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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Blurred Lines: An Examination of High School Football Recruits' Self-Presentation on Twitter

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The purpose of this study was to explore self-presentation among highly ranked high school football recruits on Twitter. The top 10 athletes in the ESPN 300 were selected for analysis. Specifically, an inductive thematic analysis of the athletes' tweets was conducted using grounded theory and constant-comparative methodology. Tweets were analyzed from the beginning of the football season through national signing day on February 5. Five self-presentation categories emerged from the data analysis including the personalist, interactivist, promotionalist, culturalist, and vocationalist. Overall, the high school athletes in this study were more likely to use Twitter to engage in backstage (i.e., candid) self-presentation than front-stage (i.e., calculated) self-presentation. While these athletes did use front-stage self-presentation, the performances were characterized by a highly personalized approach to communicating. The candid nature of these athletes' use of Twitter suggests that proactive education of how to properly use social-media platforms is essential.

Keywords: ESPN 300, social media, athletes

Social-media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have truly altered the nature of sport communication (Clavio & Frederick, 2014). While Twitter was founded in 2006, it has seen exponential growth in the last 5 years, from less than 50 million active users in late 2009 to 316 million active users as of July 2015 (Smith, 2015). Multiple scholars have noted that athletes are one demographic that has become heavy users of Twitter (Kassing & Sanderson, 2015). The active use of Twitter among athletes has led to several benefits including heightened fan–athlete relationships (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2014) and enhanced access by fans who are being given insight into athletes' personal and sporting lives (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). This change in relationship dynamics warrants examinations of how athletes use Twitter to navigate a more complex communication landscape.

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While Twitter is a relatively new medium in the realm of sport communication, a growing body of research has documented its usage trends among both college athletes (Browning & Sanderson, 2012) and professional athletes (Frederick et al., 2014; Hambrick, Frederick, & Sanderson, 2015; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010). However, high school athletes about to enter their college careers have remained unexplored. High school athletes are a worthy avenue of investigation, as high school sports have become a lucrative business that includes large stadium-naming-rights deals and broadcasting-rights deals with such networks as ESPN and Fox Sports (Koba, 2012). With this increased exposure comes increased attention. This increased attention is evident on Twitter, as most highly ranked high school football recruits in the United States have thousands of followers who take an interest in their content (Trotter, 2012), while the average individual has only about 200 followers (Gilbert, 2013). In that respect, the once clearly defined line between high school recruits and fans has been blurred by the emergence of Twitter (Crabtree, 2014). Examining how these blurred lines and increased access affect self-presentation among young athletes who have recently been thrust into the media spotlight (i.e., primetime ESPN broadcasts and coverage of the Under Armour All American Game and national signing day) is a necessary research endeavor. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine self-presentation among highly ranked high school football recruits on Twitter. Specifically, this study analyzed athletes listed in the ESPN 300, which is a database that tracks the 300 highest ranked high school football prospects.

While research has begun to explore self-presentation among professional athletes on Twitter (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Sanderson, 2013), this study is significant in that it was one of the first attempts to analyze the self-presentation of high school athletes. According to Marshall (2010), the presentation of oneself in an online environment is "a hybrid among the personal, interpersonal, and the mediated" (p. 35). Marshall claimed that Twitter and other social-media platforms allow individuals to construct "a character for the kind of ritual performance of the self" (p. 40). These statements, along with existing research, further validate the need to examine self-presentation in the context of social-media use.

Review of Literature

Self-Presentation

Individuals often present themselves in the most desirable way possible by accentuating positive characteristics to elicit favorable impressions (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). This phenomenon is referred to as self-presentation. The concept of self-presentation was first introduced by Erving Goffman in 1959 in his work titled *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. According to Goffman, individuals navigate between backstage (i.e., candid) and front-stage (i.e., calculated) performances during their interactions with others. In that sense, identity performance is a complex process where the individual constructs an identity consistent with audience expectations (Goffman, 1959). Identity construction involves weighing both individual goals and audience expectations and desires (Bortree, 2005). A significant body of self-presentation research has focused on interpersonal contexts such as

dating (Feeney & Hill, 2006), marriage (Ragsdale & Brandau-Brown, 2005), and the workplace (Birkner, 2004; Kvarnstorm & Cedersund, 2006).

The advent of the Internet and related communication technologies has created new opportunities for self-presentation research. Specifically, this line of research has examined self-presentation on Web sites (Dominick, 1999; Niven & Zilber, 2001) and personal blogs (Bortree, 2005; Hevern, 2004). Scholars have extended this research to include online dating contexts (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Toma & Hancock, 2010) and online communities (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007; Schwämmlein & Wodzicki, 2012). Most recently, scholars have investigated self-presentation in social-media communities. Specifically, self-presentation research related to social-media platforms has analyzed the relationship between personality traits, secondary goals, and self-presentation on Facebook (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). This subset of self-presentation research has also examined the effect of Facebook photos on judgments of social orientation (Van Der Heide, D'Angelo, & Schumaker, 2012), as well as the relationships between audience size, privacy concerns, and disclosure on social-networking sites (Vitak, 2012).

Applying self-presentation to the Internet and its related platforms has proven beneficial. One of the key findings from this line of research is that when individuals use online platforms, they often navigate between impression-management pressures and the desire to present an authentic self (Ellison et al., 2006). One subset of individuals that would arguably have to negotiate between those conflicting strategies on a daily basis is athletes, who are the focus of the current study.

Athletes and Self-Presentation

Before the proliferation of communication platforms available on the Internet, athletes were at the mercy of traditional-media outlets to create their public persona. While athletes could use traditional outlets to counter any negative press, their opportunities for image alteration were relatively limited. For example, Bishop (2005) analyzed how the media portrayed Joey Galloway during his contract renegotiation before the 1999 season. His analysis found that the media portrayed Galloway as a selfish individual who championed his own goals over the goals of his team. At the time, Galloway had little control over the image that was being portrayed in the media. There were limited Internet platforms (and no social media) at his disposal. Therefore, any self-presentation attempts by Galloway would have been disseminated through traditional media and thereby monitored and controlled by those outlets. For better or for worse, the Internet allows athletes to have greater control over their self-presentation by disseminating their identity directly to fans.

Limited studies to date have examined athlete self-presentation on the Internet. Although this body of work is small, some valuable findings have emerged. In his 2008 study, Sanderson investigated Curt Schilling's self-presentation on his blog after Schilling was accused of faking an injury and criticizing Barry Bonds. Three methods of self-presentation emerged from the data analysis: critic, committed individual, and accountable person. Schilling used his blog as a platform to criticize how journalists portrayed him. In addition, he self-presented as someone who cared about his team above his individual goals. While Schilling took multiple opportunities to attack or criticize those who criticized him, he also was willing to admit when

he made a mistake. Sanderson concluded that Schilling's blog provided an outlet to navigate effectively between multiple methods of self-presentation as various events took place in his life. Overall, fans supported Schilling's self-presentation in terms of his willingness to both attack journalists and admit his mistakes.

Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) examined self-presentation among both male and female professional tennis players on Twitter. They were concerned with how professional athletes self-present, as well as whether differences in self-presentation existed across genders. Their analysis found six backstage performances: the conversationalist, the sport insider, the behind-the-scenes reporter, the superfan, the informer, and the analyst. In addition, four front-stage performances emerged from the analysis: the publicist, the superintendent, the fan aficionado, and the brand manager. Both male and female athletes used backstage performances far more than front-stage performances. Overall, the conversationalist (i.e., interaction with family, friends, celebrities, and other athletes) and sport insider (i.e., providing behind-the-scenes sport information) were used most frequently. Significant differences were found across genders, with men using the superfan frame more than women, while women used the brand-manager frame more than men. Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) concluded that hegemonic values persist despite the gender equity present in tennis and the uncensored communication style that Twitter provides.

In a follow-up study, Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) examined audience interpretations of the self-presentation approaches being used by professional athletes on Twitter. They found that the most salient approach among audience members was the sport insider, which is when an athlete posts content related to athletic performance and athletic expertise. However, their previous study (i.e., 2012) found that the conversationalist was the most predominantly used method of self-presentation among professional athletes on Twitter. Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) suggested that a disconnect exists between the content being posted by professional athletes and audience preferences. Furthermore, they stated that perhaps fans are not as interested in athletes' revealing personal details via Twitter.

Finally, Sanderson (2013) analyzed Twitter use among rookie athletes in Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, the National Football League, and the National Hockey League to determine how these individuals constructed their identities as they were becoming accustomed to their respective leagues and teams. He discovered that these athletes were discussing a variety of topics on Twitter. Not only did they tweet about training and other sport-related commentary, but they were also willing to share information about their daily lives and opinions regarding pop culture. In addition, these athletes often engaged their fans by asking for assistance with questions. In doing so, these athletes conveyed information that fostered connections of similarity that enhanced opportunities for identification and parasocial interaction.

While research has been dedicated to athletes' self-presentation, this body of work is still in its infancy. Furthermore, only two studies to date have analyzed athletes' self-presentation on Twitter (i.e., Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Sanderson, 2013), both of which examined professional athletes. To add to our understanding of the self-presentation phenomenon through social media, this study examines high school athletes using the following exploratory research question:

RQ1: How are highly ranked high school football recruits in the ESPN 300 using Twitter as a platform for self-presentation?

Methodology

Data Collection

The goal of this study was to analyze self-presentation among highly ranked high school football recruits on Twitter. Therefore, a list of the top 300 college football recruits was obtained from ESPN.com (i.e., the ESPN 300). The top 10 athletes from that list were selected for analysis. Analyzing the top 10 athletes on this list was deemed a logical starting point for this line of research as these individuals would arguably receive the most exposure and attention from fans and the media throughout the season. Furthermore, as a qualitative study, this research was focused more on quality and depth of analysis rather than examining a smaller data set from a larger sample of athletes.

Once the athletes were selected, their Twitter accounts were located. Unlike college or professional athletes, there is no online service that lists verified Twitter accounts for high school athletes. However, when each athlete was typed into Twitter's search function, only one public account appeared per athlete. Since these Twitter accounts were public rather than private (or locked) accounts, this study did not fall under the definition of human subjects research and did not require approval from an institutional review board (see Walther, 2002). Each public account had thousands of followers, indicating acceptance among other Twitter users of the account's authenticity. While guaranteeing 100% authenticity of a Twitter account is impossible, a reading of the dialect and terminology contained in these athletes' tweets indicated that they were representative of their demographic characteristics (i.e., age-appropriate). In addition, high school athletes would likely not have access to public relations assistants who could help them craft their tweets like many professional athletes. It is also highly unlikely that an individual would hijack or create a fake Twitter account of a high school athlete.

On national signing day (2/5/2014) at 5 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, tweets were collected for each athlete using NVivo10. Since we were only concerned with the 2013 football season and tweets leading up to national signing day, any tweet before September 1 was deleted from each athlete's data set. This allowed for an analysis of self-presentation during the high school football season, the Under Armor All American Game, the days leading up to national signing day, and national signing day itself (i.e., September 1 through February 5). We decided to eliminate push-button retweets from the analysis, as this technological capability does not accurately depict a Twitter user's self-portrayal. Push-button retweets are simply redistributed messages created by other Twitter users that do not contain any added commentary from the user who redistributes them. Once push-button retweets were eliminated, the adjusted data set was 4,021 tweets, which served as the final data set for analysis. This number of tweets analyzed was consistent with existing sport-specific Twitter research (Frederick et al., 2014; Hambrick et al., 2010, Pegoraro, 2010).

In addition to analyzing the athletes' tweets for self-presentation categories, user data (i.e., followers and following) were collected each month throughout the season up until national signing day. Demographic information was collected, as well. Each athlete analyzed in this study was a senior in high school, under the age of 21, and African American. In terms of followers, each athlete gained Twitter

followers during the time frame of analysis. Gains in followers ranged from 360 to 14,272 (M = 4,915). In terms of following, all of the athletes (except for one) followed more individuals at the end of the time frame of analysis then they did at the beginning of the time frame. Excluding the individual who unfollowed 454 individuals, the following gains ranged from 8 to 574 (M = 166). A complete representation of these data is displayed in Table 1. It is also important to note that at the conclusion of data collection (i.e., February 5), tweet numbers for these athletes ranged from 809 to 17,200. Those tweet numbers are reflective of the entire life span of their Twitter accounts and not the analysis time frame used in this study.

Data Analysis

It was necessary to use a qualitative approach in the current study, as we did not want to make assumptions that different populations of athletes (i.e., professional vs. high school) used Twitter in a similar manner. While we know of no research

Table 1 User Data

		Date							
Ath		9/1	9/30	10/31	11/30	12/31	1/31	2/5	Total
1	Flwng	666	760	888	982	1,054	1,081	1,089	423
	Flwrs	4,428	4,732	6,047	7,592	17,239	17,894	18,700	14,272
2	Flwng	2,225	2,220	2,254	2,258	2,309	2,300	2,310	85
	Flwrs	18,333	18,881	19,688	21,987	25,319	25,943	26,300	7,967
3	Flwng	544	552	570	584	597	611	614	70
	Flwrs	3,831	3,862	3,931	4,452	5,644	6,125	6,235	2,404
4	Flwng	657	702	735	801	883	907	909	252
	Flwrs	7,832	8,104	8,531	10,720	11,025	11,210	11,500	3,668
5	Flwng	728	728	730	734	753	759	758	30
	Flwrs	1,827	1,833	1,882	1,930	2,133	2,165	2,187	360
6	Flwng	371	378	395	413	369	376	379	8
	Flwrs	5,019	5,120	5,960	6,773	10,590	10,739	11,600	6,581
7	Flwng	763	763	774	779	781	777	777	14
	Flwrs	4,420	4,747	5,222	5,672	9,689	9,819	9,858	5,438
8	Flwng	1,071	1,091	1,104	1,140	1,194	619	617	-454
	Flwrs	4,499	4,599	4,999	5,443	6,985	9,178	9,500	5,001
9	Flwng	890	916	955	1,052	1,314	1,402	1,464	574
	Flwrs	1,236	1,258	1,341	1,462	1,783	1,887	1,974	738
10	Flwng	685	695	714	717	717	719	719	34
	Flwrs	4,502	4,616	4,775	5,020	5,800	6,530	7,218	2,716

Note. Ath = athlete; Flwng = following; Flwrs = followers.

that concentrated on differences between teenage athletes and professional athletes, there are data that highlight differences in Facebook and Twitter use between these age groups in the general population. For instance, Panek, Nardis, and Konrath (2013) found that teenagers exhibiting narcissistic personality tendencies were more likely to use Twitter to express themselves, while adults demonstrating similar traits were more likely to use Facebook.

In this instance, a thematic analysis was conducted using grounded theory and constant-comparative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), the grounded-theory approach "articulates a compelling logic of discovery" (p. 250). Since this research approach was based in discovery rather than confirmation, the thematic analysis was inductive in nature rather than deductive. For this study, each tweet served as the unit of analysis. To incorporate this methodological approach, we viewed the data independently for content categories and emergent themes, which was consistent with previous research (i.e., Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012). Instead of creating categories a priori, tweets were coded into categories during the analysis process. Specifically, descriptors were extrapolated from the tweets (i.e., open coding) and placed into inductively derived thematic categories (i.e., axial coding). Categories were continually discussed, clarified, and refined as the tweets were reexamined. The purpose of this stage was to determine the usefulness of the developed categories (Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Durham, 2006). Categories were summarized and compared to ascertain similarity, and we reduced the categories as much as possible while still preserving meaning. Development, clarification, and enhancement of the categories continued until theoretical saturation had been reached and new observations did not add significantly to the existing categories.

Results

RQ1 asked how ESPN 300 athletes are using Twitter as a platform for self-presentation. A plethora of individual techniques and initiatives emerged, and we attempted to evaluate and categorize those techniques into broader categories. In total, five self-presentation categories were observed. Table 2 contains a comprehensive list of observed categories and the various descriptors within those categories.

The first category, labeled culturalist, included tweets that focused on external, cultural, nonfootball commentary. These tweets contained references to a variety of pop-culture elements such as fashion, movies, music and musicians, cars, television shows and commercials, and general cultural commentary. Also included in the culturalist category were hashtag-enabled cultural-engagement tweets and unsolicited commentary from the athlete on pop culture, commerce, and other related areas. Tweets in the culturalist category were almost entirely parasocial (i.e., one-sided) in nature, with athletes offering observations and commentary absent of audience prompting or interaction. For example, "@Drake will be the GREATEST "Overall Artist" of all time when it's all over with. . . ," "Friday Night Lights Is Relatable, Love These Types Of Movies," and "I need that Black G-weagon, all black rover and Bugatti."

The second category, labeled interactivist, contained tweets that focused on elements of personal interactivity between the athlete and his followers. These tweets included statements of camaraderie and playful interactivity, debate and

Table 2 Self-Presentation Categories

Personalist	Promotionalist	Interactivist	Culturalist	Vocationalist
Anticipation	Athletic abilities	Calling out "haters"	Apps and technology	Addressing critics
Aspirations	Audience teasing	Camaraderie	Cars	Commentary on athletes
Emotions	Boosterism	Confrontation	Cartoons	Commentary on sport media
Exclamations	Brand building	Debate	Clothes and shoes	Commentary on football culture
Family commentary	Group promotion	Emoticons	Commercial advice	Commentary on NFL
Feelings	Invited surveillance	Giving thanks	Cultural references	Discussion of coaches
Inspiration	Projection	Interactivity	Movies	Games and game play
Life advice	Protectiveness	Personal communication	Musicians	General cheers
Locational reference	Puffery	Question posing	Pop-culture commentary	Other sports
Mantras	Recruiting process	Requests for help	Restaurants	Sport commentary
Motivation		Romantic interactivity	Song lyrics	Sport-related commentary
Nostalgia		Well wishes	Television observation	Teammates
Opposite-sex commentary				Teams
Personal mind set				Training and workouts
Realism				
Relationships				
Religious homage				
Self-characterization				
Undirected musings				

questions posed to the audience, confrontation and argumentation with nonprofessional critics, statements of gratitude and well-wishing, and requests to the audience for companionship and help. For example, "@MillionaireJayy thank you homie," "it was the struggle back then RT @DaeTheDon: @JabrillPeppers You & Tiyahnn Ugly In Your Header," and "@VT4MO first off. I'm not a kid. Second. You haven't played a down of football in your life. Who are you to judge me and my team. I'm humble." Tweets in this category were primarily bidirectional and social in nature.

The third category, labeled personalist, contained tweets focusing on the athletes' individual personal experiences. Primarily parasocial and unidirectional in nature, these tweets included commentary on the athletes' aspirations and goals, commentary on family, expressions of emotion and excitement, statements of personal motivation, descriptions of life events, and reflection, self-characterization, and unsolicited life advice and commentary. Examples of these tweets include "I think it just hit my momma that today is my last day here," "Walking to class in tha snow," "Got my High School diploma," and "Bless my grandma soul I know she up there watching can't wait to see her grandson glow can't wait to see her grandson blow."

The fourth category, labeled promotionalist, contained tweets focused on both the athlete's promotion of self and his promotion of his community, his fellow athletes, his school, and his friends. This category's tweets included expressions of satisfaction about the athlete's own abilities, sharing of video highlights and photographs relating to the athlete as a football player, received honors and awards, puffery, and promotional elements relating to the recruiting process. These tweets were primarily parasocial and unidirectional in nature. For example, "TOMORROW AT 4 !! TUNE IN TO ESPN AND WATCH THE UNDER ARMOUR ALL AMERICAN GAME !! #LETSGETIT [link]," "Everybody follow the bro @TheAdams_era my FS at the #UAGame Committed to LSU, show my bro love!! #OnMe," and "#BugaNation," which was a personal brand promotion.

The fifth and final category, labeled vocationalist, focused almost entirely on tweets dealing with football, at all levels. These tweets focused on fellow football players, commentaries on sport-media critics, comments on the culture of football, college and NFL football commentary, sport-related social commentary, the football-related actions of teammates, and items related to football training and workouts. This was a primarily parasocial, unidirectional category of tweets. These tweets differed from the promotionalist category by focusing primarily on the fundamentals of game play, training, and the culture of the game, without endorsing the particular athlete's abilities and participation in prestigious events. Examples of these tweets stated, "IDC what anyone says.. Tom Brady & his boys woulda made it a much more competitive game than that BS last night. AlavsND was worse though..," "If you really sit and think about it.. High school football coaches are the reason why athletes call each other by they last name," and "@BornAnAthlete12 I'm bouta do a pool workout. I go everyday at 6am."

Discussion

The observed categories of tweets by ESPN 300–rated football recruits provide an interesting entry point for the evaluation of Twitter use among amateur athletes. Although many of the individuals evaluated were under the age of 18, and all

under the age of 21, multiple methods of communication emerged, which indicated significant individual knowledge of the athletes' levels of popularity and attention.

Goffman's conceptualization of self-presentation, and subsequent categorization of self-presentation into backstage and front-stage personae, has been evaluated in sport and social-media settings, most recently in Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) and Sanderson (2013). However, while Lebel and Danylchuk's (2012) analysis discovered a series of professionalized and manicured approaches to both backstage (i.e., candid) and front-stage (i.e., calculated) self-presentation, the results of this study indicate that the athletes included in the analysis are pursuing an almost entirely backstage approach. Three of the categories that emerged in this analysis (culturalist, interactivist, and personalist) focused primarily on nonsports, noncalculated statements and interactions relating to a wide variety of cultural and personal elements. The two remaining categories (promotionalist, vocationalist), although similar to the front-stage categories discussed by Lebel and Danylchuk (2012), were primarily characterized by a highly personalized approach of communicating. For example, one athlete in this sample created a name for his fan base (i.e., BugaNation). He then used that name in many of his promotional tweets to add a personalized touch to his connectivity with fans (i.e., "#BugaNation," "Follow me on Instagram buga_," and "B's up"). In these tweets he was giving a shout-out to his fans while also promoting a personalized brand. In that sense, these tweets (along with many other promotionalist tweets) were a hybrid of both backstage (i.e., candid) and front-stage (i.e., calculated) performances.

It is important to note that the majority of professional athletes in Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) preferred adopting a backstage persona to a front-stage one, a reality that likely speaks to the personalized nature of Twitter use, as opposed to the more strictly mediated environment of traditional mass media. That the high school athletes observed in this study tended to use backstage approaches almost exclusively appears to be a natural precursor to the preferred backstage approach of professional athletes. This is likely reinforced by greater comfort in the use of the technological interface of Twitter by the high school athletes, all of whom have come of age in an environment where social media and Twitter use are the norm, rather than the exception. Teen use of Twitter in the United States has grown considerably over the past 5 years, with over 24% of teens using Twitter and the average teen Twitter user having 79 followers (Madden et al., 2013). Furthermore, high-school-age students in general are using social media for a wide variety of personal and scholastic pursuits, from socializing to searching for the right college (Lytle, 2012). The growing popularity of the medium of Twitter creates social capital from its effective use, and that likely translates to more personal and candid use by high school athletes. To our knowledge, no existing literature examines the specific differences in patterns of Twitter use between high-school-age students and high school athletes. This represents an area that warrants examination in the future.

The results from the current study are also similar in nature to those of Sanderson (2013). Like the professional athletes examined in that study, the high school athletes in this study used a multifaceted approach to Twitter use. While this particular subset of athletes did tweet out sport-specific information such as training regimens and sport commentary, they also provided individuals with an enhanced insight into their personal lives, such as details about friendships, camaraderie with teammates, relationships (i.e., girlfriends), and family dynamics. They were also

quick to tweet out information related to popular culture, especially their preference for musicians, actors, movies, cars, and so on. While these methods of communication would most certainly enhance fan identification, it appears that this approach was more candid rather than calculated. In other words, the communication efforts of these athletes seem to fall more within the realm of pattern, rather than tactic, with little evidence of either a public relations or a marketing strategy.

With that in mind, a primary implication of this study is that social-media managers may be focusing on the wrong types of social-media uses. With the findings of this study, as well as those of Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) and Sanderson (2008, 2013), the traditional public relations and marketing paradigm of external communication appears to be threatened by a more candid, personal, interactive, and inclusive method of communicating. While further studies need to be carried out in relation to audience preference, like the one conducted by Lebel and Danylchuk (2014), it appears that the "natural" method of communication on Twitter for athletes at various stages of amateurism and professionalism is one forged in the crucible of candidness, not calculation. Social-media managers who focus primarily on front-stage (i.e., calculated) message delivery may be forcing their advisees into an ill-fitting communicative stance. In fact, social-media managers would be wise to advise their athletes to use a backstage (i.e., candid) approach that focuses primarily on giving insider information related to sport performance and expertise, as Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) found that this is the most salient self-presentation strategy among audience members.

A related implication focuses on follower numbers and Twitter-feed content. Despite many of the topics and techniques used by high school athletes being focused on personal and candid content, the follower numbers for these athletes remains high. It would appear that fans who follow these athletes may be most interested in the real, unmanicured persona of the athlete, rather than the crafted messages that they might expect a professional athlete to deliver via Twitter. While further testing is needed to verify this implication, it is interesting that the high follower numbers of many of these athletes seem to belie their lack of calculation.

The findings of this study have implications for sport-management practitioners. The current sample of athletes will soon join the college ranks. Previous research has indicated that assessment of college athletes is paramount as they are a diverse population who deal with criticism and identity management in varied ways (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). That being said, having an understanding of how these individuals are using social media before they join their highly publicized athletic programs could be beneficial to both college coaches and administrators. This approach to social-media management would allow an athletic department to point out problem areas in athletes' social-media habits before they step foot onto campus. This approach would also allow administrators and coaches to discover ways in which athletes are using Twitter in a positive way and reinforce that behavior once the athletes arrive at their respective universities.

Finally, this study has implications for high school administrators and athletics personnel. These individuals should be more proactive in training their athletes how to use social-media platforms in a manner that allows them to showcase their personality without painting themselves or the school in a negative light. A recent example that highlights the need for training before entering the college ranks involved Ohio State quarterback Cardale Jones. As a freshman at Ohio State, Jones

sent the following tweet: "Why should we have to go to class if we came here to play FOOTBALL, we ain't come to play SCHOOL, classes are POINTLESS." This tweet has actually appeared in a college textbook as an example of what a college student-athlete should not do on Twitter (Lesmerises, 2014). Perhaps by the time these athletes get to college it is too late, as social-media habits have already been ingrained. In addition, this training is necessary to circumvent the peer norms that often influence the messages that flood social-media channels.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study sought to understand how highly regarded high school football players use Twitter to express themselves and communicate with fans and stakeholders. Through an inductive analysis, five primary categories emerged. Because of the interpretative nature of this study and the fact that it was based in discovery rather than confirmation, it was not without some limitations. As a qualitative study, the analysis is not yet generalizable to other athlete uses of Twitter, either within the larger population of high school football players or among athletes in general. While the self-presentation categories highlighted in the analysis provide insight into how this group of athletes uses the technology, quantitative, deductive research should be conducted using these categories to evaluate the extent to which they capture the variance present in athlete Twitter use. While the top 10 athletes in the ESPN 300 was a logical starting point for self-presentation research among high school athletes, future research should analyze larger data sets of high school athletes from various ranking points in the ESPN 300, as that analysis may yield different results. In addition, the time period we studied could have resulted in a skewed or unknowingly biased sample of tweets. Analysis at different times of the year may result in different patterns of use.

Finally, future research should also focus on operationalizing the categories found in the current study, to shed further light on how athletes are using social media to express themselves and to communicate with stakeholders. These future investigations should compare and analyze athlete tweets in different sports, as well as athletes of differing ages, gender, geographic location, social-media experience, and education levels. By closely evaluating and analyzing this type of use, greater understanding of how athlete Twitter use compares with organizational Twitter use may be attained.

Conclusion

A common finding in social-media research is that athletes, from amateur to professional, are using Twitter to discuss their personal lives and reveal candid details about themselves (Frederick et al., 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010; Sanderson, 2013). What is unique about the current sample of high school athletes is the sheer volume with which they are willing to put their highly personal experiences and thoughts on display. The majority of the self-presentation categories observed in this study were backstage (i.e., candid) in nature. While being candid would most likely foster identification and various forms of interaction with one's followers, the interaction may not always be positive (debate, confrontation, bullying, etc.). Even if

the athlete's commentary is free from interaction, the use of derogatory or "informal" language could paint that individual in a negative light. In that sense, being candid with one's followers is both a blessing and curse. Perhaps high school athletes have not become fully aware of the consequences of their overly candid social-media behaviors, as most have not experienced any real consequences for their actions. However, real consequences exist. If a recruit creates a negative persona on Twitter, this could damage his or her future prospects, as college recruiters may distance themselves from an individual they view as a liability. While this danger exists, the use of these platforms is not going away anytime soon. This digital immersion is certainly a product of a generation brought up in a social-media world, where one's status in life is dictated by retweets, followers, and Facebook friends. Therefore, proactive education on proper social-media use from an early age is essential.

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