



Communicating via photographs: A gendered analysis of Olympic athletes' visual self-presentation on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine Olympic athletes' self-presentation on Instagram, a social media outlet on which users post photographs as their primary communication mechanism, in order to develop an understanding of the ways in which athletes use this medium as a communication and marketing tool to build their personal brand. Additionally, this research sought to understand whether differences existed between the utilisation of Instagram by male and female athletes. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, this study examined eight purposively selected Olympic athletes' Instagram photos. Findings revealed similarities to previous research on athletes' use of written social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter, as the majority of photos posted by athletes were personal in nature, thus reflecting backstage performance strategies according to self-presentation theory. The results indicated that female athletes were more likely to share photos of themselves and photos taken in private settings, but male athletes who posted a wider variety of photos encouraged greater engagement from their followers. Personal brand management implications for athletes and sport organisations are examined in greater detail in the discussion.

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1. Introduction

Drawing on Goffman's (1959) influential work on social interactions and self-presentation, Marshall (2010) noted that social media has the ability to serve as a platform on which an individual can build a public presentation of themselves. Furthermore, Marshall asserted that an individual's self-construction on social media is "highly conscious of a potential audience as much as it is a careful preening and production of the self" (p. 40). Research on this topic to date has found that athletes and sport organisations are increasingly active on social networking websites such as Twitter and Facebook for a variety of reasons: connecting and interacting with fans and stakeholders (Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Hambrick, Simmons,

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Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010), obtaining information from others (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Sanderson, 2013), increasing brand awareness (Eagleman, 2013), and promoting and attracting sponsors (Eagleman & Krohn, 2012).

Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) stated that with the ever-increasing opportunities for athletes to express themselves via social media, athletes must be cognizant of public relations practices and ensure that they present themselves in a positive light. Similarly, DeAndrea and Walther (2011) analysed Facebook users' self-presentations and concluded "everything one posts on Facebook can be used against him or her in the court of social approval" (p. 820), highlighting the importance of self-presentation management when utilising social media. While elite athletes from all sports use social media, it is especially important for athletes who do not receive mainstream media coverage on a daily basis to take advantage of social media outlets and online content creation tools in order to generate publicity, as this is often their only means of promotion to increase awareness and build their personal brand (Eagleman, 2013; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

Scholarly research on athletes and social media to date has focused mostly on Twitter and Facebook, both of which rely largely on written content as the main mode of communication between users. Another social media outlet gaining popularity amongst athletes is Instagram, in which users post photographs as their primary communication mechanism (Armen Graham, 2013). Instagram was launched on 6 October 2010, and by December 2014 the social media application boasted 300 million active monthly users with an average of 55 million photos shared daily (Instagram, 2014b; Systrom, 2014). Shively (2014) reported that 86 of the top 100 global brands use Instagram for brand awareness and management purposes. It is the fastest-growing social media platform and has an engagement rate 15 times greater than that of Facebook (Truong, 2014). Highlighting the platform's impact on branding objectives, Truong (2014) stated that brands advertising on Instagram reported 32% increases in ad recall rates and 10% increases in brand message recall.

Pegoraro and Jinnah (2012) explained that sport organisations and athletes "have led the way in encouraging widespread adoption" (p. 88) of social media platforms, which has in turn "transformed the interaction between athletes and their fan base" (p. 88). In an examination of athletes' Twitter profile pictures, Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) emphasised the intimate nature of athletes sharing photographs. They stated that photos allow athletes to give fans a glimpse into their lives, thus "providing them with the insider information that sports fans covet. It may be the truest behind-the-scenes look a fan can experience" (p. 331). Noting the importance of athletes' visual self-presentation strategies, they encouraged scholars to engage in research focused on Instagram.

The rapid uptake of Instagram as a marketing platform by the world's most popular brands combined with the potential marketing and branding implications it can have for organisations and individuals merit further exploration of this visual social media platform in the sport context. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine Olympic athletes' self-presentation on Instagram in order to develop an understanding of the ways in which athletes use this medium as a communication and marketing tool by which to build their personal brand, and to understand whether differences exist between the utilisation of Instagram by male and female athletes. The results from this study will assist in developing an understanding of the self-presentations on display, as well as insights into the effectiveness of certain types of self-presentations based on metrics such as likes and comments.

1.1. Instagram

Instagram is a mobile device application designed to share photos and is described on the Instagram FAQ (2014) as "a fun and quirky way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures" (para. 2). Users first register an online account and are then able to take, filter, and share photos (Buck, 2012). Similar to Twitter, individuals can select to follow other Instagram users and view their shared photos, effectively creating an audience for these images (Instagram, 2014a). It was acquired by Facebook in 2012 for \$1 Billion USD and is the fastest-growing social media outlet with over 300 million users worldwide (Systrom, 2014) and 71% of the most recognised global brands using it (Simply Measured, 2013). Additional functionality was added in 2013, including the ability to share and later import videos, and share photos with specified individuals through direct messaging (Baig, 2013; Miners, 2013).

As noted earlier, many global brands have also begun to utilise this visual platform. It was named the best platform for brands by SumAll, a business analytics tool that tracks over 100,000 brands on social media (Koetsier, 2013). Miles (2014) identified three advantages Instagram provides for utilisation as a brand awareness tool. First, it is the only major social networking application that was launched on mobile phones rather than the Internet. Second, it is what Miles (2014) termed "social media lite" (p. 11), meaning that it is not conversation-intensive such as Facebook and Twitter. Finally, content posted on Instagram is thought to have a longer shelf life than that of other social networking sites (Miles, 2014).

2. Theoretical framework

Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation posits that in society, individuals adopt different identities depending on factors such as the audience or setting. According to Goffman (1959), individuals act in much the same way they would in a drama and present themselves as they wish others to view them. These self-presentations, as Goffman (1959) refers to them, tend to come in the form of two different daily life "performances": front stage and backstage. Front stage performances are those that take place in front of others, or an audience, and therefore individuals tend to be more concerned with the impression they create in the minds of others. Backstage performances, by contrast, are those that take place when either no audience or a more familiar audience is present. In these situations, individuals tend to be more candid (Goffman, 1959).

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