Self-Representation of Female Athletes: A Content Analysis of Athlete Avatars

Megan Shreffler, University of Louisville
Meg Hancock, University of Louisville

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The representation of female athletes in media outlets has been examined and scrutinized through scholarly research for the past three decades (Kane & Maxwell, 2011). Two patterns of representation have emerged. First, female athletes are considerably underrepresented in the amount of coverage received in comparison to male athletes (Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Grau, Roselli, & Taylor, 2007). The second pattern of representation suggests that female athletes are consistently portrayed in ways that emphasize their femininity and heterosexuality versus their athletic competence (Douglas & Jamieson, 2006).

The inequitable patterns of representation of female athletes in mainstream sport media are theoretically supported by critical feminist theory, a subset of critical theory. Critical feminist theory suggests that gender oppression is endemic in our society, and is considered normal and ordinary (Geisinger, 2011). Society through the lens of critical feminist theory is structured around inequitable relationships in which women are often marginalized (Hoeber, 2007). In their study guided by critical feminist theory, Kane and Maxwell (2011) found that the “sex sells” approach taken in the mainstream media coverage of female athletes actually creates a backlash effect, as those exposed to the coverage were offended by sexualized images of female athletes. Additionally, their results found that sexualizing female athletes alienated the core fan base of women’s sports – women and older men. While their results and those of previous researchers identify inequitable patterns of representation of female athletes in print and broadcast journalism (Kane & Maxwell, 2011), the self-representation of sportswomen in alternative media outlets, such as Twitter, has not yet been examined.

Since its inception in 2006, Twitter has experienced exponential growth and has become a popular online social network for professional sport teams and athletes to connect with fans (Fisher, 2009). Given that Twitter is user-controlled, athletes are able to control the image they wish to portray to the public through this social media platform. Impression management, or the ability of users to influence the perceptions of how others view them (Goffman, 1959), is an appropriate theoretical lens from which to examine the manner in which athletes are presenting themselves on Twitter. Goffman (1959) asserted that the presentation of one’s self is affected by the audience. Thus, a person may present an idealized version of self rather than being authentic. For this reason, athletes are able to control the version of themselves that they wish to portray to the Twitter audience.

While it is clear that mainstream media feminizes and sexualizes sportswomen (Douglas & Jamieson, 2006), how female athletes visually portray themselves in user-generated media has yet to be examined. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how female athletes present themselves on Twitter. Two research questions guided this study: 1) Are female athletes perpetuating the findings in mainstream media research and presenting themselves in feminine and heterosexual ways continuing the stereotypes proposed in critical feminist theory? 2) Are female athletes presenting themselves in ways that emphasize their athletic competence as sportswomen?

To address the purpose of the study, the Twitter profiles of female athletes were examined. Sportsin140.com, a website that identifies verified athlete Twitter accounts, was utilized to identify usable Twitter profiles. A total of 208 verified, female athlete accounts were found on the website and employed within this study. The avatar, or the small picture used to represent a person on the Internet (Avatar, n.d.), was pulled from each of the 208 accounts. The avatar was deemed an appropriate tool for analysis, as it is the first picture that an individual sees on a Twitter account, and is the image portrayed to individuals interacting through Twitter.

Content analysis was then used to categorize and analyze the avatar pictures. Each avatar picture was coded independently into one of six categories to ensure interrater reliability. The six categories, which represent a continuum of images were borrowed from the work of Kane and Maxwell (2011), included: Athletic Competence, Ambivalence, All-American Girl Next Door, Hyper-heterosexual, Sexy Babe, and Soft Pornography. The athletes’
Avatar pictures were classified into the above categories by three independent raters. Raters initially agreed on 77.8% of the avatars. Disagreements on the differences were resolved through discussion, leading to 100% agreement.

The results of the initial content analysis indicated that the category with the most avatar pictures was All-American Girl Next Door (42.3%). However, during the discussion on the placement of the images into this category it became apparent that the raters had placed all self-taken pictures into this category, as it was deemed the most appropriate placement out of the six provided categories. Athletic competence, or the portrayal of the female athlete in uniform, on court, or in action, yielded the second highest number of avatar pictures (31.7%). Ambivalence (12%), Sexy Babe (7.7%), and Hyper-heterosexual (6.3%) rounded out the remaining pictures. There were no avatar pictures that were categorized as soft pornography. The results suggest that contrary to the depiction of female athletes in mainstream media, female athletes are more likely to present themselves in athletically competent ways than in sexualized ways.

Due to the discrepancies that arose in how to categorize the self-taken pictures, a second content analysis was conducted in which inductive coding was employed. The same three independent raters created categories that they believed effectively categorized the avatar pictures. Following the initial inductive coding process, discussion ensued in which seven categories emerged. Four of the seven categories emulated the findings of Kane and Maxwell (2011): Athletic Competence, Ambivalent, All-American, and Sexy Babe. The additional three categories that emerged included: Athlete as Social Being, Athlete as Promotional Figure, and Selfie. The category with the most avatar pictures was athletic competence (30.1%), followed by All-American (18.3%) and Selfie (16.3%).

The results of this study illustrate discrepancies between how mainstream media is representing female athletes and how female athletes are choosing to represent themselves on user-controlled outlets. Specific implications for this study will be discussed in further detail if accepted for presentation. Additionally, to address the inability of content analysis to account for an audience response to the user-generated images, a follow up study in which the attitudes and intentions of sport consumers are measured will be conducted.