found to spend a significantly increased portion of their time performing the role of sport fan compared to their female counterparts. Conversely, female athletes put significantly more effort into their roles as brand managers. Male athletes were found to have a substantial audience, averaging 90,439 followers relative to the female average of 56,496. Male athletes also enjoyed a higher collective impact score sitting at 13.6, compared to the average female score of 8.9. These results serve as an important baseline study of gender in a social media context and hold implications for the future content production of athletes and sport enthusiasts on Twitter.