

# How Tweet It Is: A Gendered Analysis of Professional Tennis Players' Self-Presentation on Twitter

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The innovations of social media have altered the traditional methods of fan-athlete interaction while redefining how celebrity athletes practice their roles as celebrities. This study explored gender differences in professional athletes' self-presentation on Twitter. Content analyses were used to compare male and female athletes' tweets relayed by all professional tennis players with a verified Twitter account. Profile details and messages were scoured for themes and patterns of use during the time surrounding the 2011 U.S. Open Tennis Championships. Goffman's seminal 1959 theory of self-presentation guided the analysis. While athlete image construction was found to be largely similar between genders, male athletes were found to spend more time in the role of sport fan while female athletes spent more time in the role of brand manager.

**Keywords:** celebrity athlete, gender, social media

The advent of social-media technologies has had a profound impact on the world of sport (Sanderson, 2011). Rapidly becoming standard infrastructure, this innovation has transformed the way sports are both reported (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010; Sheffer & Schultz, 2010) and consumed (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010), while recasting athletes as the rulers of their own domain—free to interact on a much more direct level with their audience (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010; Sanderson, 2008, 2010). Scholars argue that the swift revolution social media have achieved in sport may be unrivaled in terms of impact compared with any other industry (Sanderson, 2011).

In the digital-media-sport landscape, the microblogging site Twitter has been particularly influential. This communication phenomenon has been embraced by the sporting world at an extraordinary pace. We have now reached the point where it is unusual to tune into a sport broadcast, attend a live event, or even read a sport-related article without some sort of Twitter reference mentioned. Traditional news media are reporting stories based on Twitter sources with increasing regularity (Burt, 2010). Twitter has shattered our traditional views of fan-athlete interaction and redefined how athletes practice their roles as celebrities.

The appeal of Twitter for fans lies in the perception of direct access (Hambrick et al., 2010). For athletes, it is the opportunity to build voices and audiences (Pegoraro, 2010). There is power in the direct communication that Twitter affords—it allows athletes to exert more control over their identity and public presentation. The Web site *tweeting-athletes.com* reflects this thought, reporting over 5,000 verified professional athlete accounts on Twitter as of March 2012. This figure is up nearly 60% from data collected in March 2011 and represents roughly half of all professional athletes worldwide (Wertheim, 2011). Twitter is evolving into a strategic marketing tool; it is enabling athletes to cultivate their own brands through diverse engagement with a broad audience. In so doing, it is opening up some very powerful doors for celebrity athletes—most notably in the form of brand awareness and sponsorship opportunity (Wertheim, 2011). One of the most fascinating aspects of this form of digital communication lies in the prospects it offers to athletes that were previously invisible in traditional-media markets. Some of Twitter's most popular sports stars are relatively unknown for their sporting prowess, instead celebrated for their witty insight and accessibility (e.g., Chintapalli, 2010).

There have been a variety of studies that have begun to analyze data patterns and trends on Twitter. Specific to sport, Hambrick et al. (2010) found that professional athletes' tweets tend to be direct and address topics beyond sport. Kassing and Sanderson (2010) described how Twitter is able to enhance the immediacy between athletes and their fans. Pegoraro (2010) declared Twitter a powerful tool for increasing fan-athlete interaction while finding that athletes predominantly chat about their personal lives. The purpose of this study was to delve into the largely unexplored terrain of athlete gender on Twitter. Specifically, this exploratory study investigated the function of gender in the self-presentation strategies professional athletes use to navigate Twitter. As such, this study was guided by the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What self-presentation strategies are professional athletes using to present their brands on Twitter?

**RQ2:** How does athlete self-presentation vary relative to gender?

## Media Coverage of Women in Sport

The deeply entrenched hegemonic values present in sport have long been a topic of dispute. Investigation of the traditional media's treatment of female athletes is abounding with data that suggests a disproportionate quantity and biased quality of coverage (Duncan, 2006). This finding has been so prevalent that it is argued that sport, more than any other social institution, perpetuates male superiority and female inferiority (Bernstein, 2002; Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988). Despite the notable achievements female athletes have accomplished, women in sport seem to be continually undercut by the mainstream media's narrow focus on male sport and the social prestige that is associated with male athletics. Messner and Cooky's (2010) longitudinal study of televised sport news and highlights shows indicated that news coverage of female sport is actually declining at an alarming rate. Network-affiliated news coverage (KNBC, KCBS, and KABC) slashed women's sport content from 9% of all sport coverage in 1999 to a dismal 2% in 2009. ESPN's *SportsCenter* similarly cut back its already bleak coverage from a mere 2% of airtime in 2004,

to just 1% in 2009 (Messner & Cooky, 2010). As the splash of digital media makes tsunami-like waves in the worlds of sport marketing and communications, we wonder, Do traditional treatments of gender persist in new-media outlets?

## Online Coverage of Women in Sport

Internet-based sport-media studies are an emerging field of research. Specific to the online coverage of women in sport, Clavio (2008) noted a male dominance of online sport content. Clavio and Eagleman (2011) studied the portrayal of females in popular sports blogs. Their content analysis concluded that males receive significantly more photographic exposure in sports blogs than do females, with female representation far more apt to be sexually suggestive in nature. Kian and Clavio (2011) found that online journalism was less likely to trivialize female athletic accomplishment and skill than traditional-media sources. Similarly, Kian, Mondello, and Vincent (2009) found that the use of stereotypical descriptors that belittle the accomplishments of female athletes, or focus on their personal lives, was much less prevalent online than in traditional-media streams.

In a study of varsity athletics, Sagas, Cunningham, Wigley, and Ashley (2000) found that university Internet sites posted more detailed coverage of men's baseball than women's softball. This finding stands in contrast, however, to a study conducted by Cunningham (2003) that found that university Web sites actually provided more coverage of women's tennis than men's tennis. In a further analysis of NCAA college Web sites, Cooper (2008) concluded that coverage of male and female athletes in the same sport was mostly equitable. When considering the online coverage of women's sport in a more global sense, Leonard (2009) speculated that traditional media have in effect "interfaced" with new media. This is in line with a growing number of scholars who believe that the traditional male dominance so engrained in our sport culture is being reflected in digital media sport (Dart, 2009; Mean, 2010, 2011; Oates, 2009; Reichart Smith, 2011).

## A Gendered Look at Social Media

While study of the online coverage of women's sport has found mixed results, gender has been left largely unexamined in the social-media context. Reichart Smith (2011) conducted a gender analysis of the Twitter feeds of four major Division IA sport conferences in the United States. Despite the relative freedom that the Twitter format allows, this study found that female athletes received less than 25% of the combined coverage from their respective sport conferences. Using the theory of hegemonic masculinity to help explain the results, this research hypothesized that sport coverage may actually be taking a step backward with respect to gender equity and concluded that Twitter is reinforcing male dominance in sport.

The Twitter resource *tweeting-athletes.com* further illustrates gender inequity, noting extreme discrepancy in the volume of followers that male and female athletes have been able to attract. At the time of data collection, no female athletes were ranked in the top 10 most followed athletes. In a recent ode to Twitter, *Sports Illustrated* acknowledged the site's influence on the sport landscape by releasing its "Twitter 100"—a collection of the sport mavens deemed the most intriguing producers of content. Only 11 females made the list (Wertheim, 2011). This gender imbalance mirrors the findings of ESPN network's 1999 ranking of the 100 greatest

athletes of the 20th century. The historic list featured only eight female athletes among the 89 male athletes and three horses that rounded out the top sporting figures of our time (Billings, 2000).

The unique format of Twitter offers athletes the opportunity to level the playing field in the battle for gender equality. The absence of a female presence among the most popular Twitter athletes, however, raises questions regarding content production. Do athletes present themselves to their audiences in a manner that differs so dramatically it warrants such discrepancy in influence, or is male hegemony so entrenched in sport that the Twitter platform is merely another way to perpetuate female inequality in sport?

## Twitter as a Social-Media Tool

Twitter is recognized as a social-networking and microblogging service. It encourages users to answer the simple question, "What's happening?" in brief, 140-character posts that are referred to as "tweets." The tweets are chronicled in a constantly updated newsfeed that includes everything from breaking news stories to what a person ate for dinner. Twitter has thrived as an outlet for information sharing. While it includes a directed-friendship model in which users are able to "follow" Twitter accounts in their newsfeed, there is no technical or social expectation of "follower" reciprocity (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). Tweets may be posted and accessed from a variety of media outlets, which allows for convenient use. Users have the ability to post photos and links, offer a newsworthy story, or interact with fellow "tweeps" via any Web-connected device. At its core, Twitter has evolved into a dialogical tool—highlighting up-to-the-minute trends and emergent themes. In contrast to the static profiles of other social-networking sites, Twitter is much more focused on facilitating conversation, making its appearance much more textual than visual and its overall function more communicative than social (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

Twitter has enjoyed rapid growth and popularity since its inception in 2006. Arbitron and Edison Research reported in May 2011 that 92% of the U.S. population was aware of Twitter (Webster, 2011). To put the swiftness of this awareness in perspective, the same company's 2008 report found only 5% of U.S. consumers were mindful of the communication medium; a mere 1% of the population reported having actually used the service. Currently, the Pew Internet and American Life Project's 2012 statistics suggest that 15% of American adults identify as active Twitter users (Smith & Brenner, 2012). Among this population, 8% access Twitter on a daily basis—this figure has doubled since May 2011 and quadrupled since findings compiled in late 2010 (Smith & Brenner, 2012). Data released in October 2011 by Twitter CEO Dick Costolo touted more than 100 million active Twitter users worldwide. Of this number, 50% reportedly check in with the site on a daily basis and collectively produce an astonishing 250 million tweets per day (Parr, 2011). eMarketer projected that U.S. advertising revenues on Twitter would reach upward of \$225 million by the year 2012 (eMarketer.com, 2011). Perhaps the most telling statistic of all though is that 44% of all Americans over the age of 12 reported seeing tweets in other media (radio, TV, newspaper, or other Web sites) "almost every day" (Webster, 2012). A total of 80% of the overall population reported having seen tweets in other media at some point (Webster, 2012). These findings illustrate Twitter's expansive use as a broadcast medium in today's society.

## The Celebrity Performance

The term *microcelebrity* has been coined to describe the prevailing style of online behavior linked to an increase in the popularity of "self-branding" and strategic self-presentation (Hearn, 2008; Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005). Microcelebrity can be distinguished as "a mindset or set of practices in which the audience is viewed as a fan base; popularity is maintained through ongoing fan management; and self-presentation is carefully constructed to be consumed by others" (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, p. 141). Twitter has popularized the practice of microcelebrity. In this arena, the creation of compelling content can be leveraged to superstardom. Many athletes have been quick to incorporate this technology into their marketing arsenals (Sanderson, 2011). Athletes who have not yet hopped on the social-media bandwagon are in many cases being encouraged to do so in the name of their brand and its development (Wertheim, 2011).

While Twitter has received considerable attention for the many challenges it presents to sport communication (see Sanderson, 2011), the opportunity for positive brand building exists as a decided strength. In following an athlete on Twitter, fans are able to "gain intimate perspectives that would be unlikely to appear in the mainstream media" (Sanderson, 2011, p. 70). This unprecedented access to athletes is part of the allure that has spurred the popularity of Twitter among sports fans. In an effort to better understand the motivation behind professional athletes' Twitter use, we conducted an initial inquiry of social-media stakeholders onsite at the 2011 U.S. Open Tennis Championships.

Interviews were conducted with various communications staff representing the U.S. Tennis Association, the Association of Tennis Professionals, and the Women's Tennis Association. These stakeholders reiterated a similar theme: Social media are revolutionizing the communications industry. The fact that digital media have become an integral component in all marketing extensions was repeatedly emphasized by all communications professionals, though Twitter existed as a particularly hot topic. According to the Women's Tennis Association's senior manager of social media, the key to establishing a presence on Twitter lies in providing authentic, behind-the-scenes insight (A. Chu, personal communication, September 15, 2011). When paired with tactical promotion, digital-footprint success can build both audiences and sponsorship opportunity. The management of social media accounts thus becomes a performance of sorts. The consensus among tennis communications professionals was that it is largely irrelevant whether the actual athlete provides status updates or a trusted member of their team does (A. Chu, personal communication, September 15, 2011). At the end of the day, content is the ultimate social-media currency.

A senior communications coordinator for the U.S. Tennis Association noted that Twitter is about selling a brand. In his opinion, it is in the athlete's best interest to give fans the impression of candid, uncensored access into their lives (M. Zanca, personal communication, September 10, 2011). Social-media outlets have become so influential according to these professionals that it is to the detriment of an athlete to not put their best foot forward, in whatever form this may be, as they embrace and construct their celebrity status. Reflecting on how this new level of accessibility contrasts to the tightly guarded images traditionally protected by public relations professionals, the Women's Tennis Association communications staff noted that while Twitter may have initially reflected typical mass-media reports, they are encouraging their athletes to find their own voices.

## Self-Presentation

By and large, people tend to have a preferred manner in which they aspire to present themselves to the world (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Typically, this translates into accentuating positive characteristics in an effort to engender favorable impressions among peers. This practice is referred to as self-presentation, a concept that was pioneered by Erving Goffman in his highly influential work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Goffman's underlying thesis was that people navigate between "front stage" and "backstage" performances in their daily social interactions, much as actors intermingle between their audience and the stagehands or crew. Conversations behind the curtain are undoubtedly more candid than the calculated, professional performances that take place before paying customers. According to Goffman (1959), individuals work to maintain preferred self-images in a never-ending negotiation of complex identity performance. Various "impression management" strategies are used as people adjust to varying contexts and perceptions of audience judgment.

To date, the investigation of virtual self-presentation has centered largely on personal Web pages and blogs. Papacharissi (2002b) concluded that Web authors "stage online performances through which the individual's personality, or aspects of it, are revealed" (p. 654). In research that considered the personal utility of Web pages, Papacharissi (2002a) found that authors maintained their sites to fulfill information and entertainment needs. That same study found that authors who viewed their Web pages as a tool for self-presentation were more likely to share personal information, while those who used the pages as a professional extension of self tended to avoid posting personal information. In research that examined the authors of A-list blogs, Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005) found that men were more likely to maintain filter blogs (information related to events external to the author), while women were more inclined to run diary blogs (commentary on one's own life). Mehdizadeh (2010) noted that the qualities of narcissism and low self-esteem were related to greater online activity and linked to self-promotional content production.

In reference to the flourishing online celebrity culture, Marshall (2010) posited that the presentation of self online is not entirely interpersonal in nature, nor entirely mediated or representational. He labeled it "a hybrid among the personal, interpersonal and the mediated" (p. 35). In relation to Goffman, Marshall declared we are "witnessing the staging of the self as both character and performance in online settings" (p. 40). He likened the props and accoutrements of the stage to the profiles, images, and messages of social-media accounts. As such, Twitter (and social-networking mediums of the like) becomes a means to construct a "character for a kind of ritual of the performance of the self" (p. 40).

## Method

Consistent with Goffman's theatrical analogies, Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (2005) likened the research design to the stages a property owner might embark on when building a new structure—the conceptualization of the phenomenon under review comparable to the property owner's vision of what a structure might look like, the research design similar to an architect's construction of a blueprint, and the data

collection and analysis much like a contractor executing a building plan. Using this framework, the vision of our research was to shed light on the function of gender specific to the online platform Twitter and the self-presentation strategies of professional athletes. Due to the burgeoning nature of this brand of knowledge, this study was envisioned as largely exploratory, with the goal of setting a foundation on which future research in this area might expand.

## Research Context

The blueprint for this research included a content analysis of all professional tennis player's tweets from the time period surrounding the 2011 U.S. Open Tennis Championships. Among professional sports, tennis is the only setting in which women register among the most followed athletes on Twitter according to the resource *tweeting-athletes.com*. In the sport itself, three women cracked the top 10 most followed players. We believed that this made the sport of tennis well suited to act as the springboard with which to begin gendered social-media research through a microcelebrity lens.

As one of tennis's grandest stages, the U.S. Open Championships were selected as a highly covered sporting event that attracts the attention of a significant audience. Statistics rank the U.S. Open as the top-ranked annually attended international sporting event in the world; it attracted 1,710 credentialed media in 2010, broadcast coverage of the event to 180 nations, and boasted 12.4 million unique visitors to *USOpen.org* (U.S. Tennis Association, 2011). The period of study thus included coverage of the entire 2-week tournament, as well as the 2 days on either end of the event, in an attempt to capture the full Open experience. The requirement of an extra day of competition due to rain delays elongated the period of study by a day, pushing the actual period of study to include posts from August 27 to September 14. The 19-day analysis was based on publicly available Twitter data.

## Participants

All professional tennis players with a verified Twitter account, as confirmed by the Web site *tweeting-athletes.com* and Twitter, were included in the sample ( $N = 84$ ). Profile details and messages from the sample were downloaded for both quantitative and qualitative content analyses. Of the 84 verified professional tennis player's Twitter accounts, 38 belonged to women and 46 to men. As only English-speaking accounts were included in the design, the final sample included 34 female athletes and 35 male athletes who contributed a total of 2,783 tweets for analysis.

The mean ages of the sample were 25.5 ( $SD = 3.9$ ) and 27.4 ( $SD = 4.4$ ) for women and men, respectively. Female players hailed from a range of 12 countries. The United Kingdom led the way with representation from eight athletes, followed by Russia with seven athletes, the United States with five athletes, Germany with four athletes, Slovakia and Belgium each with two athletes, and Denmark, India, Canada, Belarus, Israel, and Australia each with one athlete. On the men's side, 15 countries were represented. Twelve athletes represented the United States, the UK had six, India and Serbia each had three athletes, and Canada, Spain, Japan, Croatia, Finland, Denmark, Slovenia, Bosnia, Sweden, Switzerland, and the Netherlands were each represented by a single athlete.

The mean world ranking among female athletes was 90.6 ( $SD = 94$ ), ranging from the world number 1, Caroline Wozniacki, to Anna Fitzpatrick, ranked 384. Among the male athletes, the mean world ranking of the sample was 140.9 ( $SD = 197$ ), with representation from the top-ranked player, Novak Djokovic, to Vince Spadea, ranked 834. Of the top 20 female players in the world, seven had Twitter accounts at the time of study, while 12 of the top 20 ranked men were active on Twitter.

## Research Method

In the spirit of Goffman's dramaturgical analogies and the online adaptation of the presentation-of-self theory, a coding protocol was developed specifically for this study. Frames were developed to explain athlete Twitter activity based on Goffman's definition:

Given their understanding of what it is that is going on, individuals fit their actions to this understanding and ordinarily find that the ongoing world supports this fitting. These organizational premises—sustained both in the mind and the activity—I call the frame of the activity. (Goffman, 1974, p. 247)

In our development of frames for athlete Twitter activity, all athlete tweets were first critically analyzed and reviewed for emergent themes. We then translated the themes into the development of broader self-presentational frames. This process entailed extensive discussion between the study's researchers to ensure that all themes were appropriately captured. An expert in the field of research methods was consulted to provide feedback and ensure frame relevancy. In all, 10 self-presentation frames were constructed—six backstage frames and four front-stage frames (see Table 1). The backstage frames included the conversationalist, the sport insider, the behind-the-scenes reporter, the super fan, the informer, and the analyst. The front-stage frames included the fan aficionado, the publicist, the superintendent, and the brand manager.

Each frame was operationalized through the creation of a coding sheet that was reviewed by an expert in the field to ensure readability, frame relevancy, and face validity. Content analysis was then used to categorize each tweet into one of the 10 frames in the systematic and replicable fashion inherent to the method.

## Procedure

Two independent coders, knowledgeable with the sport of tennis and Twitter, analyzed a random sample of 10% of the total number of tweets for each gender, representing 20% of the total number of tweets ( $N = 2,783$ ). Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (2005) recommended an overlap of data of 10–20%, placing our procedure within acceptable means. Intercooder reliability was .92, calculated using Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1960). Given the short format of tweets and the high initial agreement, the remaining tweets were coded by the primary researcher. Each tweet was assigned to a single frame using Microsoft Excel as an organizational tool. Tweets containing content consistent with more than one frame were placed into the frame that was thought to exemplify the most dominant theme of the message. For example,



**Table 1 Self-Presentation Strategy Frames**

Type	Example
Backstage performances	
The conversationalist	Interaction with fellow athletes, celebs, family, personal friends
The sport insider	Personal behind-the-scenes tennis info: travel, practices, matches, general insight into tennis
The behind-the-scenes reporter	Candid reports of the person behind the persona: sightseeing, favorite movies, extracurricular activities
The super fan	Discussion of nontennis athletes, other sports
The informer	General information sharing, Web apps, content, links, current events
The analyst	General statement of opinion, complaints, life musings
Front-stage performances	
The publicist	Promotion, publicity regarding sponsorship, upcoming matches, autograph sessions, etc.
The superintendent	Presence maintenance, e.g., "good morning tweeps"
The fan aficionado	Fan interaction
The brand manager	Formal acknowledgments associated with positive image, e.g., 9/11 recognition

athletes often introduced their first tweet of the day with a short salutation, followed by a more lengthy thought. In these cases, the bulk of the content was coded into the appropriate frame as opposed to the tweet being placed in a frame addressing the salutation. As most of the tweets were concise and fit into a distinct frame, instances of more than one frame being applicable were rare.

In addition to athlete posts, descriptive data were gathered regarding each athlete's world ranking, Twitter impact score, age, and country of origin. Profile information was collected, making note of when the athlete joined Twitter, the number of followers each athlete had at the time of data collection, and the number of Twitter accounts each athlete followed. Notations were further made when athletes identified their location, provided a self-description, or included a link to a personal Web site in their Twitter profile.

On completion of data collection, all materials were examined using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, frequencies, and cross-tabulations were run to interpret and report results.

## Discoveries

The primary focus of this research was to determine how male and female professional tennis players elect to present themselves to their audience via Twitter. The findings reflect the descriptive statistics of each gender's Twitter presence, as well as how presentational strategy variables correlate with gender.

### Twitter Activity

Following a person on Twitter might also be described as subscribing to that person's account. As a follower/subscriber, one is privy to the messages sent out by each individual one follows in a personal Twitter timeline. Anyone with interest is able to follow professional athletes on Twitter. At present, there is no reliable method to discern the demographic characteristics of followers. At the time of analysis, the mean number of individuals following the sample of female athletes on Twitter was 122,043 ( $SD = 409,521$ ). One extreme case was detected in Serena Williams, among the most followed athletes in any sport on Twitter. Ms. Williams had accumulated 2,285,105 followers at the time of study and was thus identified as an outlier that skewed the collective data (Barnett & Lewis, 1984). With the outlier removed from calculations, the average number of followers of women decreased to 56,496 ( $SD = 149,345$ ). By contrast, this sample of male athletes had a mean of 90,439 followers ( $SD = 201,953$ ), with no influential cases detected.

The athletes in the sample employed their Twitter accounts not only to be followed but also to follow other Twitter accounts. The mean number of Twitter accounts followed by female athletes was 60.2 ( $SD = 45.4$ ), and they posted a mean of 39.4 tweets per athlete ( $SD = 29.7$ ) during the period under review. By contrast, male athletes followed a mean of 117.9 accounts ( $SD = 222.3$ ). An outlier was again detected in Travis Parrott, who followed 1,324 accounts. With this outlier removed, the mean became 82.4 followed accounts ( $SD = 74.3$ ). Male athletes posted a mean 41.3 tweets per athlete ( $SD = 40.5$ ) during the time of study.

It is recognized that the number of followers a person accumulates is not necessarily indicative of the influence or reach of a Twitter account (Leonhardt, 2011). The analytical tool Twitalyzer was therefore used to calculate each athlete's impact score. As opposed to measuring influence based solely on the number of followers a Twitter user is able to collect, an impact score takes into account factors such as the number of times a Twitter name is mentioned by others and the frequency with which a person is actually communicating (Leonhardt, 2011). The mean impact score of female athletes was 8.9 ( $SD = 15.1$ ), with the highest impact calculated for Serena Williams with a score of 69. The mean impact score for male athletes was 13.6 ( $SD = 17.7$ ), with the highest impact achieved by Rafael Nadal with a score of 68.1.

### Athlete Self-Presentation

While the interface of the Twitter Web site only states, "What's happening?" it also provides users the opportunity to post a self-description, identify their location, and provide a link to a personal home page. In this sample, female athletes chose to self-describe 65% of the time, while male athletes did so 83% of the time. Female athletes identified their location 74% of the time, compared with 69% of male athletes. Among the female athletes, 76% provided a link to a personal home

page, only slightly higher than the 74% of their male counterparts. It is also notable that female athletes included a personal photograph in 8% of their posts, compared with 9% of men. Female athletes included links to content in 13% of their posts, in contrast to male athletes, who made this a practice in just 2% of their posts.

The self-presentation frames that were developed for this study (see Table 1) included a concentration of all athletes in the "backstage performance," with 76% of all female tweets classified as such and 77% of all male tweets. The frequency counts and percentages of self-presentational strategies employed on Twitter by male and female athletes in this sample are displayed in Table 2.

**Backstage Performances.** The conversationalist frame consisted of 31.4% of all female tweets and 27.8% of all male tweets. Athletes conversed with friends and family frequently but were also quite chatty with fellow players, speaking to one another about travel, tournament conditions, and match results. An example of this was exemplified by Sania Mirza-Malik congratulating Lisa Raymond on her victory: "@lisaraymond73 congratulations;))) nail biter..." Mardy Fish teased fellow player John Isner, asking him, "Do you ever tweet without name dropping?"

Within the sport insider frame, athletes provided an assortment of behind-the-scenes tennis information to their audience. Andrea Petkovic let her fans know she was watching the tournament, commenting, "Did anybody just see the James Blake return on matchpoint? What the HELL?" Milos Raonic notified his fans that he

**Table 2 Self-Presentation Strategies of Male and Female Professional Tennis Players**

Self-Presentation Strategy	Male Athletes		Female Athletes		t
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Backstage performances					
The conversationalist	401	27.8	421	31.4	-0.25
The sport insider	356	24.6	285	21.3	1.02
The behind-the-scenes reporter	157	10.8	232	17.3	-1.53
The super fan	146	10.1	28	2.1	2.35*
The informer	30	2.0	33	2.5	-0.31
The analyst	19	1.3	28	2.1	-0.8
Front-stage performances					
The publicist	46	3.2	88	6.6	-1.79
The superintendent	6	0.4	18	1.3	-1.48
The fan aficionado	265	18.3	159	11.9	0.67
The brand manager	12	0.8	38	2.8	-2.79*
N/A	4	0.03	11	0.8	

\* $p < .05$ .

was "Heading to the courts. Doing a training session this morning on court and the gym before I fly off to Israel tonight."

The behind-the-scenes-reporter frame provided audiences with access to non-tennis-related details of the athlete's life. Laura Robson, for example, informed fans she was "Watching the Great British Bake Off with my mum. Pie week! Jason and Rob are my faves." Novak Djokovic provided a personal photo link with this tweet, "Some photos from Mamma mia show the other day with @RafaelNadal," as he let fans know he both socialized with fellow tennis star Rafael Nadal and was a fan of Broadway.

The super-fan frame was used by athletes to discuss athlete fandom of non-tennis-related sport. For the time period reviewed, chatter revolved largely around the Premier League, the beginning of the NFL season, and college football. Sabine Lisicki let her fans know, "My favorite player is Drew Brees, so I'm going with the Saints! ☺ But I still remember how great Packers played in the Super Bowl..." Colin Fleming captured the essence of this category with his tweet, "Wow. Glad I got to see that. What a display from Man United, relentless attacking and enthusiasm. It's going to be a good season..."

The informer frame was developed to encapsulate the sharing of general information. This often included the provision of links. Vera Zvonareva, for example, shared the breakdown of her followers' demographics, tweeting "My followers live in the U.S. (21.1%), the U.K. (13.7%), & Argentina (7.5%) [top 3]. Find yours at <http://twocation.com/>." Somdev Devvarman shared this link with his followers: "<http://www.happyplace.com/3941/the-most-entertaining-obnoxious-or-completely-insane-notes-written-to-neighbors-hilarious!>"

Finally, the analyst frame categorized general statements or opinions provided by athletes. Sventlana Kuznetsova commented on a looming hurricane on her arrival in New York, noting, "I'm not sure how big the hurricane will be but I'm sure that the shops sold tons of food!" Rajeev Ram used this self-presentation strategy to share his opinion of a sport commentator, tweeting, "Pam Shriver is interviewing Will Ferrell and somehow finding a way to make him sound dull and not funny (amazing but true)."

**Front-Stage Performances.** The fan aficionado was the most prevalent frame for front-stage performances, with 11.9% of all women's tweets being coded as such and 18.3% of all male athletes' tweets. This frame captured interaction between athletes and their fans. Venus Williams, for example, collectively thanked her fans with the tweet "Thank you 4 sharing all your sjogrens & auto immune stories w/ me. Feels good to know I'm not alone! Feel better to you and your loved ones!" This was in response to an outpouring of support received after withdrawing from the Open due to illness. Andy Roddick similarly interacted with his fans, saying, "Thanks to all of you tweepies for all the great bday wishes!!! Much appreciated!"

The publicist frame featured promotional self-presentation strategies. John Isner used this to plug an interactive Twitter date with his fans. Tweeting, "I'm answering all ur #USO11 questions tmrw from 3:30-4:30pm. Tweet me ur Q's (hosted by @AmericanExpress)," this athlete was able to include a promotion for his American Express sponsor in his short message, as well as promote an activity. Bob Bryan similarly used this strategy in his tweet "Mike and I will be signing autographs at the @esurance booth at 11:30am. Hope to see some of you out there. @usopen #fb."

The superintendent frame was designed to capture athletes' presence maintenance with their followers. Svetlana Kuznetsova exemplified this strategy, tweeting, "Hey guys! How are you guys doing?" Henri Kontinen checked in with his followers, asking, "Whats up homies?" The fact that this frame is the least used self-presentational strategy is somewhat misleading. On analysis, we found that this strategy was often used as a lead-in to another more prevalent strategy. As tweets were only categorized into one frame per the research design, this category may have been affected by a lack of representation.

Rounding out the front-stage performances, the brand-manager frame was developed to categorize the tweeting of formal acknowledgments. The period of study happened to include the 10th anniversary of the horrific September 11 attacks, as well as the tragic Lokomotiv Yaroslavl plane crash that claimed the lives of a number of Russian hockey players. Many athletes used the brand-manager frame as a way to recognize these events on Twitter. Yaroslava Shvedova paid her tribute, noting, "Can't believe what happened to the hockey team from Yaroslavl city. So sad and shocked. Praying with condolences to their families." Ken Skupski used this strategy when he tweeted "9/11 - 10 years ago! It's amazing how time has passed. Remembering all those who lost their lives!"

A *t* test indicated that the total number of tweets posted did not significantly differ across gender ( $p > .05$ ). A series of *t* tests was also conducted to examine gender differences in each of the 10 front- and backstage self-presentation strategies employed by athletes on Twitter. There were no significant differences as a function of gender for the conversationalist, the sport insider, the behind-the-scenes reporter, the informer, and the analyst ( $p > .05$ ). In front-stage performance frames, there were no significant differences as a function of gender for the publicist, the superintendent, and the fan aficionado ( $p > .05$ ). A significant difference did emerge as a function of gender in the super-fan frame ( $t = 2.3, p < .002$ ), with men employing a greater attention to sports outside of tennis in their self-presentation than women do. The brand-manager frame was also found to have a significant difference as a function of gender ( $t = -2.8, p < .005$ ), such that female athletes employed a greater amount of brand management in their self-presentation than did their male counterparts. The corresponding effect sizes, calculated by Cohen's *d* at .56 and .68, respectively, are both considered medium-size effects by statistical conventions (Cohen, 1992).

## Discussion

This study sought to explore the self-presentation strategies used by professional tennis players in the Twitter terrain and ascertain possible differences between genders. Ten self-presentation frames were developed to help explain athlete behavior on Twitter, with an average of 77% of all tweets distinguished as backstage performances. This population of athletes posted messages at a very similar frequency and in fundamentally the same manner. Significant gender variance was found in terms of the number of followers athletes were able to attract, as well as the influence athletes have established as content producers—male athletes enjoying substantial advantages in both cases. These findings suggest that despite the relative gender equity in the sport of tennis and the opportunities inherent in Twitter as an uncensored broadcast medium, hegemonic values appear to persist.

One of the goals of this study was to determine the self-presentation strategies professional athletes use to present their brand on Twitter. In examining athlete communication strategies, this work built on the research of Hambrick et al. (2010) and Pegoraro (2010). Similar to the current study's finding that athletes tended toward backstage performances, Hambrick et al. coded 62% of the athlete tweets in their study as either interactive communication or diversion, concluding that Twitter gives sport fans unprecedented access to the personal and social lives of professional athletes. Pegoraro (2010) coded 26% of the athlete tweets in her study as relative to an athlete's personal life. Through the exploration of athlete tweets as a form of self-presentation, the current study was able to expand on athletes' use of Twitter as a self-marketing tool.

The ideas of athlete branding and the use of Twitter as a self-marketing tool were highlighted in this research's initial inquiries to tennis communication professionals and have also been underscored in recent literature (e.g., Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). As Twitter has escalated in popularity, some controversy has leaked into the conversation regarding the genuineness of professional athletes' accounts. If content is posted by someone other than the athlete whose name the account bears, is the authenticity of the information compromised? When Twitter content is viewed through a self-presentation lens as in this study, the answer to this popular question would appear to be irrelevant. From a self-presentation standpoint, Twitter exists as an extension of the athlete's brand. It is but another avenue for athletes to market their names. What makes the case of Twitter unique from traditional athlete branding is the fact that the athlete, not a media professional, has complete control over how his or her story is told and, by extension, how their brand is framed.

As Twitter grows as a legitimate sports-media source, the management of an athlete's brand through this unrestricted medium will surely become increasingly important as a means to promote both the athlete and his or her perspectives (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). The key point here is that regardless of who actually posts material on a Twitter account, it behooves professional athletes to ensure that they are represented in a positive light, and, ultimately, the onus of this presentation falls on the shoulders of the athletes. In a competitive market, professional athletes may be best served by having someone with communications experience on their team to avoid some of the highly publicized miscues that have plagued a number of athletes on Twitter (e.g., Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Sanderson, 2009, 2011). In evaluating social-media authorship, we must ask ourselves why Twitter should be held to a different standard. Athletes are trained to compete in a sport. While Twitter has opened up athletes' ability to have a voice in the media, is it reasonable to expect them to be proficient in public relations?

This particular study emphasized the growing trend of brand promotion on Twitter. It is noteworthy that promotion is not a new concept with respect to Twitter. Other researchers have recognized its potential and even encouraged its use among athletes (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). As the potential for financial gains progresses, however, increasing numbers of athletes may seek professional advice as they navigate emerging business opportunities. Increased sponsorship prospects for athletes may further spur the evolution of social media into a corporate-focused endeavor, compelling athletes to seek increased council regarding their online presence.

The breakdown of Twitter self-presentation strategies in this research provides a context to view other content-production tactics in addition to promotion. It is hoped that the framework developed as a result of this research might redirect the focus of social-media blunders and pitfalls in sport to a more brand-centric conversation. In reviewing the 10 strategies presented, athletes have the capacity to develop a clearer understanding of where their energy might be best spent. As social media continue to evolve from a pastime to a strategic self-marketing endeavor, it is believed that strategies such as these will become increasingly valuable.

The second goal of this research was to evaluate athlete self-presentation relative to athlete gender. While this sample made use of similar self-marketing strategies, male athletes were found to spend significantly more of their time performing the role of sport fan than their female counterparts. Conversely, female athletes put significantly more effort into their roles as brand managers. A tendency toward sport fandom may seem a natural transition for male athletes. Early socialization grooms men to converse about sports from a very young age in our society (Green-dorfer, 1993). Alternatively, females are often encouraged in their upbringing to be thoughtful, which may explain their tendency to recognize events on Twitter as brand managers. Further investigation into this finding is required, although the current information could be instructive for female athletes looking to build their followings. Recent statistics suggest that 83% of sports fans will check sports social-media sites while watching sports on TV, while 63% will browse sports social-media sites while attending live sporting events (KTTape, 2012). Sports fans are hungry for sport information in any form they can get it. Developing sport conversational strategies may very well be to the benefit of female athletes.

Outside of these two significant frames, the fact that male and female professional tennis players are posting messages to Twitter in such a similar fashion problematizes the decided difference in the number of followers and relative influence each gender has established. It seems suspicious to link a tendency toward sport fandom with the thousands of additional fans the male athletes have gathered and their domination of influence as ranked by the sport media at large (e.g., Wertheim, 2011). One explanation offered to explain this finding might be the current strength of men's tennis. There are a number of very strong players breaking records and establishing brands through high-caliber play. Women's tennis has been criticized of late for its lack of pizzazz; the absence of a dominant star has been cited as a reason for a lessened excitement in women's tennis (Osmak, 2011). It is possible that, similar to the way they do in traditional-media outlets, superstardom and intense rivalry play a role in garnering Twitter audiences; the exceptional competitiveness currently thrilling fans of men's tennis on the court may also be imparting an added boost of support to men's tennis as a whole on Twitter. Perhaps traditional-media attention is a form of Twitter currency for athletes.

In terms of the ways in which men and women are using the Internet, a comScore survey concluded that women in fact make up the digital mainstream (Abraham, Morn, & Vollman, 2010). A June 2010 study highlighted the unique qualities of Twitter in relation to gender, noting that as a communication mechanism, it lends itself to females while as an innovative technological platform, it appeals to a traditionally male demographic. In line with this finding, the sample of male athletes, as a whole, was faster to join Twitter, with women catching on to the platform more recently. Rates of adoption of technology may help explain

the unequal audience distribution, as well. Twitter's reach has been found to be marginally higher among women than among men in general; however, use was found to vary among gender by context (Abraham et al., 2010).

In dealing with celebrity athletes, literature from the study of role models in sport might also be relevant to our results. Building on the large database of research that suggests our sport heroes have a propensity to be male, Biskup and Pfister (1999) surveyed a sample of male and female students. Asking participants to identify their favorite role models, the study indicated that most boys named male sporting heroes among their most admired. In contrast, girls reported a fondness for the stars of the movie and music industries. This, too, might contribute to the disproportionate audiences of male and female athletes. Perhaps our early socialization grooms us to revere male athletes, making us subconsciously more inclined to follow male athletes on Twitter.

Another possible explanation lies in the actual language being used by male and female athletes. A growing body of literature has identified gender differences in computer-mediated communication. For example, women have been found to be more polite, supportive, emotionally expressive, and less verbose than men (Herring, 2003, 2004). In contrast, a tendency has been documented for men to be more insulting, challenging, and sarcastic while also more likely to use profanity in their digital messaging (Herring, 2003, 2004). While these qualities were not within the realm of this study, we recommend that future research consider the possibility of these variables with regard to the identity performance of athletes.

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not recognize the potential impact of the profound roots of male hegemony in sport. While Twitter presents itself as an exciting opportunity to shed the unfair light in which female athletes are often cast, the mass media continue to exercise considerable influence on the construction of societal expectations and gender. Deeply ingrained traditions that feature sport as a male rite continue to be reflected in society by our socializing agencies (Greendorfer, 1993; McCallister, Blinde, & Phillips, 2003). Fischer and Gainer (1994) offered an insightful assessment of the perpetuation of male superiority and female inferiority in sport, noting:

Consumption of sports is deeply associated with defining what is masculine and concurrently, what is not feminine. It has been noted that participating in and watching sports lead to a range of masculinities, and each of them relies for its definition on being distinct from femininity. (p. 101)

Twitter has fundamentally changed the communications playing field. It might even hold the power to help us diverge from our hegemonic tendencies; however, athletes and their fans must also be ready to let them go.

## Implications

As we continue to tackle the challenges inherent in this new technological innovation and as Twitter progresses through the technology-adoption life cycle, we will undoubtedly see its continued growth. Adoption rates will level out as early adopters become seasoned veterans and a majority audience becomes more familiar with the "Twitterverse." Sponsorship opportunities and promotional activities are certain



to become more intimately intertwined in Twitter's communication applications. This study serves as a baseline to monitor this progress. What is more, the study serves to highlight the possibilities of a new and unique space. There is opportunity to significantly expand scholarship by not only chronicling the growing influence of new media but also, in this case, reimagining women's sport. These results are merely the tip of the iceberg. The promotional culture to which we have all become accustomed is undergoing great change: New media are customizable. The public not only has a much greater role in shaping conversation—we can filter the content that we consume based on our interests and ideals. The stereotypical notions of gender and sexuality that have shaped the portrayal of female athletes for so long need no longer be idly ingested. There is opportunity to encourage a new voice, free of the mechanics used to undermine female athletic ability and success.

Athletes are already beginning to bypass traditional media sources to break leading news stories. This acts as strong evidence of the power collapse occurring in a once-omnipotent institution. This also stands as an example of the influence the online platform holds to affect social change; if society no longer requires the traditional media as an intermediary, it does not seem unreasonable to detour around the clichés of hyperfemininity, maternity, and heterosexuality that have plagued female athletes, as well. As researchers, it will be our continued responsibility to keep gender at the forefront of social-media observations. With new technology comes new opportunity. If we can use our history of gender relations in traditional sport media to inform content production of athletes and sport enthusiasts in the future, we have an opportunity to reshape the direction of women's sport. Perhaps with a collective education, gender equality has a chance to prevail in this new medium. Female athletes could be rightly known for their athletic prowess and the content of their character as opposed to a hyperfeminine image.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study was limited by the fact that each tweet was coded into only one frame. While this was a research decision that was deemed appropriate for most of the data in this review, other coding techniques might be exercised to gauge the impact of this decision. As athletes become more adept at posting their thoughts in 140 characters or less, tweets may become increasingly complex, warranting more complex coding procedures.

This study was an initial attempt to investigate the function of gender in professional athletes' self-presentation on Twitter. As a burgeoning field of study, it provides many opportunities to pursue and further develop this topic. For example, this study was limited to the Twitter content posted by professional tennis players during the time of the 2011 U.S. Open Championships. While tennis is a valid starting point, future research might wish to examine other sport comparisons and perhaps look at the differences that may exist between team and individual sports. An investigation might also look at potential differences in the content posted by female athletes participating in "socially acceptable" sports or explore content posted during a training time frame as opposed to that posted during competition. As the world of social media spurs the traditional branding models of athletes forward, the possibilities for research are boundless.

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