A Qualitative Study of Student-athletes’ Personal Branding on Social Media: A Look through the Lens of Self-Presentation Theory

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The number of student-athletes in the U.S. has gradually increased over the last several decades, and among all NCAA divisions, approximately 480,000 student-athletes participated in 24 sports in 2016, which was an all-time high (NCAA, 2016). Reflecting the growing population of student-athletes in colleges and universities in the U.S., previous research has examined a variety of topics with regard to student-athletes’ career paths and development, including athletic identity (Houle & Kluck, 2015; Sturm, Feltz, & Gilson, 2011), career maturity (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010), career planning attitudes (Larry & Kerr, 2005; Tyrance, Harris, & Post, 2013), and career adaptability (Duffy, 2010). Although substantial academic efforts have been made to examine what factors influence student-athletes’ careers, there remains a significant gap in the research regarding how student-athletes prepare for their future careers as well as how they effectively develop and establish their personal brands in the pursuit of careers.

Personal branding is defined as a marketing tool intended to permit one to promote him- or herself on the market so as to achieve his or her career goals (Peters, 1997). Though Peters (1997) popularized the idea, the primary concept originated with Kotler and Levy (1969), who maintained that a person could be marketed like a product and that personal marketing is a normal human activity carried out as a means of impressing others. The primary assumption of personal branding suggests that everyone has his or her own personal brand with distinctive characteristics (Peters, 1997). As personal branding has become extremely important to an individual’s success in a highly competitive job market (Khedher, 2014), the idea has been applied to a number of fields or areas of research, including celebrity branding (Thomson, 2006), CEO branding (Bendisch, Larsen, & Trueman, 2013), the fashion industry (Parmentier, Fischer, & Reuber, 2013), faculty positions in marketing (Close, Mourlard, & Monroe, 2011), and political leaders (Hughes, 2007).

Social media is considered one of the most efficient and widely used vehicles to help a person develop and establish his or her personal brand (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005; Shepherd, 2005). Personal branding via social media is also crucial because employers in organizations use social media in the hiring process to seek relevant information about candidates (Grasz, 2016; Labreque, Markos, & Milne, 2010; Ward & Yates, 2013). Thus, understanding the significance of social media is a key step for college students’ successful personal branding (Hopkins, Raymond, & Carlson, 2011). However, although most college students had a general understanding regarding the usefulness of social media, they were not aware of the potentially significant impact social media could have on their personal brands (Edmiston, 2014). Consistent with Edmiston (2014), Johnson (2017) also found that being aware of how social media facilitates personal branding is critical to college students’ abilities to successfully manage their exposure on various social media platforms, which may eventually help them to achieve their career goals.

Similarly, social media can provide an ideal platform for student-athletes to showcase and articulate their skills, abilities, achievements, and character, which can translate into success in the workforce. In the sport management literature, athletes’ personal branding is a relatively new concept. Most prior studies have discussed professional athletes’ unique personal brands primarily due to the tremendous impact these branding efforts and the athletes’ celebrity status had on fans (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014; Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Hodge & Walker, 2015; Parmentier & Fisher, 2012; Williams, Kim, Ayegmanuel, & Martin, 2015; Williams, Walsh, & Rhenwrick, 2015). An extensive amount of research has also examined professional athletes’ personal branding efforts carried out via social media (Coche, 2014, 2017; Davies & Mudrick, 2017; Lebel & Danyluck, 2014) and elite athletes’ social-media-facilitated personal branding efforts (Geurin, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016), and the research found that these athletes were actively engaged in presenting and portraying themselves via various social media platforms, which
were heavily investigated via content analysis based on self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1957).

While there is a vast amount of personal branding research that applies to various fields and populations, there is a still lack of research on how student-athletes build their personal brands using social media. Student-athletes, with their unique characteristics, must differentiate themselves from both professional athletes and non-athlete college students, and they must also assume the dual roles of students and athletes; as such, it is imperative to examine student-athletes’ perceptions of personal branding via social media. Therefore, the purpose of this study is (a) to examine student-athletes' perceptions of personal branding via social media and (b) to identify common themes regarding the use of social media for personal branding purposes.

Three overarching research questions were developed to guide this study in its exploration of student-athletes’ use of social media related to their career development. These questions are as follows. 1) How do student-athletes perceive personal branding via social media? 2) How do student-athletes use social media in order to build their personal brands? 3) What are the perceived benefits associated with and barriers to using social media as a means of developing their personal brands?

Considering the exploratory nature of this study, the researchers will employ a qualitative approach to best understand student-athletes’ use of social media related to their careers and personal branding. Study participants will include male and female student-athletes who are currently enrolled at a large mid-western division I university. The number of participants will be determined based on the saturation point of the emerging themes when no additional information is identified (Merriam, 2009). A purposive sampling technique will be used as the study will explore a specific population. In terms of data collection, semi-structured interviews will be conducted, and each interview will take approximately 35 to 45 minutes. The researchers will develop a specific interview protocol that reflects the research questions and will ask follow-up questions as necessary in order to collect more in-depth information. After verbatim transcription is completed, the researchers will execute open coding based on an inductive reasoning to identify patterns and categorize the identified themes rather than place the themes into the pre-existing categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The data analysis procedure will also include constant comparative analysis and re-reading of the data to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. In addition, the researchers will make a constant effort to minimize researcher bias during the interviews and throughout the entire data analysis phase, as this will help to ensure the objectivity of the study.

This study will contribute significantly to the body of knowledge on student-athletes’ personal branding efforts by identifying common themes regarding their perceptions and thoughts. Furthermore, the study will contribute to the literature on self-presentation via social media by bridging the research gap between professional athlete and student-athlete populations. In terms of practical implications, findings of this study will be a great resource to student-athletes who seek to build strong personal brands and to career counselors and mentors who aim to more effectively help student-athletes achieve success as they pursue careers.