

An Audience Interpretation of Professional Athlete Self-Presentation on Twitter

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The technological innovations of social media have become deeply entrenched in the world of sport. Within this new communications landscape, the micro-blogging tool Twitter has evolved into a particularly popular social media device in the sporting sphere and is now widely recognized as the industry's social network of choice (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). While research into this platform has investigated athlete use of Twitter (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010), audience interest in athlete Twitter commentary has yet to be considered. In a competitive marketplace, this exists as an important and practical research extension—to build a loyal audience, one must listen to their audience. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore how sport consumers interpret athlete self-presentation on Twitter, and further, how a sport audience distinguishes the perceived importance of self-presentation on an athlete's image.

Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) explored the digital self-presentation of professional athletes through the lens of Goffman's 1959 theory of self-presentation. This work resulted in the creation of ten athlete content strategies—six backstage or less formal strategies, as well as four front stage or more formal content strategies. With the purpose of the current study to investigate audience interest in the digital self-presentation of professional athletes, a self-administered online survey was created using these ten athlete self-presentation strategies to guide the development of audience interest scales. A definition and specific example was provided for each self-presentation strategy after which participants were asked to rate their level of interest in each item.

The survey was focused around the sport of golf due to its diverse demographic of both gender and age representation. Golfers exist as one of the most sought after target audiences on the internet due to the diversity they offer (GolfADS Global, 2010). Additionally, the sport of golf has received significant social media buy-in from many of its top players; as of December 2012, there were 210 professional golfers with verified Twitter accounts according to the website *tweeting-athletes.com*. The top followed players all boast well over a million followers. The survey link was sent out via email to a convenience sample of golfers, golf courses, and golf governing bodies across both Canada and the U.S with snowball sampling encouraged. The link was also posted on various golf-related Facebook and Twitter pages.

Data from 377 sport consumers revealed participants were largely ambivalent to the Twitter practices employed by professional golfers. The most salient strategy reported was that of the *sport insider*. Participants reported greatest interest in the discussion of athlete performance, athlete fitness, and an athlete's sport expertise. Significant gender variance was identified for the sport insider strategy, with males reporting greater interest than females. Significant age variance was found in all ten self-presentation strategies with 18-34 year olds reporting consistently greater interest than those aged 55 and older. The study offered evidence of broad Twitter awareness among sport consumers, but suggested that fans may not be as interested in the personal details of an athlete's life outside of sport as previously suggested. Further, it would appear there may be a disconnect between the self-presentation strategies being employed by athletes on Twitter and the strategies sport consumers report being most interested in.

Social media has forced great change on the presentational culture of professional athletes. Images that were once tightly controlled by public relations professionals are now largely shaped by athletes themselves and expected to include far more diverse and personal dimensions of self. This makes it all the more important to develop an understanding of what drives online sport consumption and what content best attracts the interest of sport consumers. The knowledge gained through this research will assist athletes in appropriately tailoring their self-presentation strategies to develop positive fan engagement and establish brand equity. In a similar manner, audience research of this nature can inform the development of social media strategy by highlighting potential brand benefits and best practices while potentially avoiding damaging missteps. As the social media platform becomes increasingly saturated and competition mounts, success on the very public Twitter stage will require more calculated

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performances by athletes. This research contributes to the digital construction and refinement of professional athlete self-presentation by confirming the value of authentic performances among a sport audience and offering quantitative support for a greater interest in sport-specific Twitter content. By benchmarking audience preferences, we also uniquely add an interpretive element to the larger body of sport communication literature.

Selected References

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