

## **Self-Presentation of Female Athletes: A Content Analysis of Athlete Avatars**

**Megan B. Shreffler, Meg G. Hancock, and Samuel H. Schmidt**

University of Louisville, USA

Unlike traditional media, which frames female athletes in sexualized manners and in socially accepted roles such as mothers and girlfriends, user-controlled social-media Web sites allow female athletes to control the image and brand they wish to portray to the public. Using Goffman's theory of self-presentation, the current study aimed to investigate how female athletes were portraying themselves via their Twitter avatar pictures. A total of 207 verified Twitter avatars of female athletes from 6 sports were examined through a content analysis. The avatars from each player were coded using the following themes: athlete as social being, athlete as promotional figure, "selfie," athletic competence, ambivalence, "girl next door," and "sexy babe." The results revealed that athletic competence was the most common theme, followed by selfie and athlete as social being. Thus, when women have the opportunity to control their image through social media they choose to focus on their athletic identities.

**Keywords:** second-screen behavior, Twitter, symbolic annihilation, impression management, athlete-brand personality

The ever-changing social-media landscape has revolutionized the ways in which sport is consumed. While traditional sport consumption occurs through means such as attending events, viewing games on television, listening to games on the radio, or reading about sports in newspapers and magazines, the infiltration of social media into the sport realm has led to changes in sport consumption. Consumers are using their personal electronic devices to participate in "second screen" behaviors instead of focusing solely on the sport event through traditional methods of consumption. Second-screen behavior entails using a smart phone, tablet, or laptop while watching television to access the Internet and other social-networking sites to obtain more information (de Zúñiga, García-Perdomo, & McGregor, 2015). In other words, consumers use multiple distribution systems to meet different needs that are not fulfilled by one system alone (Boehmer, 2015). Second-screen behaviors allow sport consumers to connect with other fans, feel the adrenaline rush of big moments in real time, be the first to broadcast content, and have their voices heard (Yorke & Greenwood, 2014).

---

The authors are with the Dept. of Health and Sport Sciences, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY.  
Address author correspondence to Megan Shreffler at megan.shreffler@louisville.edu

Second-screen behavior is undeniably changing how consumers watch sports and obtain information. Fans are no longer waiting until the final whistle to search for content related to the sport event but seek supplemental information on the event and their favorite teams and athletes in real time via the Internet and social-networking sites such as Twitter. Twitter, a microblogging social network, has quickly become one of the most widespread forms of second-screen platforms during sport events (Giglietto & Selva, 2014). The use of Twitter as a distribution system for second-screen behaviors allows consumers to provide their own commentary on events as they unfold live (Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2013). The growth of the platform, since its inception in 2006, has led to its greater use as a second-screen distribution channel. It has been estimated that there were 4.43 million unique users in December 2008 (Ostrow, 2009). The number of monthly active Twitter users grew to over 310 million in 2016, with 83% of users choosing the mobile platform (Twitter, 2016). Twitter has truly become a platform for sport-fan engagement, which was illustrated in the most recent Super Bowl. The 2016 Super Bowl had a Twitter audience of 15.2 million users in the United States, with a total of 1.3 billion Twitter television impressions throughout the night (Nielsen, 2016). The numbers associated with this megaevent illustrate the intersection of sports and social media through second-screen behavior.

The success of Twitter in the sport realm has been attributed to a number of factors such as Twitter's ability to humanize and personalize teams and athletes, offer unprecedented access to teams and athletes through unique content, and make fans contributors while uniting them with other like-minded individuals (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010). For these reasons, fans are able to get a glimpse into the lives of their favorite athletes beyond the court or field. Furthermore, fans are afforded the opportunity to take part in online brand communities in which they can form relationships with not only their favorite athletes and organization but other fans, as well. Beyond the benefits provided to fans, Twitter offers athletes the opportunity to control the image they wish to portray to the public due to its being a user-controlled platform. This characteristic of the social-media site starkly contrasts with traditional-media platforms in which athletes are provided little control over the image that is portrayed. Having the ability to control one's image is particularly important to female athletes, as traditional media emphasize female athlete's femininity and sexuality versus their athletic competence (Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015; Creedon, 1998; Douglas & Jamieson, 2006; Kim, Walkosz, & Iverson, 2006). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine, through Goffman's self-presentation framework, how female athletes portray themselves when provided a user-controlled platform such as Twitter.

## Literature Review

### Media, Symbolic Annihilation, and Female Athletes

Of particular interest to the current study is the representation of female athletes in social media. Before the advent of social media, however, traditional media were a main source of the portrayal of female athletes to society. Research on the representation of female athletes in traditional-media outlets has spanned decades (Kane & Maxwell, 2011; Messner, 2002; Messner, Duncan, & Jensen, 1993).

Over time, two main themes have emerged. First, female athletes are considerably underrepresented in terms of the amount of coverage received in comparison with their male counterparts (Buyse & Wolter, 2013; Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Grau, Roselli, & Taylor, 2007; Kane & Maxwell, 2011; Kian, Vincent, & Mondello, 2008; Messner et al., 1993). For example, Weber and Carini (2012) examined the frequency and manner in which women were portrayed on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* magazine. From 2000 to 2011, female athletes were represented on less than 5% of *Sports Illustrated* covers. In a more recent study, Cooky et al. (2015) found a decline in the amount of coverage of female athletes from 1989 to 2014. In 1989, television news shows spent 5% of their time on women athletes. In 2014, however, only 3.2% of network television coverage focused on women's sports, with SportsCenter only providing 2% coverage. This decline is particularly puzzling, as there has been tremendous growth in the participation of girls and women in sport since Title IX (Cooky et al., 2015).

The underrepresentation of female athletes in the media reflects the concept of symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1979). Symbolic annihilation refers to the manner in which women and women's issues are omitted from public media and, therefore, society. In other words, when women athletes and women's sports receive little attention in the media, they also receive less attention in society—by fans, potential sponsors, and prospective athletes. Thus, there are fewer perceived female-athlete role models for young women and girls; moreover, there are likely to be fewer perceived opportunities to play sport at the intercollegiate and professional levels.

The lack of representation of women in media's coverage of sport contributes to the second pattern reflected in research—sport as a male domain. Birrell (2000) identified the media as a “particularly active site for the construction of masculinist hegemony” (p. 68). This means that men are not only the primary players in sport but also the primary consumers. The media perpetuate notions of sport as a male domain through displays of hypermasculinity, strength, and power. On the other hand, when women athletes receive coverage, they are consistently portrayed in ways that emphasize their femininity through caregiver roles and sexuality versus their athletic competence (Cooky et al., 2015; Creedon, 1998; Douglas & Jamieson, 2006; Kim et al., 2006). This notion was supported by research on top-ranked sport blogs that found while women were the primary focus of only 8.7% of photographs, they were posed in sexually suggestive ways 73.7% of the time (Clavio & Eagleman, 2011). This is particularly important, as previous research suggests that when female athletes were sexualized in the media, sport consumers perceived them as less credible (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2009).

While it is clear that mainstream media feminize and sexualize sportswomen (Douglas & Jamieson, 2006; Kim et al., 2006), further examination into how female athletes visually portray themselves in user-generated media is warranted. With this in mind, we examined if and how female athletes may actively engage in strategic self-presentation through the creation of a social-media presence that promotes their athletic competence, social interests, or identity (e.g., friend, spouse) rather than sexualized or hyperfeminine images. When examining Twitter athlete avatars through the lens of self-presentation, scholars and practitioners can better understand how women are actively creating and managing their public personas and building their personal brands.

## Self-Presentation Theory

Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation suggests that individuals present themselves in manners in which they wish others to view them. Consequently, individuals adopt different identities in different situations based on conditions such as the audience or setting to engender favorable impressions (Goffman, 1959). Goffman (1979) suggests that people use various impression-management strategies to adjust to different situations, as the impressions created by individuals are affected by the anticipated reactions of others. Thus, the purpose of strategic self-presentation is to establish power and influence over a target person (Tedeschi & Riess, 1981). Moreover, Goffman (1959) alludes to life being a "drama," and the two types of self-presentation depicted by individuals as daily life "performances" are front-stage performances and back-stage performances. In front-stage performances, individuals are especially concerned with the impression they create in the minds of others. On the other hand, in back-stage performances individuals are more candid, often sharing information as if no audience or an audience of familiar people were present (Goffman, 1959).

Self-presentation is an important concept to examine in social media because of the positive outcomes of Twitter use on athlete brand personality. Social media serve as a platform in which an individual's self-construction is created with a potential audience in mind for which the individual builds a public presentation of him- or herself (Marshall, 2010). Research on the self-presentation of athletes suggests that athletes engage in back-stage performances on social-media platforms (Bruhn, Schoenmueller, & Schaefer, 2012; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Geurin-Eagleman & Clavio, 2015; Hambrick et al., 2010; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). These studies found that back-stage performances occurred as athletes discussed their private lives and engaged with individuals, allowing followers a more realistic view into the life of the athletes that would not be revealed through traditional media. For example, Candace Parker (@candace\_parker) is a basketball player for the Los Angeles Sparks in the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). On her Twitter account, Parker posts pictures and Tweets associating her with her professional team and college team. In addition, Parker tweets about her family, friends, and philanthropic endeavors. This provides her audience with a "day in the life" picture of a woman who shares common interests with others but also happens to be a superstar athlete.

With respect to front-stage performances, Krane et al. (2010) investigated female college athletes' self-presentation preferences. They found that female athletes wanted to be portrayed in ways that emphasized their power and strength. Support for the preferences of female athletes to be portrayed as powerful athletes was found in later research by Lebel and Danylchuk (2014), who found that athletes who used Twitter profile pictures including a sport setting were more effective in terms of personal branding than those who used pictures that did not reference the sport in which they competed. An example of this is WNBA champion Tamika Catchings's (@catchin24) Twitter avatar (i.e., profile photo) and photographic banner. These photographs depict Tamika in basketball action poses—reminders that she is a WNBA athlete. The selection of the avatar picture is exceptionally important, as the pictures chosen by athletes further the understanding of who they are and affect the public's overall perception of them (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014).

While several studies have explored the back-stage self-presentation of athletes, we argue that Twitter provides a unique platform on which users have the ability to perform on both front and back stages. Twitter offers the opportunity for an athlete to shape the impression (i.e., front stage) others may have about him or her, while also allowing the athlete to engage openly and honestly with fans, friends, and family members (e.g., back stage). Moreover, athletes with Twitter accounts have access to over 310 million other users. Many of those users consume sport through the second screen, which broadens the scope of exposure to current and potential fans. As such, self-presentation may be particularly important to female athletes as they establish their professional athlete brand, while also building fan bases for themselves and their respective teams. In addition, athletes who tweet have a greater ability to build and create their personal and brand personas, which are all-too-often shaped by traditional media (e.g., television, newspaper, print magazines).

## The Role of Twitter in Athlete Brand Personality

Previous research on Twitter in sport has focused on how professional athletes (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010; Sanderson, 2010) and student-athletes (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; McKinney, Kelly, & Duran, 2012; Miller, Parsons, & Lifer, 2010) use the social-media platform, as well as the motivations and constraints of Twitter users (Witkemper, Choong Hoon, & Waldburger, 2012). More recently, Walsh, Clavio, Lovell, and Blaszka (2013) examined the impact social media had on the brand personality of a sport event. Although their method employed Facebook instead of Twitter and focused on a sport event rather than individual athletes, their results suggested that social media might have a positive impact on a sport brand's image.

Given that Twitter is user controlled, athletes are able to control the image they wish to portray to the public. This is particularly important as athletes look to shape their personal brand. Aaker (1997) defined brand personality as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (p. 347). More recently, Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014) introduced the term *athlete brand*. Athlete brand is "a public persona of an individual athlete who has established their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face or other brand elements in the market" (p. 98). Understanding how athletes can control their athlete brand through user-generated social media such as Twitter is imperative, as previous research suggested that the personification of brands allows for differentiation from competitors and aids in the development of brand equity (Ross, 2008). In the instance of individual athletes using Twitter, they can control the personality they depict to their followers and consequently differentiate themselves from other athletes. The use of social media as a platform to generate publicity and interest is particularly important for athletes who do not receive mainstream coverage, as it is often their only opportunity to increase awareness of their personal brands (Eagleman, 2013).

As noted in previous research, brands not only create a competitive advantage through the generation of ticket sales and sponsorships (Ross, 2006) but may also increase brand equity (Ross, 2008). With these benefits in mind, further examination

of the outcomes of Twitter use by individual athletes looking to build their brands is important. While it is clear that Twitter can lead to positive brand personalities and brand equity, the concept in terms of individual athletes has not yet been examined. This is particularly important in the examination of female athletes, as previous research has suggested that understanding brand personality is critical to the survival of leagues with small consumer bases (Heere, 2010).

While female athletes cannot control how they are depicted in mainstream-media outlets, they can control how they are present themselves in user-controlled outlets such as Twitter. For this reason, the purpose of this study was to examine how female athletes present themselves on Twitter, a user-controlled social-media platform. Two research questions guided this study:

**RQ1:** How are female athletes presenting themselves and their personal brands on Twitter?

**RQ2:** What differences exist between the self-presentation tactics of female athletes in individual versus team sports?

## Method

To address the purpose of the study, the Twitter profiles of female athletes were examined. Sportsin140.com, a Web site that identifies verified athlete Twitter accounts, was used to identify usable Twitter profiles. At the time of data collection, a total of 207 verified female-athlete accounts were found on the Web site and used in this study. The athletes represented a variety of sports as illustrated in Table 1. The avatar, or the small picture used to represent a person on the Internet (Avatar, n.d.), was pulled from each of the 207 accounts. The avatar was deemed an appropriate photograph for analysis, as it is the first picture that an individual sees on a Twitter account and is the image portrayed to individuals interacting through Twitter. Further support for the use of avatar pictures in this study is found in previous research that suggested that the use of visual images is more powerful than the written word because it can catch the attention of even the most casual consumer (Cuneen & Spencer, 2003) and serve as a frame of reference and initial point of assessment for online consumers (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014).

**Table 1 Sport Distribution of the Sample**

Sport	n	%
Basketball (WNBA)	79	38.2
Olympic sports	56	27.1
Golf (LGPA)	33	15.9
Volleyball (AVP)	20	9.7
Soccer (WPS)	14	6.7
Auto racing	5	2.4

Content analysis was used to categorize and analyze the avatar pictures. A content-analytic method was appropriate, as the aim of the study was to identify core consistencies and meanings from qualitative material (Patton, 2002) in the form of photographs of the athletes. When working with data without established codes, the process of content analysis involves identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling primary patterns in the data (Patton, 2002). However, since established codes were used, we could just classify and label the patterns in the data. The use of the photographs was suitable for the content analysis, as photographs are unobtrusive because the pictures were consumed after they were produced (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). Each avatar picture was coded into one of six categories by two independent coders with previous experience in content analysis and PhDs in sport management.

The six categories, which represent a continuum of images, were borrowed from the work of Kane and Maxwell (2011) and included athletic competence, ambivalence, all-American "girl next door," hyperheterosexual, "sexy babe," and soft pornography. A description of each can be found in Table 2.

The athletes' avatar pictures were classified into the categories by the coders. Raters initially agreed on 77.8% of the avatars. Discussion ensued, as the percentage agreement did not meet the minimum threshold of 80% to continue a content-analysis study (Riffe et al., 2005). After the initial coding process, it became clear there were recurring discrepancies with respect to which category "selfies" belonged. In addition, athletes with friends, teammates, family, and other people and athletes being used for promotional purposes also provided many discrepancies between the raters. Through discussion, seven categories emerged. Four of the seven categories mirrored the findings of Kane and Maxwell (2011): athletic competence, ambivalence, all-American "girl next door," and "sexy babe." It was evident, however, that additional categories would be needed to accommodate the

**Table 2 Category Definitions of Avatar Pictures**

Photo category	Definition
Athletic competence	Picture of a sportswoman depicted in an athletic manner, be it a portrayal in uniform, on court, or in action
Ambivalence	A contradictory picture of a sportswoman in which some indication of athleticism is present, but the primary image features a nonathletic, off-the-court, feminine portrayal
All-American "girl next door"	Picture with little or no indication of athleticism in which a sportswoman is portrayed in a wholesome pose
Hyperheterosexual	Image of a sportswoman in a traditionally heterosexual role such as girlfriend, wife, or mother
"Sexy babe"	Picture of a sportswoman in which she is portrayed in a sexualized manner with little to no indication of her sport present
Soft pornography	Includes the blatant sexual objectification of the sportswoman through seminude or sexual presentation

Note. Definitions from Kane and Maxwell (2011).

recurring discrepancies. The coders came together to openly discuss the recurring regularities, and we judged potential categories by two criteria: internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Patton, 2002). Internal homogeneity refers to the extent the data hold together in a meaningful way. For instance, an added theme, selfie, comprised only the user taking a picture of her face or body. Second, external heterogeneity refers to the extent the categories differ from each other (Patton, 2002). Data that showed overlapping tendencies indicate a fault in the coding process. Therefore, it was necessary to develop categories that eliminated any overlapping of themes. The additional three categories that emerged included athlete as social being, athlete as promotional entity, and selfie. These categories were created based on the common themes of the photos. The definitions and reasoning for the new categories can be found in Table 3.

After the creation of the new categories, a second content analysis was conducted. The athletes' avatar pictures were classified into the seven categories by the same two independent raters. Both percentage agreement and Cohen's kappa were used to determine intercoder reliability. Raters agreed on 94.68% of the avatars, surpassing the 80% threshold identified by Riffe et al. (2005). Cohen's kappa was employed to test for chance agreement (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006) and found to be .935. This figure was above Wimmer and Dominick's suggested acceptable threshold of .70, indicating that interrater reliability was present in the study.

**Table 3 Emerging Category Definitions of Avatar Pictures**

Photo category	Definition
Athlete as social being	This category was created as a replacement for the hyperheterosexual category of Kane and Maxwell's (2011) study. Much like the hyperheterosexual category, there is an image of a sportswoman in which she is portrayed as girlfriend, wife, or mother. However, the difference in the new category is the idea that one does not have to be heterosexual to fulfill the duties of these roles.
Athlete as promotional figure	This category was created to encompass the avatar pictures in which athletes are blatantly promoting their personal brands or the brands of others through endorsements.
Selfie	This category was created to ensure that there was not bias in the all-American "girl next door" category, as initially all selfies were placed into this category despite the fact that they did not necessarily directly fit into it. This new category was characterized by pictures that the sportswomen had taken of themselves.
Athletic competence	Picture of a sportswoman depicted in an athletic manner, be it a portrayal in uniform, on court, or in action.
Ambivalence	A contradictory picture of a sportswoman in which some indication of athleticism is present, but the primary image features a nonathletic, off-the-court, feminine portrayal.
All-American "girl next door"	Picture with little or no indication of athleticism in which a sportswoman is portrayed in a wholesome pose.
"Sexy babe"	Picture of a sportswoman in which she is portrayed in a sexualized manner with little to no indication of her sport present.

## Results

The first research question in this study asked how female athletes are presenting themselves and their personal brands on Twitter. Pictures depicting the athletes as athletically competent were the most common, comprising 30.9% ( $n = 64$ ) of the sample. Next were selfies at 18.8% ( $n = 39$ ) and athlete as social being at 13.0% ( $n = 27$ ). The complete results from the content analysis are presented in Table 4.

The second research question aimed to determine if there were differences in how female athletes were presenting themselves based on the type of sport played. To answer this research question, the six sports were split into two categories, individual sports and team sports. The three sports in the individual-sport category ( $n = 94$ ) included Olympic sports, golf, and auto racing. The three sports in the team-sport category ( $n = 113$ ) included basketball, soccer, and volleyball.

Chi-square analysis was then used to examine what differences existed between the self-presentation tactics of female athletes who play individual sports and those who play team sports. Chi-square results revealed a significant difference between the photo category and type of sport ( $\chi^2 = 14.21$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p = .027$ ). The findings are presented in Table 5 and suggest that athletes who play individual sports are more likely than their team-sport counterparts to post pictures that depict athletic competence (35.1–27.4%), athlete as social being (19.1–8.0%), and athlete as promotional figure (14.9–9.7%). Athletes who play team sports, on the other hand, are more likely than athletes in individual sports to use avatar pictures as selfies (23.9–12.8%), all-American “girl next door” (13.3–9.6%), sexy babe (13.3–6.4%), and ambivalence (8.0–2.1%).

## Discussion

Social-media platforms including Twitter have been linked to the generation of ticket sales and sponsorships (Ross, 2006) and offer forums in which fans can engage with athletes and other fans. Furthermore, Twitter has the potential to help athletes develop brand equity and build fan bases for themselves and their respective teams. For athletes who wish to maintain a certain brand toward their audience, using

**Table 4 Descriptive Statistics for Content Analysis**

Photo category	<i>n</i>	%
Athletic competence	64	30.9
Selfie	39	18.8
Athlete as social being	27	13.0
Athlete as promotional figure	25	12.1
All-American “girl next door”	24	11.6
“Sexy babe”	21	10.2
Ambivalence	7	3.4

**Table 5 Descriptive Statistics Comparison of Individual Sports and Team Sports**

Photo category	Individual Sports		Team Sports	
	n	%	n	%
Athletic competence	33	35.1	31	27.4
Selfie	12	12.8	27	23.9
Athlete as social being	18	19.1	9	8.0
Athlete as promotional figure	14	14.9	11	9.7
All-American “girl next door”	9	9.6	15	13.3
“Sexy babe”	6	6.4	15	13.3
Ambivalence	2	2.1	9	8.0

Note.  $\chi^2 = 14.21$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p = .027$ .

Twitter as a front-stage tool is an appropriate means for delivering their structured brand. However, Twitter provides a back-stage opportunity for athletes to provide a more genuine look into their lives. Thus, Twitter may be of particular interest to female athletes who are less likely to gain media exposure that is consistent with their athlete brand.

The first research question examined the ways in which female athletes represented themselves on Twitter through their avatars. The results suggest that the female athletes examined were most likely to portray themselves as competent athletes, in selfies, or as social beings. These results support past studies on how female athletes want to portray themselves to others. In a study on female college athletes, Krane et al. (2010) found that women wanted to portray their athletic and social identities as their public image. These presentations of self are in direct conflict with how female athletes have traditionally been portrayed as sexualized beings in traditional-media outlets (Clavio & Eagleman, 2011). Moreover, sexualizing female athletes may be detrimental to their athlete brand, as sport consumers perceived female athletes as less credible when sexualized in the media (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2009). Thus, when women have the opportunity to control their image through social media they can focus on their athletic identities and perhaps enhance perceptions of credibility.

When we apply the lenses of self-presentation and media representation, the results indicate that most women in this study were not presenting themselves in hyperfeminine or sexualized ways. When given the opportunity to control the image that they are portraying to consumers, female athletes are not succumbing to the typical typecasts in which they are placed by mainstream media. In other words, the finding illustrates discrepancies between how mainstream media represent female athletes and how female athletes are choosing to represent themselves on a user-controlled outlet. Female athletes can and are constructing athlete brand images that are authentic and representative of the self. They have the power to socially construct their identities in a manner that often defies stereotypes imposed by traditional media. More important, user-controlled social-media platforms like

Twitter offer the space for female athletes to construct athlete brand images that are more aligned with their respective sports, personalities, values, and social identities.

The second research question investigated the difference in self-presentation of female athletes based on individual and team sports. Results of the chi-square analysis revealed that individual-sport athletes were more likely to display their athletic competence, highlight themselves as social beings, or be promotional figures. This may stem from the desire to develop their own athlete brand by differentiating themselves from other female athletes, most notably those in mainstream media. Again, as mainstream media portray female athletes in a sexualized manner, athletes in sports that receive less attention (i.e., auto racing, Olympic sports, golf) may differentiate themselves by not presenting themselves as sexualized beings. Instead, they opt for athletic competence or social pictures to highlight their differences. This is particularly important for individual-sport athletes, as they must generate their own publicity to increase their personal brand (Eagleman, 2013) without the help of teammates or an organization supporting them. Furthermore, the individual sports in this study may be considered niche sports. Geurin-Eagleman and Clavio (2015) found that niche-sport athletes are more likely to engage in back-stage performances through their avatars. That is, female athletes in niche sports may consider their "followers" people with whom they are familiar (e.g., friends, family); as such, interactions may be more candid and less an attempt to build a public image. However, individual-sport athletes in this study also often displayed athlete competence, which would suggest the desire to build a public image or athlete identity. For example, women participating in individual sports were more likely to have avatar photos reflecting athlete competence and engaging in social activities (i.e., social-being photos). Both types of Twitter avatars reflect a desire to build a professional-athlete image that also mirrors social identities salient to the athlete herself.

Conversely, team-sport athletes are more likely to be in selfies, pose as a "girl next door," sexualize themselves, or be ambivalent. This was an interesting finding as the athletes who play teams sports such as basketball (WNBA) and soccer (World Cup) are more likely to receive what little mainstream-media coverage is provided to women's sports. As mainstream media portray female athletes in a sexualized way (Douglas & Jamieson, 2006; Kim et al., 2006) or in idealized manners in which they are presented as capable of juggling athletics with their socially suitable roles as mothers or girlfriends (Cooky et al., 2015), these female athletes may be more concerned with their front-stage performance. Past studies have noted that consumers believe that sex appeal and the sexualization of female athletes was a "necessary evil" for promoting women's sports (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014). In other words, female athletes in team sports may feel the need to reinforce mainstream-media portrayals; therefore, some Twitter avatars examined in this study reflected the "sexy babe." The use of a selfie, "girl next door" pose, or a photo that is ambivalent may also suggest that female athletes desire to be seen as individuals and not only as members of a team. More specifically, despite being identified as a member of a team, a woman athlete may feel that the team identity is simply not compatible with the social identity or role she wishes to portray (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Cooky et al., 2015).

As a whole, the Twitter avatars of women in team sports are also examples of a dynamic self-concept, which recognizes the "tension or opposition between

needs and motives that promote individuation and differentiation of the self from others, and those that promote assimilation and unit formation" (Brewer & Gardner, 1996, p. 91). Women on teams are part of a group but strive to be unique in their self-presentation on Twitter. In an attempt to be unique, women athletes may use avatars like the "sexy babe" that also inadvertently reinforce mainstream-media stereotypes.

Regardless of the avatar chosen by women in this study, social-media platforms such as Twitter offer female athletes a space to create and reclaim presentation of self. The athletes in this study were found to present public identities that do not, in most cases, perpetuate the "sex sells" mentality of mainstream media. Instead, when allowed to dictate their own message, they decided to use their Twitter avatars to promote their athletic-competence personal brand. With this in mind, athletes on Twitter and other social-media outlets can use these platforms to engage with the public in ways that showcase other important identities.

Such a space also helps combat the notion of symbolic annihilation, but only if the athlete is "followed" on Twitter. Followers on Twitter offer avenues for exposure and visibility to tens of thousands, if not millions, of current and potential fans. When an athlete is followed and tweets are "favorited" or retweeted, the public nature of Twitter combats omission of women's sport and female athletes from public media and, therefore, society. Furthermore, while the results of this study illustrate discrepancies between how mainstream media represent female athletes and how female athletes choose to represent themselves on Twitter, it must be noted that fans and followers are not always interested in an athlete's life outside of sport (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014). This notion has specific marketing implications and is particularly important for female athletes attempting to build their professional brands. The user-generated nature of Twitter provides athletes with an outlet in which they can control the brand personality they want to market to their consumers. This is particularly important, as athletes are able to directly affect the depicted brand personality, inevitably playing a direct role in the development of their own personal brand equity.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

The current study was not without its limitations. First, only the avatar picture was examined for analysis on each athlete's profile. A header photo, a banner photo behind the avatar photo, provides additional insight into the self-presentation of the athlete. However, the avatar was used as it provides a first impression for a user and can be viewed without going to an individual's profile. In addition, only Twitter was used as a platform for analysis. Other social-media Web sites such as Facebook and Instagram are user-generated platforms for athletes to self-present images. Twitter still remains a popular place for second-screen behavior (Giglietto & Selva, 2014).

Although this study provides both practical and theoretical implications, there are additional deficiencies that should be addressed in future research. First, audience-response research would be appropriate in gauging the perceptions of consumers with respect to the images portrayed by the female athletes. Is there a correlation between the types of images portrayed and behavioral intentions? Is there a correlation between the types of images portrayed and brand equity? These

and many more questions could be answered through audience-response research. Future research could also address the content of athletes' tweets. Are the tweets consistent with the images portrayed in the avatar pictures? Finally, future research could examine coverage of the female athletes in mainstream media and compare that with the coverage of the same athletes in user-generated outlets.

## Conclusion

The current study's aim was to examine how female athletes present themselves on Twitter, a user-controlled social-media platform. Through a content analysis, we examined 207 avatar photos of female athletes. Results from this study are twofold. First, when given the opportunity to portray their own images, female athletes are more likely to portray themselves differently than traditional media do (Clavio & Eagleman, 2011). The results of this study revealed that female athletes are more likely to present themselves as athletically competent rather than in sexualized manners. Second, individual-sport athletes and team-sport athletes portray themselves differently. Individual-sport athletes are more likely to display their athletic competence and highlight themselves as social beings or as promotional figures. Conversely, team-sport athletes are more likely to be in a selfie, pose as a "girl next door," sexualize themselves, or be ambivalent. The current study furthers the literature by noting that female athletes are not succumbing to stereotypes in which they are placed by mainstream media. The results of this study are particularly important when considering the widespread use of second-screen distribution channels by sport consumers. While athletes are unable to control the images with which they are depicted through traditional outlets, athletes who use user-controlled outlets have a greater ability to build and create their personal brand personas.

## References

- Aaker, J. (1997). Dimensions of brand personality. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 19, 347–356. doi:10.2307/3151897
- Arai, A., Ko, Y.J., & Ross, S. (2014). Branding athletes: Exploration and conceptualization of athlete brand image. *Sport Management Review*, 17, 97–106. doi:10.1016/j.smr.2013.04.003
- Avatar. (n.d.). In *Dictionary.com*. Retrieved from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/avatar?s=t>
- Birrell, S. (2000). Feminist theories for sport. In J. Coakley & E. Dunning (Eds.), *Handbook of sports studies* (pp. 61–76). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. doi:10.4135/9781848608382.n4
- Boehmer, J. (2015). Does the game really change? How students consume mediated sports in the age of social media. *Communication and Sport*, 4(4), 1–24.
- Brewer, M.B., & Gardner, W. (1996). Who is this "we"? Levels of collective identity and self representations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71(1), 83–93. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.71.1.83
- Browning, B., & Sanderson, J. (2012). The positives and negatives of Twitter: Exploring how student-athletes use Twitter and respond to critical tweets. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 5, 503–521. doi:10.1123/ijsc.5.4.503

- Bruhn, M., Schoenmueller, V., & Schaefer, D.B. (2012). Are social media replacing traditional media in terms of brand equity creation? *Management Research Review*, 35(9), 770–790. doi:10.1108/01409171211255948
- Buyesse, J., & Wolter, S. (2013). Gender representation in 2010 NCAA Division I media guides: The battle for equity was only temporarily won. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 6, 1–21.
- Clavio, G., & Eagleman, A.N. (2011). Gender and sexually suggestive images in sports blogs. *Journal of Sport Management*, 25(4), 295–304. doi:10.1123/jsm.25.4.295
- Clavio, G., & Kian, E.M. (2010). Uses and gratifications of a retired female athlete's Twitter followers. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 3, 485–500. doi:10.1123/ijsc.3.4.485
- Cooky, C., Messner, M.A., & Musto, M. (2015). "It's dude time!" A quarter century of excluding women's sports in televised news and highlight shows. *Communication and Sport*, 3(3), 1–27.
- Creedon, P.J. (1998). Women, sport, and media institutions: Issues in sports journalism and marketing. In L.A. Wenner (Ed.), *MediaSport*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cuneen, J., & Spencer, N. (2003). Gender representations related to sport celebrity portrayals in the milk mustache advertising campaign. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 12(3), 141–149.
- de Zúñiga, H.G., García-Perdomo, V., & McGregor, S.C. (2015). What is second screening? Exploring motivations of second screen use and its effect on online political participation. *Journal of Communication*, 65(5), 793–815. doi:10.1111/jcom.12174
- Douglas, D., & Jamieson, K. (2006). A farewell to remember: Interrogating the Nancy Lopez farewell tour. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 23, 117–141. doi:10.1123/ssj.23.2.117
- Eagleman, A.N. (2013). Acceptance, motivations, and usage of social media as a marketing communications tool amongst employees of sport national governing bodies. *Sport Management Review*, 16(4), 488–497. doi:10.1016/j.smr.2013.03.004
- Fink, J.S., & Kensicki, L.J. (2002). An imperceptible difference: Visual and textual constructions of femininity in *Sports Illustrated* and *Sports Illustrated for Women*. *Mass Communication & Society*, 5(3), 317–339. doi:10.1207/S15327825MCS0503\_5
- Geurin-Eagleman, A.N., & Burch, L.M. (2016). Communicating via photographs: A gendered analysis of Olympic athletes' visual presentation on Instagram. *Sport Management Review*, 19, 133–145. doi:10.1016/j.smr.2015.03.002
- Geurin-Eagleman, A.N., & Clavio, G. (2015). Utilizing social media as a marketing communication tool: An examination of mainstream and niche sport athletes' Facebook page. *International Journal of Sport Management*, 16(2), 316–334.
- Giglietto, F., & Selva, D. (2014). Second screen and participation: A content analysis on a full season dataset of tweets. *Journal of Communication*, 64(2), 260–277. doi:10.1111/jcom.12085
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.
- Goffman, E. (1979). *Gender advertisements*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Grau, S.L., Roselli, G., & Taylor, C.R. (2007). Where's Tamika Catchings? A content analysis of female athlete endorsers in magazine advertisements. *Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising*, 29(1), 55–65. doi:10.1080/10641734.2007.10505208
- Hambrick, M.E., Simmons, J.M., Greenhalgh, G.P., & Greenwell, T.C. (2010). Understanding professional athletes' use of Twitter: A content analysis of athlete tweets. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 3, 454–471. doi:10.1123/ijsc.3.4.454
- Heere, B. (2010). A new approach to measure perceived brand personality associations among consumers. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 19, 17–24.
- Highfield, T., Harrington, S., & Bruns, A. (2013). Twitter as a technology for audiencing and fandom. *Information Communication and Society*, 16, 315–339. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2012.756053

- Kane, M.J., & Maxwell, H.D. (2011). Expanding the boundaries of sport media research: Using critical theory to explore consumer responses to representations of women's sports. *Journal of Sport Management*, 25, 202–216. doi:10.1123/jsm.25.3.202
- Kian, E.M., Vincent, J., & Mondello, M. (2008). Masculine hegemonic hoops: An analysis of media coverage of March Madness. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 25, 223–242. doi:10.1123/ssj.25.2.223
- Kim, E., Walkosz, B.J., & Iverson, J. (2006). USA Today's coverage of the top women golfers, 1998–201. *The Howard Journal of Communications*, 17, 307–321. doi:10.1080/10646170600966550
- 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. doi:10.1080/19398441.2010.488026
- Lebel, K., & Danylchuk, K. (2009). Generation Y's perceptions of women's sport in the media. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 2, 146–163. doi:10.1123/ijsc.2.2.146
- Lebel, K., & Danylchuk, K. (2012). How tweet it is: A gendered analysis of professional tennis players' self-presentation on Twitter. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 5, 461–480. doi:10.1123/ijsc.5.4.461
- Lebel, K., & Danylchuk, K. (2014). Facing off on Twitter: A generation Y interpretation of professional athlete profile pictures. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 7, 317–336. doi:10.1123/IJSC.2014-0004
- Marshall, P.D. (2010). The promotion and presentation of the self: Celebrity as a marker of presentational media. *Celebrity Studies*, 1(1), 35–48. doi:10.1080/19392390903519057
- McKinney, B.C., Kelly, L., & Duran, R.L. (2012). Narcissism or openness? College students' use of Facebook and Twitter. *Communication Research Reports*, 29, 108–118. doi:10.1080/08824096.2012.666919
- Messner, M.A. (2002). *Taking the field: Women, men, and sports*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Messner, M.A., Duncan, M.C., & Jensen, K. (1993). Separating the men from the girls: The gendered language of televised sports. *Gender & Society*, 7(1), 121–137. doi:10.1177/089124393007001007
- Miller, R., Parsons, K., & Lifer, D. (2010). Students and social networking sites: The posting paradox. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 29, 377–382. doi:10.1080/01449290903042491
- Nielsen. (2016, February 9). Super Bowl 50: Nielsen Twitter TV ratings post-game report. Retrieved from <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2016/super-bowl-50-nielsen-twitter-tv-ratings-post-game-report.html>
- Ostrow, A. (2009, January 9). Twitter's massive 2008: 752 percent growth. *Mashable*. Retrieved from <http://mashable.com/2009/01/09/twitter-growth-2008/#hKc91H2SrGqb>
- Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pegoraro, A. (2010). Look who's talking—Athletes on Twitter: A case study. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 3, 501–514. doi:10.1123/ijsc.3.4.501
- Riffe, D., Lacy, S., & Fico, F.G. (2005). *Analyzing media messages: Using quantitative content analysis in research* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Ross, S. (2006). A conceptual framework for understanding spectator-based brand equity. *Journal of Sport Management*, 20(1), 22–38. doi:10.1123/jsm.20.1.22
- Ross, S.D. (2008). Assessing the use of the Brand Personality Scale in team sport. *Journal of Sport Management*, 20, 22–38. doi:10.1123/jsm.20.1.22
- Sanderson, J. (2010). Framing Tiger's troubles: Comparing traditional media to social media. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 3, 438–453. doi:10.1123/ijsc.3.4.438

- Tedeschi, J.T., & Riess, M. (1981). Identities, the phenomenal self, and laboratory research. In J.T. Tedeschi (Ed.), *Impression management theory and social psychological research* (pp. 3–22). New York, NY: Academic Press. doi:10.1016/B978-0-12-685180-9.50006-3
- Tuchman, G. (1979). Women's depiction by the mass media. *Signs*, 3, 528–542.
- Twitter. (2016). About Twitter. Retrieved from <https://about.twitter.com/company>
- Walsh, P., Clavio, G., Lovell, M.D., & Blaszka, M. (2013). Difference in event brand personality between social media users and non-users. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 22, 214–223.
- Weber, J.D., & Carini, R.M. (2012). Where are the female athletes in *Sports Illustrated*? A content analysis of covers (2000–2011). *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 48(2), 196–203. doi:10.1177/1012690211434230
- Wimmer, R.D., & Dominick, J.R. (2006). *Mass media research: An introduction* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Witkemper, C., Choong Hoon, L., & Walburger, A. (2012). Social media and sports marketing: Examining the motivations and constraints of Twitter users. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 21, 170–183.
- Yorke, Z., & Greenwood, J. (2014). Sport fans and the second screen. Retrieved from <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/articles/sports-fans-and-the-second-screen.html>

Copyright of International Journal of Sport Communication is the property of Human Kinetics Publishers, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.