Visual Communication Quarterly

ISSN: 1555-1393 (Print) 1555-1407 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hvcq20

She Poses, He Performs: A Visual Content Analysis of Male and Female Professional Athlete Facebook Profile Photos

Betsy Emmons & Richard Mocarski

To cite this article: Betsy Emmons & Richard Mocarski (2014) She Poses, He Performs: A Visual Content Analysis of Male and Female Professional Athlete Facebook Profile Photos, Visual Communication Quarterly, 21:3, 125-137, DOI: 10.1080/15551393.2014.893752

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15551393.2014.893752

She Poses, He Performs: A Visual Content Analysis of Male and Female Professional Athlete Facebook Profile Photos

Using branding theory and a content analysis of the visual components of male and female professional athlete Facebook profile photos, this study suggests that hegemonic gender portrayals persist in visual representations of athletes. Female athletes were more likely to pose for photos and smile while male athletes were more likely to look away from the camera and be in motion. Athletes most often were visually represented in their uniforms, while sexualized visual portrayals of athletes of either gender were not affirmed in this study.

Betsy Emmons and Richard Mocarski

Online media has undeniably altered the way fans interact with professional athletes. Today fans can follow the activities of their favorite sports celebrities almost every day, through constant Twitter feeds, Facebook posts, engaging in other social network (SN) sites, RSS feeds from such sports news websites as ESPN and CBS Sports, and numerous blogs written by other fans, sportswriters, and publicists (Pegoraro, 2010). Via social media, there is decreasing social distance between professional athletes and their fans (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Fans can post personal messages instantly to sports celebrities' social media site pages and sometimes even get a reply (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Clavio & Kian, 2010). Many professional athlete SN sites fan pages on Facebook are managed by publicists, while others are run by the athletes themselves (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010). Athletes are interacting with fans via SN sites in different and more personal ways than they were able to using traditional media.

Given this decreasing social distance, it can be in the athlete's best interest to use social media as another tool of branding (Yan, 2011). Many athletes indeed do so (Yan, 2011; Labrecque, Marcos & Milne, 2010). Athletes post messages to their Facebook accounts or Twitter accounts, and also upload photos of themselves (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010). These personal touches not only add social depth to the fan relationship but also reveal some of the athlete's personality. These messages, then, tell fans a few things about the athlete, such as writing style and opinions. The first thing a fan will learn about an athlete, however, occurs before the fan even visits the athlete's SN site profile page. When typing an athlete's name into a search feature on Facebook or Twitter, a link to the athlete's page will appear. Next to the athlete's name is a key social identifier: a photo. The photos show fans whether they have found who they were searching for. The profile photo, then, is the first visual representation of the athlete in the social media realm, giving prominence to the chosen photo as a branding tool. Eye-tracking software has shown that the profile photo is the first item an SN site user notices when visiting a profile page (Kessler, 2011). Therefore, considering that athletes are conveying visual information about themselves on their profile photos, and further that this is the first thing a search function will show during a social media query, the question thus becomes: Are the gender roles found in mediated photos and portrayals of athletes internalized and therefore reflected in the photos they autonomously choose to represent themselves on their social media pages?

This exploratory study investigates athlete profile photos on the most popular SN site to date based

on number of users: Facebook (Andrews, 2011). Branding, the theory of creating a brand via strategic communication, is the theoretical basis for the professional athlete's choice of visual expression. A visual content analysis notes trends in photo content. The content of 120 professional athletes are investigated: 60 male athletes and 60 female athletes from a variety of televised professional sports. Athletes representing both genders from each sport are chosen to ensure gender equity and to note any differences between male and female athletes. While there is some observational visual evidence about gender differences between male and female athletes when creating, or re-creating, themselves as a brand online, there has yet to be a study noting whether such trends continue on social media, and this research seeks to address this gap.

Literature Review

Prior athlete SN site research has dealt with professional athletes' use of Twitter in career and personal settings (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Hambrick et al., 2010). These studies have looked to content, not visual communication; there is no prior research specifically delving into visual cues from professional athletes' Facebook profile photos as an extension of personal branding. Prior research has also not focused on Facebook in the study of athlete communication. This study aims to add to the body of literature on how social media, specifically Facebook, is an important visual aspect of a professional athlete's brand.

Social Networking Sites and Athletes

Understanding the reach of Facebook, and SN sites in general, demonstrates its importance for study as a branding tool. Facebook has more than 800 million registered users, with 2 billion daily post interactions, including writing, "liking," and commenting on posts, in addition to 250 million daily photo uploads (Facebook Statistics, 2011). Although SN sites have emphasized their role in increasing the interpersonal benefits of keeping up with friends and family (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Kalpidou, Costin & Morris, 2011), other uses for social media in professional sports and sports fandom have emerged. Some sports fans use SN sites as part of a "second screen" participation while watching games (Wertheim, 2011), as fans comment via social media about the action they observe on TV or online. ESPN vice president for interactive media Glenn Enoch noted that this consumer habit is still in its infancy (Enoch, personal communication, October 3, 2011). Super Bowl XLV generated more than 4,064 tweets per second during the game (Chiang, 2011). Kassing and Sanderson (2010), in a content analysis of tweets from professional cyclists, found that the cyclists offered insights into the terrain and conditions of the event route, adding a level of personal knowledge for fans that journalists would not have necessarily focused on.

NFL teams use their official web pages and Facebook pages to create online community (Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2011). While Facebook has not overtaken official team websites for dissemination of important information, it has become the better place to cultivate fan relationships (Waters et al., 2011). Jenkins (as cited in Horne, 2006) noted that, with the capabilities of new media, traditional mediated communication barriers in sports consumption have disintegrated. Thus, because "sports fans actively seek and consume information about their favorite teams and players" (Waters et al., 2011, p. 172), professional athletes have an incentive to participate on a player-to-fan level, encouraging the use of SN sites in fan engagement.

Hambrick and colleagues (2010) discovered that professional athletes use their Twitter accounts for a variety of reasons, but most often their tweets, at more than 30%, are to interact with fans and friends. Professional athletes communicated with fellow Twitter users and discuss nonsports topics (Hambrick et al., 2010), which supports interaction between fan and player. Facebook, however, has created fan pages for professional athletes, thus a more public persona is conveyed (Cohen, as cited in Sanderson, 2009). So while SN sites may appear to give fans a glimpse into the backstage performances of athletes, the athletes are aware of their public nature, thus they are still a part of their frontstage personae (Goffman, 1959). Some fan pages are maintained by publicists (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010), but others are maintained by the athletes themselves. In both cases, the athlete is ultimately responsible for brand management. Brand managers working for athletes will often first study the habits of the athlete's followers, then respond to information requests or promotions such as ticket giveaways to garner good will with fans (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010). These brand choices lead to self-expression, which may be problematic in portrayal as athletes decide how they want their publics to see them. Self-objectification to meet expectancies could be one outcome.

Due to the interactive nature of SN sites, it is inevitable that direct and indirect fan-to-fan and athlete-to-fan interaction will occur, comparable

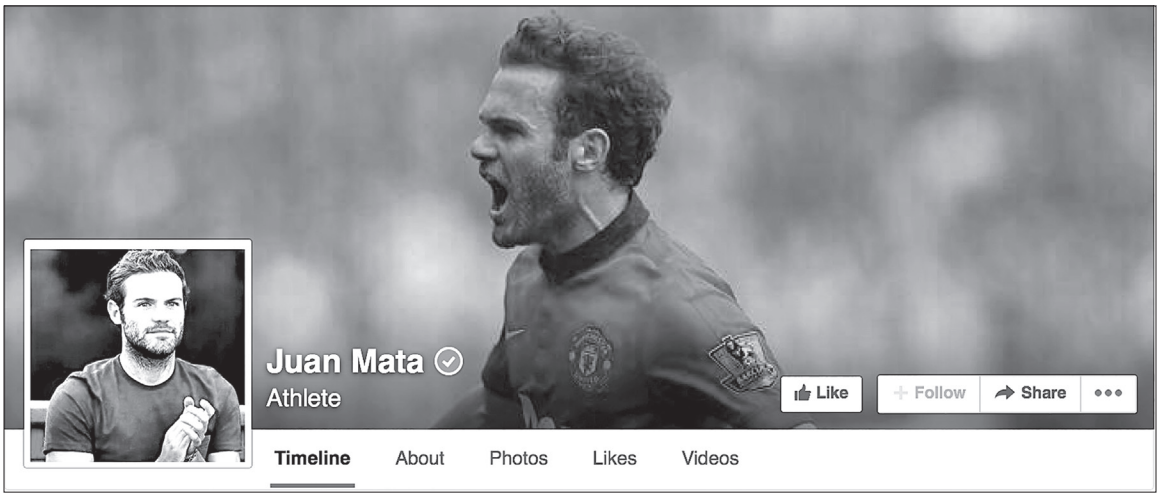

Image from Juan Mata's Facebook page.

to word-of-mouth marketing (Shu-Chuan & Kim, 2011), which adds another layer of marketability for the professional athlete but can also cause what is called viral marketing, in that SN site users can spread a photo or piece of news themselves using the participatory power of SN sites. Such viral marketing can have negative outcomes, however, in that professional athletes have even been targets of organization monitoring, as fans have uploaded compromising pictures of athletes, harming their reputations (Sanderson, 2009). Thus, a consideration in professional athletes' uses of SN sites is the freedom afforded them by their sanctioning organizations. McCoy (2010) notes that professional organizations such as the National Basketball Association (NBA) have had to monitor SN sites due to player posts that could potentially harm the group's reputation. However, McCoy (2010) further notes that right to privacy terms have been strained in the dichotomy between athlete as employee versus athlete as private person when using technology in communication. The law has allowed for sanctioning groups such as the NBA to prohibit athlete SN site use during games but has not had complete legal authority over athlete SN site use away from the sport (McCoy, 2010). Conduct rules such as those for the NBA can extend to SN sites yet allow for private posts by athletes too, which leads to a fine line between allowing athlete autonomy while ensuring league interests (McCoy, 2010). While the law is mostly intended for written SN site interactions, a visual rule would likely have similar different policies. This would suggest that demonstrated illegal behavior, such as photos of drug use or public intoxication, would probably be prohibited on an athlete's SN site profile page, but other visual representations of an athlete that might not cross legal boundaries yet are open for public ethical debate would be permitted as an extension of an athlete's expression of self. Such expressions may include alcohol use or tattoos. Thus, it is with these notations in mind that we denote an athlete's visual self-expression on SN sites as personal and demonstrative of individual personality, while at the same time within legal limits to appease sanctioning group requirements.

Visual Communication and Gender

Athletes, because of the mediated context through which fans usually observe them, experience the extension of their personality beyond their profession. Many professional athletes have crossed into such endeavors as reality television, fashion merchandising, and corporate representation. Thus, athlete communication, and specifically an online presence, carries significance as athletes can be trendsetters and conveyors of social norms (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000; Clavio & Kian, 2010). The visual communication of the athlete is a natural and important aspect of this online presence.

Professional athletes are scrutinized in photographs much like other celebrities in the press, including fashion analyses and gender portrayals (Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf, & Hardin, 2002). Because it is common knowledge that SN site profile images are key components of SN pages, normally they are carefully selected by the athletes or their publicists (Hum et al., 2011). Other forms of media have been studied for their visual persuasive messages. Magazine photos have been studied for their continued stereotyping

of male and female professional athletes (Hardin et al., 2002), as have visual portrayals of stereotypical femininity in sports magazines (Fink & Kensicki, 2002). One outcome is that, when interpreting photographs, stereotypical portrayals of men and women persist in print media (Archer, Iritani, Kimes, & Barrios, 1983). We use Trujillo's (1991) definition of hegemonic masculinity to assert stereotypical gender norms and couple this with Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity and the heterosexual matrix. With this in mind, hegemonic gender portrayals of women would be the reverse of the five tenets outlined by Trujillo for men: (a) powerful for men and passive/submissive for women, (b) occupational achievement for men and homemaker for women, (c) familial patriarchy for men and wife/mother for women, (d) frontiersmanship for men and refined/cloistered for women, and (e) heterosexual (pursuer) for men and heterosexual (pursued) for women.

SN sites, as a newer form of persuasive communication, would be an expected avenue for a wider representation of athletes as the athletes choose their visual forms as part of their public branding. When considering visual cues on a professional athlete's SN site profile page, prior research has focused on the effects of visual messages that athletes send fans. Lupton (as cited in Horne, 2006) noted that a fan who consumes mediated sport can feel old, out of shape, and lazy or lithe, energetic, and attractive based on how and when the fan watches sports. Given gender stereotyping via hegemonic portrayals (Foucault, 1972; Butler, 1990), we expect gender-role internalization to manifest in visual representations.

Photos accentuate stereotypes in many cases (Archer et al., 1983). Visual media portrayals have shown that men are more often shown face only, whereas women are shown full body. Deconstructing this discrepancy reveals a few potential underlying possible themes: face-only photos show power and prominence, whereas full body photos imply inferiority; women's bodies are more important than their faces, and the actual larger size of the man's head in the photo can equate with underlying assumptions about the size of his brain versus a woman's brain (Archer et al., 1983). This furthers gender norms that are reified throughout social history, which associate women with the body and men with the mind, positioning women as object and men as subject (Grosz, 1994). Proximity is only one aspect of photographic representation of a person, thus the symbolic undertones when viewing all aspects of visual images are vast.

Such portrayals have led to some athlete backlash, including a group of collegiate female athletes who were asked during photography sessions how they would like to pose (Krane et al., 2010). These women noted that they wanted to be visually portrayed as strong, muscular, and specifically not hypersexualized (Krane, et al., 2010). However, the professional athlete can be under considerable pressure to conform to expected societal portrayals (Knight & Giuliano, 2003) in their mediated photos. Athletes know that their profile photos on their social media pages will be a key visual indicator of their perception—as do most social media users; thus the profile photo is usually carefully selected (Hum et al., 2011). This is a key departure from other mediated portrayals of professional athletes because the athletes themselves choose—or with the help of their publicists choose—the images that appear on SN sites. Professional athletes are not necessarily given this choice when they appear in candid shots in magazines and on TV. Two studies from *Sports Illustrated* further highlight gender inequities in visually representing female athletes. Female athletes were more often shown in nonsports backgrounds (Fink & Kensicki, 2002) and were also shown less often in sports that were considered "male" sports (Hardin et al., 2002). Women were also less often visually represented, even though statistically their participation in sports is on par with men (Hardin et al., 2002).

There have not been many prior studies regarding online branding of SN site creators via visual images. Duncan (1990) noted qualitative visual features of gender representation in sports, and her study is the methodological framework for this study as noted in the next section.

Theoretical Framework

The Woman as Athlete Paradox

In Grow's (2008) study of Nike's branding of women's products, a woman's sexuality is shown as prominent over her athleticism, and thus women do not fit in the world of sport. To accommodate this, Nike chooses to highlight the feminine sides of its female athletes instead of their athletic sides. "In the patriarchal world of athletics and sports, which fundamentally shape Nike as an organization, there is a social order that further constrains women by privileging femininity over athleticism" (Grow, 2008, p. 316). This is based on Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, and Kauer's (2004) work on collegiate women athletes and the balancing act they face being women and athletes. Their qualitative study

demonstrated how these women were driven toward hegemonically masculine behaviors for their sport while at the same time they tried to stay in the hegemonically feminine role off the field of play: "Physically active women and girls face an intriguing paradox: Western culture emphasizes a feminine ideal body and demeanor that contrast an athletic body and demeanor" (Krane et al., 2004, p. 315). Another theme derived from the participants in Krane and colleagues' (2004) study was that the female athlete is constructed as other in society. Essentially, because women on the playing field must embody traditionally hegemonic masculine characteristics of aggressiveness and strength, these women were hyperaware of the need to counterbalance these behaviors when they were not participating in their sports. As one athlete in the study said, "[I]f you're an athlete, then you have to like transform into entirely someone else when you come off the field" (Krane et al., 2004, p. 322). Goffman's (1959) aforementioned frontstage/backstage performances parallel this notion.

Branding

Much of the previous branding literature's main focus is on organizations and products. Branding is the collective construction of identity for an organization or a product. With the fragmentation of media and the rise of celebrities as brands in and of themselves (Miller & Laczniak, 2011) this literature is relevant to defining the ways that celebrities "package" themselves for audiences. In Grow's (2008) branding literature synthesis, she identifies three defining features of brands, positing that brands are "(a) living things, (b) sacred entities, and (c) emotional promises" (p. 314). Organizational or product brands "are said to have 'personalities', in that they are associated with sets of human characteristics that serve symbolic or self-expressive functions for consumers" (Harris, 2007, p. 297). The closer the brand's characteristics match the consumer's expectations, the greater the likelihood that the consumer will "buy" what the brand is selling, both by literally spending money on the product and through accepting the embodied pathos and ethos expressed in the marketing. Brands are dynamic and collectively constructed. *"To a consumer brands are a language—a meaning system.* To a consumer to whom the brand exists, it is a way to identify and categorize products. Over time, consumers add to this identification and categorization" (Bendinger, as cited in Berger, 2001, p. 228, italics in original). Each piece of new information or experience a consumer has with a brand changes that consumer's construction of the brand. Therefore, each appearance of a brand is an opportunity for the owner of the brand to reemphasize her or his vision for said brand. People are not products, however, so it is important to explore how athletes could be considered brands.

Through a study of Buffalo Bill, Berger (2001) makes the case that the construct of brand and the act of branding can be applied to individuals. He points to the rise in celebrity culture over the past one hundred years, showing that active marketing is instrumental in brand recognition, just as it is in celebrity recognition. Berger (2001) cites Bendinger's definition of brand, where brands are more than just marks of demarcation; they are also a type of semiotics, adding meaning to what they represent. "A brand is not just a product. A brand is more than a name or trademark. *A brand is a concept"* (as cited in Berger, 2001, p. 228, italics in original). By expanding the definition of brand to something abstract like concept, Bendinger allows a space for more than just objects to inhabit. A concept is a dynamic category of definition that allows for multiple layers. Miller and Laczniak (2011) explain the way this works concisely:
"As consumers, we 'buy' celebrities by going to their movies, watching them play a sport, and listening to their music, insights, or witticisms. In addition to selling themselves, celebrities also endorse goods, services, and ideas. In this function, they lend their name, their image and, most important, their personal meaning to the brands they promote" (p. 499). Athletes become systems of meaning through their play, the products they endorse, and the way they are portrayed in the media. Therefore, the athlete becomes a category of definition, or concept, in consumers' (fans') systems of meaning. Because professional sports need fans to earn profits, the athletes are essentially products. In today's world, athletes further this construction by using their status as athletes to earn more profits through ventures off the field.

When transforming the logic of brands to persons as brands, the purchase is not only of product but of fandom. Therefore, because fans expect female athletes to be females first and athletes second due to the heteronormative worldview explicated previously, female athletes are be pressured to conform to this ideal. If female athletes do not conform to the ideals of heteronormativity, they may cause cognitive dissonance with fans, thereby challenging the meanings fans have constructed for female athletes and in turn causing lagging sales of their "brand." SN sites allow athletes to control one aspect of their brand, as they have control over the content

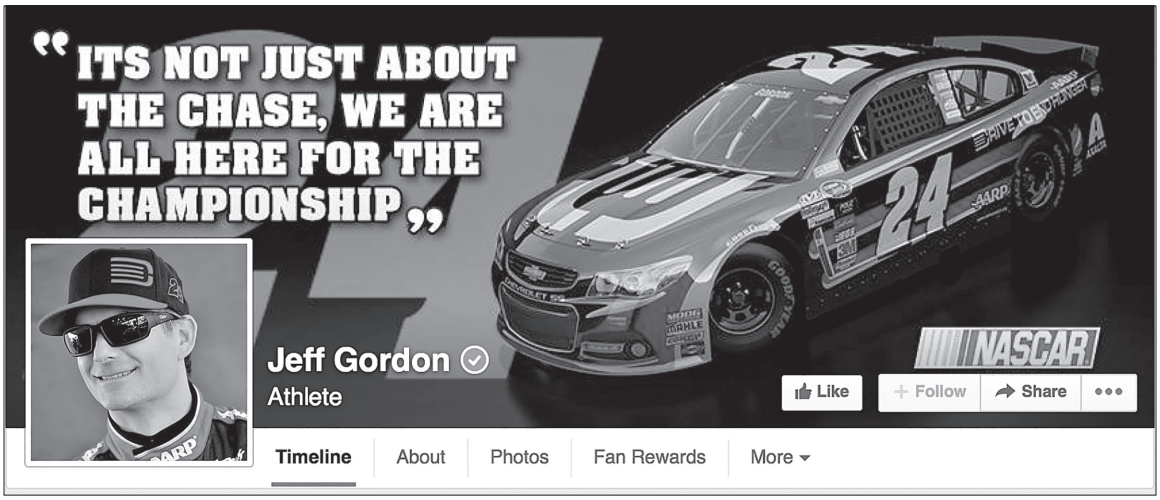

Image from Jeff Gordon's Facebook page.

posted by or for them on their SN site profiles. Therefore, the images used as the profile pictures are the first SN site access that consumers have to the athletes' vision of their brand.

As athletes become autonomous brands, they must focus on building their value across all platforms available to them. This includes the products they endorse; but because the level of autonomy athletes have in their presentation throughout all media is limited, athletes can exert brand power over their images with what they do have control over: SN sites. For our framework, an athlete has an image as a brand that he or she wishes to project, and that image must be bolstered by the outlets the athlete controls so as to counterbalance any images that clash with this ideal outside of his or her control. The female athlete paradox notes that women are sexual beings first, athletes second. Thus, in their SN site profile photos, female athletes will be less likely to be in a sports uniform when femininity can be displayed by dress. Further, women will likely want to look sexually at their fans, in other words, by making eye contact and offering a closed-mouth, seductive smile. Female athletes also will likely succumb to prior visual cues of being still for the camera. All of these notions suggest stereotypical, mediated gender behavior. We therefore propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Female athletes will be more likely to portray themselves as stereotypically feminine in profile pictures than male athletes are to present themselves as stereotypically masculine.

H1a: Female athletes will be more likely to wear formal wear and casual wear in their profile pictures than male athletes are.

H1b: Female athletes will be more likely to have a sexual gaze in their profile pictures than male athletes are.

H1c: Female athletes will be more likely to be in still poses in their profile pictures than male athletes are.

Method

Visual content analysis is used in this study as it pertains to digital color photographs that appear in the online SN site Facebook. Content analysis has been used in prior sports photograph studies (Kayoung, Sagas, & Walker, 2011; Duncan, 1990) to examine gender differences in athlete visual representations. Both qualitative (Duncan, 1990) and quantitative (Kayoung et al., 2011) methods have been employed in prior studies to determine visual aspects of photographs that might alter viewer perceptions of athletes. This study uses a quantitative content analysis with coding categories related to the hypotheses to determine statistical patterns in visual photographic portrayal of female and male professional athletes on Facebook.

Duncan's (1990) interpretative qualitative content analysis of magazine sports photographs offers a visual analysis via contextual readings of visual photographic imagery, which will be the partial basis of the coding categories for this study. Duncan (1990) focused on what she called communicative features of the photos, such as subject versus object in the photo, and "not the substantive content of the photos themselves" (p. 27), so the study featured written interpretations of photographic elements and not a systematic coding category list for quantifying the visual

Table 1 Coding Categories and Theoretical Backings

Category	Analysis Options	Type, Related H	Theoretical Backing
Athlete gender	Female/male	IV, All	Previous research indicates that gender is a predictor of hegemonic gender portrayals.
Athlete sport	Auto racing/tennis/golf/ basketball/soccer/swimming	IV, NA	Descriptive category and additional analysis category.
Photo's color	Black-and-white/color	NA	Descriptive category.
Type of attire	Uniform/business/casual/ sexual (cami, sheath, undressing, underwear)	DV, H1a	Women athletes in Krane et al.'s (2004) reported the tendency to overcompensate for their on-field gender transgressions with off-field dress that conformed with hegemonic gender ordering.
Alone or with others	Alone/ with others	DV, NA	Based on Trujillo's (1991) typology of hegemonic masculinity, the control and frontiersman tenets predict that men would be more likely to be alone than women, displaying their stoicism.
Contingent category: If with others, who?	Family/celebrity, fellow athlete, other	DV, NA	Descriptive category.
In motion or still	In motion/still	DV, H1c	Posing implying object, in motion implying subject (Archer et al., 1983)
Looking where	Looking at camera/ looking away from camera	DV/ H1b	Keeping with the object/subject binary (Butler, 1990), we predict women will look at the camera as a way to offer themselves to the viewer.
Facial expression	Smiling or happy/sexual gaze/concentrated or intense/frowning	DV, H1b	We also predict, based on the heterosexual matrix's internalization, that women will be more likely to have a sexual gaze, furthering their object position.
Proximity	Tight (chest and face only)/ medium (waist to face)/ wide (body)	DV, NA	Archer et al. (1983) demonstrated that tight shots display power, where body shots imply inferiority. Furthermore, head shots will continue the Cartesian split of genders, women as body and men as mind (Grosz, 1994).
Prop	Yes/ no	DV, NA	
Contingent category: Type of prop	Trophy or medal/sport prop (ball, club, racket)/ nonsport prop	DV, NA	

information. Thus, this present study used elements of Duncan's (1990) study, including body proximity, facial expression, and appearance of athletes with other athletes operationalized for the content analysis approach. Other researcher-generated coding categories based on the hypothesis via SN sites generated visual imagery and professional athletes were needed for comparison in the SNS domain. The coding categories for this study are presented in Table 1 along with their theoretical backing.

For an even cross-sport analysis, a list of the top 10 female and male athletes in auto racing, tennis, golf, basketball, soccer, and swimming were used as the data. These sports were chosen because they are televised, they encourage fanship via viewership, and they include female and male participation. With the exception of auto racing, where men and women compete against each other, the chosen sports are divided into male leagues and female leagues. All of the sports include rankings on the sanctioning bodies' websites. Auto racing was deemed a good choice for gender comparison as the sport is

gender neutral and the mixing of sexes in the races allows for potential parity. The official list provided by the governing organization was used in determining which 10 athletes from each gender in each sport to study. For example, the PGA and LPGA include lists of ranked golfers. In the case of auto racing, the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) is the most network-televised series in the United States and was chosen based on this media prominence. The top 10 male and top 10 female racers were chosen from each NASCAR circuit but were pulled from a combined list that includes both genders, as men and women usually compete together. Because women were not represented in the top NASCAR racers in 2011, the top women from each of NASCAR's circuits was chosen, and the top racers from other professional track-racing circuits were chosen to provide an even sampling between the genders.

Basketball and soccer players had to be chosen randomly and yet also represent the top athletes for as close a comparison to the nonteam sports as possible. Therefore, athletes from Spain's men's FIFA World Cup team were chosen as they were ranked first in 2011, and members of the U.S. FIFA Women's World Cup team were chosen for the same reason. As there were more than 10 players on each team, the athletes for analysis were chosen by picking every other athlete on the 2011 roster as listed on each team's website. For basketball, the 2011 NBA and WNBA All-Star teams were used as the representatives; and because there were again more than 10 players on each team, every other player on each roster was chosen to ensure random sampling. Because assurance of random sampling was important, some sports had slightly more than 10 athletes. There was a tie in tenth place for women's 100-meter freestyle swimming, and thus this list had 11 women. In addition, 12 men and 11 women were on the basketball players list. There were 13 women listed in the 2011 auto racers list, so all 13 were used. A total of (N = 132) athletes were studied, but after athletes with no Facebook profiles were coded, a list of 124 athletes (n = 124) were completely coded. The list included 64 men and 60 women.

The photos were gathered during a one-week period in January 2012. The photos were pulled from each athlete's official Facebook account. Facebook notes "athlete" on the profile page, therefore assuring a public-centered profile used for the purposes of the athlete's public—and not personal—SN site interaction. The unit of analysis is each profile photograph, with n = 124 for photos coded. This study did not note whether there were captions with the Facebook profile photo; however, there is no caption option when viewing a profile photo on Facebook, either when entering the athlete in the search bar or when initially arriving at the athlete's profile page. Because the purposes of this study were to analyze potential visual interpretations when first viewing a photo, captions would not pertain to this study. In addition, other photographs on an athlete's profile on Facebook were not studied, as the profile photo is the first visual interaction a fan will see when searching for and finding the athlete's profile page on Facebook.

Intercoder reliability was ensured using independent coding, wherein both researchers checked for discrepancies when independently coding 31% (n = 31) the data set. The coding sets were then compared to ensure intercoder reliability. Of the data coded, two codes did not match. Codes were designed to be mutually exhaustive after thematically analyzing each term in the coding categories. For the two codes that did not match, the disagreement areas were discussed to reach consensus. Each photo was then coded and comparison statistics generated.

Results

Photos were analyzed in 11 nominal categories, with two additional nominal categories coded depending on prior response (who the athlete is with if he or she is not alone in the photo; what the specific prop is if the athlete has a prop in the photo). There were eight athletes with no Facebook profile: two female swimmers, four female auto racers, one female soccer player, and one male basketball player. There were 124 athlete photos then coded (94% of athletes; 64 men and 60 women total). Of the photos coded, three photos were black-and-white (2% of total photos) and the rest were in color. All three of the black-and-white photos were of male athletes. Overall, athletes of both genders overwhelmingly used color photography on their Facebook profile photos.

The hypothesis stated that female athletes will be more likely to portray themselves as hegemonically feminine in profile pictures than male athletes are to present themselves as hegemonically masculine. This hypothesis was divided into three subcategories in demonstrating hegemonic visual portrayals. Hypothesis 1a stated that female athletes will be more likely to wear formal wear and casual wear in their profile pictures than male athletes. A chi-square test run comparing male and female athletes showed no significant findings. There were four possible options for dress: uniform of the sport, casual dress, business dress, or sexual dress or

Table 2

Variables	Male	Female
Concentration Expression	59%	33%
Smiling Expression	34%	60%
n=117; p=.01		
Looking At Camera	22%	51%
Looking Away from Camera	78%	49%
n=122; p=.002		
Body In Motion	52%	25%
Body Still	48%	75%
n=122; p=.004		

undressing. Of male athletes, 76% (n = 48) were wearing the uniform of their sport, while 72% (n = 42) of female athletes were wearing the uniforms of their sport.

Hypothesis 1b stated that female athletes will be more likely to have a sexual gaze in their profile pictures than male athletes. A chi-square test compared the facial expressions of male and female athletes. Male athletes were more likely to have a facial expression of concentration, with 59% (n = 35) of all men showing concentration. Female athletes, on the other hand, had 33% (n = 19) of photos displaying concentration. Female athletes were far more likely to be smiling, representing 60% (n = 35) of total female athletes. For a sexual gaze, both male (n n = 4) and female (n = 4) athletes were 4% of the total for their respective genders in facial expression, thus demonstrating no preference for sexual expression for either gender. A second dependent variable was determined to be associated with this hypothesis, whether the athlete looked at the camera or away from it, and proved significant. Male and female athletes demonstrated variance in whether they were looking at the camera or away from the camera. Female athletes were more likely to be looking at the camera, with 51% (n = 30) doing so. Male athletes were more likely to be looking away from the camera, with 78% (n = 49) doing so. Significance was demonstrated high, with p = .002 (n = 122). Table 2 shows these findings.

Hypothesis 1c stated that female athletes will be more likely to be in still poses in their profile pictures than male athletes. Female and male athletes were compared as to whether they were in motion or still in their photos. Of female athletes, 75% (n = 44) were still and 25% (n = 15) were in motion. Of male athletes, 48% (n = 30) were still and 52% (n = 33) were in motion. This hypothesis was affirmed via a significance rating of p = .004 (n = 122).

Discussion

This study was an initial attempt to examine Facebook profile photos of male and female professional athletes as extensions of themselves as brands. Based on our findings via the content analysis, our hypothesis was affirmed with significance in two of the three operationalized aspects. A female athlete was more likely to look at the camera than away from it, whereas a male athlete was much more likely to look away from the camera. This finding suggests the notion that a female athlete might be more engaged with her viewers. From a branding perspective, a female athlete looking at the camera suggests the intent to make eye contact with her audience. A female athlete's likelihood of looking at the camera rather than away from it also could affirm self-objectification, in her deference to the camera as subject. Male athletes, with 78% looking away from the camera, demonstrated an overwhelming preference to be seen but not necessarily to make eye contact with their viewers. This suggests a male athlete preference for fan observance, in keeping with stereotypical expectations that men concentrate not on their audience but on their performance. In other words, looking at the camera, as the female athletes tended to, implies a need to be seen and therefore the ceding of power to the onlooker (Grosz, 1994). Stereotypical portrayals in this aspect of the visual content analysis were supported yet suggested correlations of hegemony for both genders and not only female athletes.

The second part of our hypothesis concerned female athletes and their facial expressions. We expected female athletes to be more likely than male athletes to employ a sexual gaze in their photos. This portion of the hypothesis was not supported, with male and female athletes equally likely to use a sexual gaze in their photos, at 4% of each gender. However, we did not consider the potential gender differences between smiling and concentration gazes in the photos, and

Left: Image from Hope Solo's Facebook page.

Right: Image from Danica Patrick's Facebook page.

significance was noted here. Female athletes were more likely to smile, in 60% of photos, and male athletes were more likely to have a look of concentration, in 59% of their photos. This suggests that female athletes are personally engaging with their fans via eye contact. Male athletes, on the other hand, seem to have a stronger tendency to look engaged in their sport and not with their fans. Along with eye contact, facial expression can denote relational tendencies of female athletes and a desired professional perception of male athletes.

The third aspect of our hypothesis was not supported. We anticipated that female athletes would be more likely to have casual or sexual dress than uniforms in their profile photos. Female athletes showed only a small likelihood of wearing more sexual dress, but this was only 5% of photos, compared with 2% of male athlete photos. Male athletes were wearing the uniforms of their sports 76% of the time, while female athletes were wearing the uniforms of their sports 72% of the time. One possible explanation for this finding is that athletes use the uniforms in their photos as part of their brand. Therefore, sexual connotations may come from other individual nuances, such as facial expression and eye contact, rather than the uniform, which is tied to the athlete's brand as a member of the sport.

While we did not posit any hypothesis for cross-sport difference in our primary analysis, we did run statistics to account for any sport-specific differences. There were some differences among the sports, and they followed some gender and sport-specific lines. For example, 100% (n = 20) of both male and female golfers were in uniform in their photos. High percentages of swimmers (n = 16) and soccer players (n = 18), over 80% for both sports, were in their uniforms, while basketball players were the least likely to be in their uniforms, at 52% (n = 12) of the total for both genders. Only tennis and swimming had athletes with sexual dress, with 3% (n = 3) of tennis athletes in sexual dress and 1% of swimmers (n = 1) in sexual dress. Facial expression among the sports showed differences, with soccer athletes likely to look like they were concentrating, at 68% (n = 15) of expressions, and racers looking most likely to smile, at 61% (n = 11) of racer photos. These sport-specific tendencies were not considered in this analysis but are something to consider in further research.

Of the 73 athletes who had props, an unexpected result occurred when we measured the specific

props the athletes were using in their photos. While there was no gender difference in who had props, the actual props themselves showed differences along gender lines. Female athletes used trophies and medals as props most often, at 44% (n = 14) of photos. Male athletes most often had a sport-related prop, such as a ball or goggles, at 63% (n = 26) of photos. Male athletes had trophies or medals in 20% (n = 8) of their photos. With a p = .072 (n = 73), this finding approached significance. We considered various reasons as to why female athletes would be more likely to have trophies in their photos while male athletes were more likely to have sports props. Coupled with the facial expression and still versus in motion findings, we conclude that female athletes might use props as an added dimension of professional legitimacy. Female athletes would likely feel added pressure when pursuing sports to succeed at them, if they wish to receive credibility for their entrance into a historically male domain. Male athletes might not feel similar pressure and, therefore, like the lack of eye contact and motion in the photos, have sport-related props as elements of their prowess as professional athlete alone.

Three chi-square cross tabulations showed low significance in this study. Athletes were compared as to whether they were alone or with others. Female athletes were more likely to be alone in their photos, with 88% (n = 52) alone. Male athletes were 78% (n = 49) likely to be alone in their profile photos. Female athletes and male athlete use of props in their photos was not shown to be significant, and female and male athlete proximity of tight shot, medium shot, or wide shot were not shown to be significant.

While there was potential statistical significance on whether the athlete was with others or alone, studying the results by sport demonstrated that team-sport participants were more likely to be with others and solo-sport participants were more likely to be alone, likely affirming the significance of the difference of the sports and not necessarily the athletes. The same was true of athlete use of props. Thus, these data are not analyzed in this study.

Branding theory was used for this study, as an athlete's visual representation coincides with an athlete's brand. A possible theoretical framework that might be explored in future studies is visual framing theory. Most studies about media framing focus on texts or broadcasts, with fewer studies articulating visual framing within still photography (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). Some framing scholars have affirmed the need for framing to include the visual, as modern media increasingly relies on semiotics and determining symbolism via visual cues (Coleman, as cited in Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). Visual images are powerful symbols that carry unique meanings outside of texts and therefore their ability to be framed is multilayered and nonlinear. There are denotative, connotative, semiotic, and ideological representations evident when interpreting photos (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). This is important when considering how audiences view professional athletes, because fans usually do not have prior personal experience meeting and interacting with their favorite athletes. Therefore, fans are likely to draw conclusions when viewing photos of professional athletes based on prior accessibility constructs, which often are also via mediated communication.

Limitations

As this is an initial foray into visual branding of professional athletes on SN sites, the content analysis was based on a prior study of female athletes, which was qualitative. Thus, some coding categories used in our operationalization of the aspects of visual representation should be reconsidered in future studies. For example, we did not choose athlete ethnicity or nationality as a variable in our study, but it is possible that there were racial or cultural differences in the photos. Most of the soccer players in the study were Caucasian, and most of the basketball players were Black, especially the male athletes. This study focused on Facebook as it was the most popular SN site in 2011 and has a powerful reach with its large membership and use, not just on computers but also on mobile platforms such as smartphones (Andrews, 2011). It is important to note that Twitter and other smartphone apps would add to an athlete's branding, and this is an area ready for future research.

In addition, other photos uploaded by the athletes themselves could hold richer information about their use of Facebook as an extension of their brands, as some athletes had uploaded many photos of themselves beyond their profile photos. Collectively analyzing all photos of an athlete on her or his profile page would give a richer insight into the branding implications of the athlete's Facebook presence. This study focuses on the content of the photos and not the perception of the photos. A future study focusing on fan perception of athlete photos would offer another aspect on the athlete as brand.

Conclusion

This study is an important first step to understanding the branding opportunity that SN

site photos offer athletes. The results show that stereotypical expectations are still a factor in self-presentation but not as strong a factor as they are in other mediated representation. As athletes gain more power over their brands through SN sites, there is opportunity for the erosion or bolstering of a stereotypical worldview.

References

Andrews, R. (2011, December 28). Almost 40 percent of Facebook use is by app. Retrieved from http://paidcontent.org/article/419-almost-40-percent-of-facebook-use-is-by-mobile-app/

Archer, D., Iritani, B., Kimes, D. D., & Barrios, M. (1983). face-ism: five studies of sex differences in facial prominence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 45*(4), 725–735.

Athletes we're following on Twitter. (2010). *Shape, 29*(5), 85–85.

Ballouli, K., & Hutchinson, M. (2010). Digital-branding and social-media strategies for professional athletes, sports teams, and leagues: An interview with Digital Royalty's Amy Martin. *International Journal of Sport Communication, 3*(4), 395–401.

Berger, J. (2001). Buffalo Bill's Wild West and John M. Burke: Exploring the origins of celebrity brand management. *Journal of Promotion Management, 7*(1/2), 225–252 .

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity.* New York, NT: Routledge.
Chiang, O. (2011, February 9). Super Bowl XLV sets Twitter record. *Forbes*. Retrieved from http://www.forbes.com/sites/oliverchiang/2011/02/09/super-bowl-xlv-sets-twitter-record/

Clavio, G., & Kian, T. M. (2010). Uses and gratifications of a retired female athlete's Twitter followers. *International Journal of Sport Communication, 3*(4), 485–500.

Duncan, M. C. (1990). Sports photographs and sexual difference: images of women and men in the 1984 and 1988 Olympic Games. *Sociology of Sport Journal, 7*(1), 22–43. Facebook Statistics. (2011). Retrieved from http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics

Fink, J. S., & Kensicki, L. (2002). An imperceptible difference: Visual and textual constructions of femininity in Sports Illustrated and Sports Illustrated for Women. *Mass Communication and Society, 5*(3), 317–339.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge and the discourse of language.* New York, NY: Vintage.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life.* New York, NY: Anchor.

Grosz, E. (1994). *Volatile bodies: Toward a corporeal feminism.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Grow, J. M. (2008). The gender of branding: Early Nike women's advertising a feminist antenarrative. *Women's Studies in Communication, 31*(3), 312–343.

Hambrick, M. E., Simmons, J. M., Greenhalgh, G. P., & Greenwell, T. (2010). Understanding professional athletes' use of Twitter: A content analysis of athlete tweets. *International Journal of Sport Communication, 3*(4), 454–471.

Hardin, M., Lynn, S., Walsdorf, K., & Hardin, B. (2002). The framing of sexual difference in SI for Kids editorial photos. *Mass Communication and Society, 5*(3), 341–359.

Harris, J. B. (2007). Personal projections in artists' works: Implications for branding. *Journal of Brand Management, 14*(4), 295–312.

Heinrichs, J. (2007). *Thank you for arguing.* New York, NY: Three Rivers.

Horne, J. (2006). *Sport in consumer culture.* Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hum, N. J., Chamberlin, P. E., Hambright, B. L., Portwood, A. C., Schat, A. C., & Bevan, J. L. (2011). A picture is worth a thousand words: A content analysis of Facebook profile photographs. *Computers in Human Behavior, 27*(5), 1828–1833. Fifth International Conference on Intelligent Computing.

Kalpidou, M., Costin, D., & Morris, J. (2011). the relationship between Facebook and the well-being of undergraduate college students. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 14*(4), 183–189.

Kassing, J. W., & Sanderson, J. (2010). Fan-athlete interaction and Twitter: Tweeting through the Giro: A case study. *International Journal of Sport Communication, 3*(1), 113–128.

Kayoung, K., Sagas, M., & Walker, N. A. (2011). Replacing athleticism with sexuality: Athlete models in Sports Illustrated swimsuit issues. *International Journal of Sport Communication, 4*(2), 148–162.

Kessler, S. (2011, November 30). Here's how people look at your Facebook profile—Literally. Retrieved from http://mashable.com/2011/11/30/social-profile-eye-tracking/

Knight, J. L., & Giuliano, T. A. (2003). Blood, sweat and jeers: The impact of the media's heterosexist portrayals on perceptions of male and female athletes. *Journal of Sport Behavior,* 26, 272–284.

Krane, V., Choi, P. Y. L., Baird, S. M., Aimar, C. M., & Kauer, K. J. (2004). Living the paradox: Female athletes negotiate femininity and muscularity. *Sex Roles, 50*(5/6), 315–329.

Krane, V., Ross, S. R., Miller, M., Rowse, J. L., Ganoe, K., Andrzejczyk, J. A., & Lucas, C. B. (2010). Power and focus: Self-representation of female college athletes. *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise, 2*(2), 175–195.

Labrecque, L., Markos, E., & Milne, G. (2010). Online personal branding: Processes, challenges, and implications. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 25*(1), 37–50.

McCoy, L. (2010). 140 characters or less: Maintaining privacy and publicity in the age of social networking. *Marquette Sports Law Review, 21,* 203.

Messner, M.A., Dunbar, M., & Hunt, D. (2000). The televised sports manhood formula. *Journal of Sports & Social Issues 24*(4), 380-394.

Miller, F. M., & Laczniak, G. R. (2011). The ethics of celebrity-athlete endorsement: What happens when a star steps out of bounds? *Journal of Advertising Research, 51*(3), 499–510.

Park, N., Kee, K. F., & Valenzuela, S. (2009). being immersed in social networking environment: Facebook groups, uses and gratifications, and social Outcomes. *Cyberpsychology and Behavior, 12*(6), 729–733.

Pegoraro, A. (2010). Look who's talking - Athletes on Twitter: A case study. *International Journal of Sport Communication, 3*(4), 501-515.

Rodriguez, L., & Dimitrova, D. V. (2011). The levels of visual framing. *Journal of Visual Literacy, 30*(1), 48–65.

Sanderson, J. (2009). "Thanks for fighting the good fight": Cultivating dissent on blogmaverick.com. *Southern Communication Journal, 74,* 390–405.

Shu-Chuan, Chu, & Kim, Y. (2011). Determinants of consumer engagement in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in social networking sites. *International Journal of Advertising, 30*(1), 47–75.

Trujillo, N. (1991). Hegemonic masculinity on the mound: Media representations of Nolan Ryan and American sport culture. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 8*(3), 290–306.

Waters, R. D., Burke, K. A., Jackson, Z. J., & Buning, J. D. (2011). Using stewardship to cultivate fandom online: Comparing how National Football League teams use their web sites and Facebook to engage their fans. *International Journal of Sport Communication, 4*(2), 163–177.

Wertheim, L. J. (2011). Tweet smell of #Success. *Sports Illustrated, 115*(1), 20.

Yan, J. (2011). Social media in branding: Fulfilling a need. *Journal of Brand Management, 18*(9), 688–696.

Betsy Emmons, PhD, is an assistant professor of journalism and mass communication at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. Her research areas include visual communication and digital and mobile communication.
Email: ememmons@samford.edu.

Richard Mocarski is a doctoral candidate in the College of Communication and Information Sciences at the University of Alabama. His research areas include feminist theory and critical rhetorical theory.
Email: ramocarski@crimson.ua.edu.