Instagagement: An Analysis of the Self-Presentation Strategies and Engagement Rates of Professional Tennis Players on Instagram

Kellie Ring, Ryerson University
Katie Lebel (Advisor), Ryerson University
Alanna Harman, St. John's University

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Instagram has become a powerful marketing tool for many companies and celebrities. Athletes in particular have been attracted to the visual-based platform as a means to create powerful brand images and heighten brand awareness (Eagleman, 2013). Brandon Gayle, head of Instagram’s global sports partnerships, suggested that about one third of Instagram users follow at least 10 sport-related accounts, proving sports to be one of the most popular topics followed on the platform (Collins, 2017). This study explored the self-presentation strategies of male and female professional tennis players on Instagram, with a specific focus on the differences that exist between genders.

Specific to athletes, scholars have suggested that social media use allows for personally crafted public images (Geurin, 2017; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Sanderson, 2008) that allow athletes to engage with fans, promote products, and potentially gain new sponsors (Geurin, 2017; Hambrick & Kang, 2014). Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) argued that the intimacy of sharing visual content provides a way for fans to experience the everyday, behind-the-scenes lives of their favourite athletes. Visual content has the potential to be extremely powerful, with the ability to tell stories and convey meanings. In line with the adage that a picture is worth a thousand words, Instagram has further thrived on the ability of its images to tell stories in a universal language. The focus on visual content uniquely allows the platform to cross language barriers and provide global accessibility to its users.

Despite previous research on self-presentation and social media, limited research has been conducted through the lens of Instagram. Two studies to date have specifically focused on athlete’s self-presentation on Instagram with investigations into gender differences. Reichart-Smith and Sanderson (2015) found that athletes self-presented on Instagram in ways that confirmed previously established gender norms, while Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) looked at Olympic athletes’ self-presentation and concluded that male athletes posted a wider variety of photos on Instagram in comparison to their female counterparts. This study expands on this important work by exploring the self-presentation strategies of male and female athletes active in the sport of tennis, arguably the most gender equitable sport context available to sport researchers.

A purposeful sample of the top ten most followed female and male professional tennis players active on the Instagram platform was captured for analyses. The 20 athletes under investigation represented 17 different countries around the world. The 50 most recent posts were collected from each athlete using a screen-capture function. Content analytic methods were then employed to categorize each Instagram post. A priori coding using Shreffler, Hancock and Schmidt (2016) was initially conducted. During code comparison between the researchers, it became apparent that Shreffler et al.’s framework did not adequately address the variety of images within our data and as such, emergent coding followed which allowed for the inductive creation of themes that were representative of the data. Codes were compared and refined to better suit the context under investigation until consensus was achieved. Two of the eight categories remained consistent with the findings of Schreffler et al. (2016): athletic competence and promotional figure. Two other categories remained consistent with their definition, but were renamed to reflect gender neutrality: all-American “girl next door” was renamed “down-to-earth”, and “sexy babe” was renamed “sexualized”. In addition, four supplementary categories were created in order to better reflect the posting practices of the athletes under investigation including: “celebratory”, “behind-the-scenes”, “trendy” and “glamorized”. A second round of coding was conducted upon the creation of the new categories. A subset of the athlete posts was coded by two researchers and classified into one of the eight established categories. Inter-coder reliability was found to be 96.6% among these posts, well above the 80% minimum percentage recommended by Riffe et al. (2005) to continue content analysis. Discrepancies were discussed, the code definitions were slightly modified to avoid
ambiguity, and the primary researcher coded the remaining posts. The number of “likes” each post garnered was additionally collected in order to gauge audience engagement.

Findings suggest that despite the control provided through digital platforms, female athletes continue to present themselves as females first, and athletes second. The data demonstrated a clear tendency of the female athletes in this sample to present themselves in non-athletic contexts and they often favoured glamorized images, reflecting documented traditional media practices (Coakley, 1998; Cuneen & Sidwell; 1998). The male athletes in this study frequently self-presented as down-to-earth, but tended to post in a wider variety of categories compared to females, potentially challenging traditional media portrayals that tend to present men as athlete’s first, and males second. Sport specific presentations of self (athletic competence, behind-the-scenes and celebratory) were found to be significantly more popular among male athletes, constituting 46.1% of their sample, compared to 24.5% of the female athlete sample. Fan engagement rates revealed that followers of male athletes engaged with celebratory content the most, while followers of female athletes engaged with sexualized content most often. Despite the reinforcement female athletes may receive from sexualized posts via superficial engagement metrics, the results indicate the longer-term health of athlete brands may be better served by a focus on athletic prowess. The presentation will discuss the implications or these findings in detail as they relate to athletes, social media managers, and sport marketers.