Insta-Equality? An Exploration of Female Athlete Self-Presentation on Instagram

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Friday, May 30, 2014

20-minute oral presentation (including questions)

Abstract 2014-095
8:55 AM (Frick)

The world of social media has vastly transformed the sport media complex. One of the key drivers behind the platform’s success has been the novelty of extending athletes the control to shape their own public image (Pegoraro, 2010). Fundamentally, this has positioned social media as a stage for self-presentation (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). While scholars have produced an extensive body of evidence demonstrating how traditional media have consistently portrayed female athletes in a biased manner that trivializes their place in sport, or “ignores it altogether” (Messner, 2002), little work has investigated whether these traditional treatments of gender are persevering in new media outlets. The purpose of this exploratory study is thus to investigate social media gender representations. Specifically, this study will explore the photographic self-presentation of female athletes on one of the fastest growing social media applications, Instagram (Fox, 2013). The research question postulates how female athletes’ self-presentation on Instagram compares to the established body of research on the photographic portrayal of female athletes in traditional media outlets.

Krane et al. (2010) pointed to the paradox that female athletes often experience as they negotiate their powerful bodies against social conventions. Krane and her research team found, however, that when given a choice on how they wished to be perceived, a majority of the college-aged female athletes under investigation elected to emphasize their power, strength, and athleticism. The decision of these athletes to select physical competence as a means of self-presentation contradicts research that has suggested an inclination of sportswomen to balance traditional gender identities with athletic selves. We argue that in line with this changing tide in the negotiation of gender and athletic identities, social media has the potential to extend beyond the reach of traditional media to more diverse audiences. The re-negotiation of our concepts of femininity combined with the freedom inherent of social media self-presentation could prove a valuable key to unlocking the time-honored tradition of hegemony in sport.

A purposeful sample of six female athletes was determined for examination based upon the athlete’s active use of the Instagram application as well as their recognized stature as elite sportswomen. Initially, all photos will be delegated into one of four categories as per the framework established by Kane, LaVoi, and Fink (2013). Following this, each photo from the athlete’s Instagram account will be examined relative to setting, relation to sport, and camera angle. Finally, Goffman’s 1959 theory of self-presentation will be applied to the photos in order to analyze the version of ‘self’ our sample is presenting to their audiences. Critical feminist theory will be used to explain possible relationships between gender, privilege, and power.

Descriptive statistics, frequencies, and cross-tabulations will be conducted to interpret and report the results of our content analyses. Additional evaluation will ensue to uncover patterns and possible explanations of the data. The findings are expected to provide a deeper understanding of the self-representation of female athletes on Instagram, while generating insight into the negotiation of gender and athletic identities.

References


