

MASTER OF DIGITAL MEDIA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

INTRODUCING INSTAGAGEMENT: ANALYZING THE ENGAGEMENT RATES OF  
PROFESSIONAL TENNIS PLAYERS THROUGH SELF-PRESENTATION STRATEGIES  
ON INSTAGRAM

Kellie Ring  
Bachelor of Arts  
Specialization in Communication  
University of Ottawa, 2016

A Major Research Paper  
presented to Ryerson University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Digital Media  
in the Program of Digital Media

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2017

© Kellie Ring, 2017

**AUTHOR’S DECLARATION FOR ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION OF A MRP**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this MRP. This is a true copy of the MRP, including any required final revisions.

I authorize Ryerson University to lend this MRP to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

I further authorize Ryerson University to reproduce this MRP by photocopying or by other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

I understand that my MRP may be made electronically available to the public.

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Author Declaration \_\_\_\_\_

INTRODUCING INSTAGAGEMENT: ANALYZING THE ENGAGEMENT RATES OF  
PROFESSIONAL TENNIS PLAYERS THROUGH SELF-PRESENTATION STRATEGIES  
ON INSTAGRAM

Master of Digital Media, 2017  
Kellie Ring  
Master of Digital Media, Ryerson University

**Abstract**

This study explored the self-presentation strategies of male and female professional tennis players on the visual-based social media platform, Instagram, and explored the differences that exist between genders relative to fan engagement. A total of 963 Instagram posts were analyzed through content analyses of the top ten most followed professional male and female tennis players. Findings suggest that *down-to-earth* posts were the most common self-presentation strategy for both genders; however, male athletes were found to post in a wider variety of categories. Sport specific presentations of self (*athletic competence, behind-the-scenes* and *celebratory*) were found to be significantly more popular among male athletes, constituting 46.1% of their sample, compared to 24.5% of the female athlete sample. Fan engagement rates revealed that followers of male athletes engaged with *celebratory* content the most, while followers of female athletes engaged most with *sexualized* content.

*Key words:* social media, Instagram, fan-engagement, self-presentation, athlete brand, professional athletes

## **Co-Authorship**

The information presented in this major research paper is my original work; however, I would like to acknowledge the important contributions of my advisor, Dr. Katie Lebel. Her insight and guidance helped shape this Major Research Paper and strengthen the final product.

## **Acknowledgements**

Without the helpful support and contributions from several people, this paper would not have been possible. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Katie Lebel, for her unwavering support and guidance throughout the entire process. Thank you for your patience, your knowledge, your many FaceTime calls, and most importantly the time you took away from your newborn to help refine and polish this paper. A simple thank you is not enough. I would also like to thank my second reader, Dr. Alanna Harman for her additional insight and support as I completed this paper.

To my MDM family – thank you for your collaboration and curiosity. I am truly blessed to have learned from a great group of people who constantly shared their knowledge and experience. Above all, thank you for the amazing memories that will last a lifetime.

Thank you to the MDM faculty and staff – Sonya, Michael, Alex and Mary. I have nothing but amazing things to say about my academic experience, and I am truly excited about the future direction of the program.

To my family, thank you. Thank you for instilling belief in me, and for showing me the value of stepping outside my comfort zone.

Finally, to all the young female athletes out there, this one's for you. Let's not be afraid to show the world that we are strong and powerful.

## Table of Contents

Author's Declaration .....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Co-Authorship .....	iv
Acknowledgments .....	v
Table of Contents .....	vi
List of Tables .....	viii
Introduction .....	1
Literature Review .....	2
Gender Representation in Sport Media .....	2
Self-Presentation.....	7
Personal Branding .....	9
Method.....	12
Research Context.....	12
Sample .....	13
Coding Procedures.....	16
Results .....	20
Discussion.....	23
Self-Presentation.....	24
Engagement .....	27
Implications .....	28
Conclusion.....	30
Limitations & Future Research .....	31

References .....	33
------------------	----

## **List of Tables**

Table 1 – Most Followed Professional Tennis Players on Instagram .....	14
Table 2 – Emerging Category Definitions of Avatar Pictures .....	16
Table 3 – Category Definitions for Instagram Posts .....	19
Table 4 – Self-Presentation Strategies of Male and Female Professional Tennis Players .....	20
Table 5 – Average Engagement Rate Per Category Between Genders.....	22

## **Introduction**

Instagram has become a powerful marketing tool for many companies and celebrities. Athletes in particular have been attracted to the Instagram platform to engage with fans and heighten brand awareness. Launched in 2010, Instagram was designed to allow users to share their lives with others through photographs. In 2013, the platform expanded to include video content capabilities (Systrom, 2013). This combination of visual self-presentation has levied Instagram to become the fastest growing social media platform ever, recently boasting 700 million active monthly users (Instagram Business Team, 2017). Brandon Gayle, head of Instagram's global sports partnerships, posited that about one third of Instagram users follow at least 10 sports-related accounts, proving sports to be one of the most popular topics followed on the visual platform (Collins, 2017). The visual-based platform has played an important role in the creation of powerful brand images and increased brand awareness among users (Eagleman, 2013). According to Shively and Hitz (2016), 94% of the top 100 brands in the world use Instagram. Specific to athletes, scholars have suggested that new media use allows for personally crafted public images (Geurin, 2017; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Sanderson, 2008) that allow athletes to engage with fans, promote products, and potentially gain new sponsors (Geurin, 2017; Hambrick & Kang, 2014). The intimacy of sharing visual content has been argued by Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) to be a way fans can experience the everyday, behind-the-scenes lives of their favourite athletes. Visual content has the potential to be extremely powerful, with the ability to tell stories and convey meanings. In line with the adage that a picture is worth a thousand words, Instagram has thrived on the ability of their images to tell stories in a universal language. The focus on visual content uniquely allows the platform to cross language barriers and provide global accessibility to its users.

Despite the plethora of previous research on self-presentation and social media, few studies have conducted research on visual platforms like Instagram. Two studies to date have specifically focused on athlete's self-presentation on Instagram with investigations into gender differences. Reichart-Smith and Sanderson (2015) found that athletes self-presented on Instagram in ways that confirmed the previously established gender norms, while Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) looked at Olympic athletes' self-presentation and concluded that male athletes posted a wider variety of photos on Instagram in comparison to their female counterparts. This study expands on this important work by exploring the self-presentation differences between male and female athletes active in the sport of tennis, arguably the most gender equitable sport context available to sport researchers.

The purpose of this study was to examine how professional tennis players' choose to self-present their brands on Instagram. Specifically, this study investigated the varying self-presentation strategies and fan engagement levels between genders in order to develop a truer understanding of their personal branding choices.

## **Literature Review**

### *Gender Representation in Sport Media*

Hegemonic masculinity has long been a defining feature of the sport media landscape. Duncan, Messner, Williams and Jensen (1990) revealed that sports commentators actively described male athletes as powerful and touched greatly on their athletic skill, while female athletes were more likely to be framed in a submissive manner that focused on their appearance rather than their athletic ability (Bernstein, 2002). Kane (2011) argued that:

“Over the past three decades we have amassed a large body of empirical evidence demonstrating that sportswomen are significantly more likely to be portrayed in the ways that emphasize femininity and heterosexuality rather than their athletic prowess. Study after study has revealed that newspaper and TV coverage around the globe routinely and

systematically focus on the athletic exploits of male athletes while offering hypersexualized images of their female counterparts” (p. 28).

Cooky, Messner and Musto (2015), after a 25-year longitudinal study, found that not much has changed in women’s sports coverage on highlight shows and sports news. Contributing to other scholars’ research in a variety of media platforms, their updated study confirmed that media coverage still revolves around male athletes and sports (Cooky et al., 2015). Specifically, their findings suggested that only 3.2% of the coverage in news and highlight shows among three local network affiliates were dedicated to women’s sports. This number is lower than 10, 15, 20 and 25 years ago, when coverage of women’s sports were dedicated to 6.3%, 8.7%, 5.1%, 5.0% of sport news programs, respectively. The lack of coverage for female athletes and women’s sports confirms its perceived insignificance to the public (Coakley, 1998; Cuneen & Sidwell; 1998).

In the relatively limited media coverage female athletes and women’s sports receive, scholars have determined that sportswomen are portrayed in ways that highlight hegemonic femininity (Bernstein, 2002; Fink, 2015; Kane, LaVoi & Fink, 2013; Kane & Maxwell, 2011; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar & Kauer, 2004; Reichart-Smith, 2015; Schmidt, 2016). Daniels (2009) suggested “the sexualization of women athletes in mass media serves to reinforce patriarchal power and devalue women’s athleticism” (p. 402). This type of media portrayal—written, broadcasted and photographed—highlights the objectification female athletes face.

Based on societal expectations, female athletes are often faced with the challenge of identifying with the feminine role and the athletic role—two very different roles (Smallwood, Brown & Billings, 2014). Krane et al. (2004) suggested these two incompatible roles force “sportswomen to live in a paradox of dual and duelling identities” (p. 326). According to traditional norms, several scholars argue that the perceived negativity of being a female athlete

stems from the undesirable label of being homosexual (Christensen and Deutsch, 2015; Fink, 2015; Harrison and Secarea, 2010). Coining sports media a “heterosexist and homophobic terrain” (p. 338), Fink (2015) concluded that being labelled as “lesbian” or “different” affects all female athletes, whether or not they are gay. As these two identities are—according to societal definitions—unrelated, sportswomen are self-presenting in ways that highlight their femininity (Smallwood, Brown & Billings, 2014) in fear of being labeled lesbian.

Despite the continued portrayal of sexualized sportswomen in sports media, it has been found that this marketing and branding strategy is in fact detrimental for female athletes and women’s sports (Kane et al. 2013). Daniels (2009) illustrated in his study that performance images are optimal for prompting less self-objectification among adolescent girls and boys, adult women and men, sports fans and elite female athletes. In a study conducted by Reichart-Smith (2015), collegiate-level female athletes responded to three different types of images of sportswomen: glamorized, sexualized, and performance images. Results from this study indicated that respondents self-objectified when they were presented images of glamorized and sexualized female athletes. Consequently, this resulted in negative statements from the respondents such as, “I am never going to be as pretty as her” (p. 295). Contrarily, when presented with performance images of female athletes, respondents used statements like, “I am strong” (p. 295), proving that “when shown images of athletes engaged in sport, or in a sport-specific performance context, athletes use less objectifying statements and prefer images that focus on the skill of the athlete” (p. 294). The findings of Reichart-Smith’s (2015) study are consistent with Daniels’ (2009) findings. In his study, Daniels (2009) challenged the mainstream media to present more positive performance imagery of female athletes in an attempt to alleviate self-objectification among adolescent girls and college-aged women. In a similar study

conducted by Krane et al. (2010), findings suggested that when young girls view images of female college athletes in authentic athletic poses, it enhanced their self-perceptions about their bodies and encouraged them to resist society's standards for women.

Another study conducted by Daniels and Wartena (2011) researched how adolescent boys perceived images of female athletes. Once again, the findings remained consistent with the preceding examples. Not only did the responses to performance images elicit positive, less objectifying answers, but findings also suggested that their perception of female athletes was more positive among male viewers. The findings from these studies are consistent with Kane et al.'s. (2013) belief that, "as long as sportswomen are portrayed in ways that sexually objectify them, they will not be given the respect they deserve" (p. 293).

Interestingly, according to Cooky et al. (2013, 2015), there has been a shift in how sportswomen are presented in the sports media landscape. This shift has been dubbed "ambivalent" by many scholars (Bernstein, 2002; Bruce, 2016; Cooky et al, 2013, 2015; Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988; Eagleman, 2013; Fink, 2015). Bruce (2016) provided an example of this ambivalence when she argued that media outlets accompany sport-focused headlines with unrelated images, or sport-focused images with unrelated headlines. This type of mixed-messaging was evident in Cooky et al. (2015) research on sportswomen's representation in televised sports news and highlight shows. They concluded that commentary tended to flow back to the topic of motherhood after discussing female athletic accomplishments. Eagleman (2013) best described this ambivalence as "coverage that appears positive at first glance, but actually includes words, phrases, or themes that subtly belittle women" (p. 237). While the narrow view of female athletes has been demonstrated to be quite damaging, it is important to recognize that male athletes have also been put into an 'acceptable' box. According to Sabo and Curry Jansen

(1992), the dominant standards of male athletic excellence include power, self-control, success and agency. Other scholars noted that characteristics associated with masculinity revolve around strength and assertiveness (Krane et al., 2004). In their study, Krane et al. (2004) concluded that “aggressiveness, outgoing, and sweaty implied being an athlete, and being athletic was equated with being masculine” (p. 320). These characteristics have been reinforced by the sports media complex (Cooky et al., 2013), creating societal expectations of what it means to be a male athlete.

With the onset of social media, both male and female athletes, have the power to put an end to hegemonic beliefs. Social media has enabled a space where cultural norms can be disrupted. User-generated content can be a positive way for female athletes to enhance their athletic brands and increase their athletic credibility in the eyes of their fans. Bruce (2016) suggested that:

“Social media are argued to offer the potential to transform how women’s sport is represented, by enabling female athletes and fans of women’s sport to introduce new forms of imagery and storytelling, to contest discourses that devalue sportswomen and form communities to debate and discuss women’s sport” (p. 369).

Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014) and Geurin (2017) both concluded that the best way for an athlete to build a personal brand on social media is by doing three things: remaining authentic, engaging with and responding to fans, and posting consistently and frequently. By following this strategy, athletes can build their desired brand image. However, as much as athletes need to remain authentic, they also need to be intentional with their posts, thus engaging in Goffman’s (1959) frontstage and backstage performances. Social media has permitted athletes to freely express themselves and transform the way they are perceived; however, some research has suggested that female athletes continue to conform to hegemonic femininity, posting more sexualized photos of themselves than male athletes (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014; Reichart-Smith

& Sanderson, 2015). Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) cautioned that “posting sexually suggestive images on new media may lead to short-term gains in the number of likes or comments on a post, but athletes must also be aware of the long-term consequences posting such images may have on their personal brand” (p. 27).

Research suggests that for athletes to build a strong brand image that legitimizes their athletic skill, they must post more active and athletic photos than sexualized or glamorized. These different modes of interaction—frontstage and backstage performances—are part of a much larger self-presentation concept, which will be touched on in the following section.

### *Self-Presentation*

Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical model of social life suggests that impression management is a result of different techniques used by an individual. According to Leary and Kowalski (1990), impression motivation and impression construction are two processes that complement the impression management framework. In their work, Leary and Kowalski (1990) define impression management as “the process by which people control the impressions of others” (pg. 34). Although Schlenker (1980) and Schneider (1981) argued that impression management is not synonymous with self-presentation, many theorists, specifically Erving Goffman, believed that both terms are equally interchangeable (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

One component of Goffman’s (1959) framework is performance, which suggests that individuals ‘perform’ either a contrived or an authentic version of themselves. Goffman’s (1959) influential work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, describes these two distinct types of ‘performances’ as frontstage and backstage with the help of a theatre metaphor.

Frontstage performances, according to Goffman (1959), are “that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for

those who observe the performance” (p. 13). In other words, frontstage performances are likened to acting on a stage; individuals are presenting artificial versions of themselves, and are aware and concerned with their audience and how others think of them (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). An individual’s consciousness of the audience plays a major role in their behaviour and how they act in different public settings. Conversely, Goffman (1959) defined backstage performances as “a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course”. In private, more familiar settings (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016), individuals present a truer version of the self, and are freed from expectations and norms of front stage behaviour. Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) summarized the backstage as a place “where real, behind-the-scenes living is experienced and personality is revealed” (p. 319).

Although written prior to the Digital Age, Goffman’s theory of self-presentation (1959) is particularly relevant today. Marshall (2010) used Goffman’s framework to expand on the performances of celebrities on social media. He posited that content posted online by celebrities—athletes, actors, politicians, etc.—contribute to the presentation of self (Marshall, 2010). Marshall (2010) categorized online self-presentation, and compared Goffman’s (1959) backstage performance with what he calls the transgressive intimate self, a portrayal of self “motivated by temporary emotion” (p. 45). Geurin (2017) believes that the transgressive intimate self and Goffman’s (1959) backstage performance are complimentary.

Drawing on Marshall’s (2010) research of online self-presentation, Burch, Clavio, Eagleman, Major, Frederick and Blaszk (2014), Hambrick et al. (2010), Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) and Pegoraro (2010) researched athlete’s self-presentation on the social media platform Twitter. Each researcher concluded that athletes engage in backstage performances on Twitter,

which is what the audience is seeking (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016). In their analysis of self-presentation strategies on Twitter used by professional athletes, Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) concluded that 76% of female tweets and 77% of male tweets were categorized as backstage performances.

Recently, Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) researched Olympic athletes' visual self-presentation on Instagram. Photos examined reflected backstage performances, as they exemplified a more personal side of the athletes. In their comparison between female and male Olympians, Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) determined that personal life photos were posted more often by female athletes than male athletes.

Through visual self-presentation, athletes can build and maintain a consistent personal brand. With the growth of social media platforms, athletes play an active role in their public presentation, and have the freedom to choose how they wish to be perceived by the public (Reichart-Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Self-presentation of their athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyles can facilitate the construction of brand images for athletes (Arai et al., 2014), which have the ability to help them establish a greater following and more endorsement opportunities. The concept of personal branding, specifically the athlete brand, is discussed in further detail in the following section.

### *Personal Branding*

Johnson (2017) defines personal branding as “the process by which an individual actively tries to manage others' impressions of their skills, abilities and experiences” (p. 21). His statement is consistent with Leary and Kowalski's (1990) definition of impression management and Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, specifically frontstage performances. Communicating a personal brand is essential to creating brand equity, which Keller (1993)

defined as the “differential effect on brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of a brand” (p.1). Brand equity is comprised of two interrelated parts: brand awareness and brand image. Although Bruhn, Schoenmueller and Schäfer (2012) suggested that traditional media impacts brand awareness, they concluded that social media is essential to creating a powerful and lasting brand image.

The public image created by athletes on their Instagram feed tends to be highly associated with their personal brand (Paramentier & Fischer, 2012). Establishing this personal brand requires an astute understanding of how they wish to be perceived by various stakeholders, and studies suggest that a hybrid approach of on- and off-court portrayals is what increases their value proposition (Cortsen, 2013). Arai et al. (2014) argued that athletes have the ability to increase brand awareness and sponsorship opportunities through the development of successful personal brands.

Exclusive to athletes, Arai et al. (2014) defined the athlete brand “as 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). This recent research proposed three different dimensions of an athlete brand image: athletic performance, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle. Each dimension makes up the model of athlete brand image (MABI). Scholars (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Davies & Mudrick, 2016; Paramentier & Fischer, 2012) have concluded that social media serves as a great tool for bringing awareness to underrepresented athletes, allowing them to build brand equity through their respective personal brands. Furthermore, social media allows athletes to grow their brand images and establish brand equity, especially on visual-based platforms like Instagram (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch 2016).

Brand equity, obtained by promoting a compelling brand image, is continuous for athletes. In the age of social media, stakeholders have access to their favourite athletes at any given moment (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Rui & Stefanone, 2013). The constant opportunity for exposure, building connections with stakeholders and boosting engagement with fans is appealing to athletes (Thompson, Martin, Gee & Eagleman, 2014). Social media accounts of athletes can prove to be beneficial for companies as well. With large followings and influence comes the potential to indirectly increase sales for the products they support (Frederick, Lim, Clavio & Walsh 2012). Chadwick & Burton (2008) supported this argument, when they stated that “the stars of sport are no longer just on-field performers, they are also valuable off-field commercial properties” (p. 308).

Thus, the personal brand athletes present can be a major factor in their stakeholder response. Athletes’ self-presentation on social media platforms like Instagram should be carefully premeditated in order to garner a larger following and create an identity (Marshall, 2010). Watkins and Lee (2016) posited that “the development and maintenance of strong brand identity and image deliver the groundwork for consumer loyalty and brand equity” (p. 478). A study by Lebel & Danylchuk (2014) determined that sport specific photos (i.e. action shots) posted by athletes increased recognition and credibility, thus having a greater impact on fans. Contrarily, athletes who posted more glamorized photos had a perceived negative impact on their athlete brand. Posting photos that aren’t consistent with an athlete brand can tarnish an athlete’s athletic competence. If an athlete doesn’t utilize social media to their benefit by posting sport specific photos or videos, they could see adverse effects in building their brand (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014).

Athletes' use of social media platforms to aid their public-self-presentation and brand image is argued by Sanderson (2008, 2011) as being critical to "counteracting how they are being portrayed in the mass media" (Reichart-Smith & Sanderson, 2015, p. 343). Through these platforms, athletes can build their personas and combat societal expectations and stereotypes, specifically for female athletes (Krane et. al, 2010; Shaw, 1994). Thus, female athletes can resist the social conventions they face from the traditional media by crafting their own idea of what it means to be a female athlete (Geurin, 2011; Krane, Ross, Miller, Ganoë, Lucas-Carr & Barak, 2011; Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012). Conversely, male athletes have the opportunity to expand their presentations of self beyond the socially accepted definitions of hegemonic masculinity and allow their brands to potentially have more dynamic appeal.

The purpose of this study was to examine how professional tennis players' choose to self-present on the user-controlled platform, Instagram. Previous studies have looked at Twitter as a self-presentation platform, but little research has looked into visual platforms for self-presentation strategies. This study contributed to a small, but evolving body of research on Instagram. Specifically, this study analyzed male and female athletes within a single sport context in order to have better control over media exposure and brand awareness. The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How do male and female professional tennis players present their brands on the social media platform, Instagram?

RQ2: What differences exist between genders relative to self-presentation and fan engagement?

## **Method**

### *Research Context*

Instagram has become one of the most popular social networking platforms in the world. As of April 2017, Instagram boasted 700 million monthly users (Instagram, 2017), and roughly 200 million daily active users (Statista, 2017). A predominantly visual-based social media platform, Instagram has become a powerful tool for branding (Cohen, 2015; DeMers, 2017). Research also suggests that engagement rates on Instagram (e.g., likes, reposting, commenting) are higher than those on Facebook and Twitter (Watkins & Lee, 2016). In 2013, SumAll, a marketing analytics tool, ranked Instagram as the best social media platform for brands (Koetsier, 2013). Athletes have largely embraced this functionality as a tool to connect with and grow their fan base. As such, the Instagram platform was deemed an interesting and timely research setting. To address the research goals, content analyses were employed in order to more closely examine the self-presentation of athletes on Instagram. Content analyses were used for this study because they aimed to identify underlying consistencies of the data sets (Patton, 2002). Many social science researchers have used this method to analyze various media content, specifically images (Krippendorff, 2004; Reichart-Smith & Sanderson, 2015). For the purpose of this study, content analyses contributed to a more thorough, objective analysis of different posts from professional tennis players on Instagram (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Visual content (photos, videos) was suitable for the content analysis, because it was consumed after it was produced (Riffe, Fico & Lacy, 2005). The use of content analyses allowed for the posts to be sorted into appropriate categories by two independent coders, knowledgeable with the sport of tennis, and the Instagram platform.

### *Sample*

The Instagram accounts of the top ten most followed male professional tennis players and the top ten most followed female professional tennis players at the time of the data collection

were analyzed. The official ATP (The Association of Tennis Professionals) and WTA (Women’s Tennis Association) websites were used to determine which tennis players’ accounts were the most followed. The selection of the athletes for the study was determined according to the following criteria: the male and female professional tennis players were required to be active and ranked in singles or doubles and had to be in the top ten most followed Instagram accounts, respective to gender at the time of the data collection. The top followed athletes, at the time of the data collection, are illustrated in Table 1 and broken down between genders.

**Table 1. Most Followed Professional Tennis Players on Instagram**

<b>Male</b>	<b># of followers</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b># of followers</b>
1. Novak Djokovic	3.2M	1. Serena Williams	5.7M
2. Roger Federer	3.1M	2. Sania Mirza	3.1M
3. Rafael Nadal	2.8M	3. Maria Sharapova	2.5M
4. Andy Murray	1.1M	4. Eugenie Bouchard	1.4M
5. Juan Martin del Potro	808K	5. Caroline Wozniacki	1M
6. Stan Wawrinka	696K	6. Venus Williams	751K
7. Grigor Dimitrov	586K	7. Victoria Azarenka	370K
8. Juan Monaco	412K	8. Monica Puig	352K
9. Jo-Wilfried Tsonga	398K	9. Garbiñe Muguruza	316K
10. Nick Kyrgios	386K	10. Angelique Kerber	313K

*Note.* Data as of May 2017.

Unlike a variety of other professional sports, tennis has been able to create a much more equal balance between male and female athletes with regard to media attention and athlete brand awareness. Notably, the top followed tennis player on Instagram is a female athlete. Additionally, at the time of the data collection, six female athletes were among the top ten most followed tennis players on social media. Comparatively, the female tennis players accumulated roughly 2.5 million more followers than their male counterparts. During the time of the data collection, Serena Williams' social footprint (Instagram, Twitter and Facebook) received three million more social media interactions (e.g., likes, comments, shares) than any other tennis player (Hookit, 2017). The gender-equitability of tennis makes the sport particularly well suited for a gendered analysis and comparison. In addition to their gender-equitability, the sample of tennis players provided a varied cross-section for data collection.

A total of 17 countries were represented between both genders. Female players hailed from nine different countries. Two athletes represented the United States, followed by India, Russia, Canada, Denmark, Belarus, Puerto Rico, Spain and Germany with one athlete each. On the men's side, eight countries were represented. Two athletes each represented Switzerland and Argentina, and a single athlete represented Great Britain, Serbia, Spain, Bulgaria, France and Australia.

The mean age of the female sample was 28.3 years (SD = 4.9), with the mean world ranking of 133.6 (SD = 292.9). The female rankings ranged from number one Serena Williams, to number 940 Victoria Azarenka. The mean age of the male athletes was 29.5 years (SD = 3.9), with a mean world ranking of 21.8 (SD = 38.0). The top ranked male was Andy Murray at

number one, and the lowest ranked was Juan Monaco, ranked 126th. Of the 20 athletes – ten female and ten male—all had verified accounts on Instagram.

### *Coding Procedures*

May 2017 was chosen for data collection, and the 50 most recent posts were captured for each athlete for analysis with the exception of Juan Martin del Potro who, despite his large following, only had 39 posts available for investigation. Additionally, in order to maintain consistent units of coding, the new slideshow feature, which allows users to post as many as ten pictures and videos in a single post, was removed from the data sample ( $n = 26$ ) to maintain the consistency in the sample. In total, 963 posts were analyzed: 477 belonged to men and 486 to women.

Research suggests establishing categories with concise definitions increases the likelihood of reliability and decreases the chances of ambiguous content (White & Marsh, 2006). At the time of data collection, each post was examined and placed into one of seven categories by two independent coders. The seven categories were derived from the work of Shreffler, Hancock and Schmidt (2016), who modified the categories from the framework of Kane and Maxwell's (2011) study (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Emerging Category Definitions of Avatar Pictures**

---

<b>Photo Category</b>	<b>Definition</b>
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 a 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 has taken of themselves.
Athletic Competence	Picture of a sportswomen 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”	Image of a sportswoman in which she is portrayed in a sexualized manner with little to no indication of her sport present

---

*Note.* Definitions from Kane and Maxwell (2011) and Shreffler, Hancock and Schmidt (2016).

To answer the first research question, a priori coding was conducted independently using Schreffler, Hancock, and Schmidt’s (2015) framework. Following this initial round of coding, the researchers discussed discrepancies and modified the framework to better suit the Instagram platform. After much discussion, eight categories emerged. Two of the eight categories remained consistent with the findings of Schreffler, Hancock, and Schmidt (2016): *athletic competence* and *promotional figure*. Two other categories remained consistent with their definition, but were renamed to reflect gender neutrality: all-American “girl next door” was renamed “*down-to-earth*”, and “sexy babe” was renamed “*sexualized*”. In addition, four supplementary categories were created in order to better reflect the posting practices of the athletes under investigation including: “*celebratory*”, “*behind-the-scenes*”, “*trendy*” and “*glamorized*”. This strategy of emergent coding was undertaken to identify the specific content of the photos, and address a

noted gap in the existing framework. The codes were compared, refined, and data was re-coded until consensus was achieved. New themes emerged based upon the discrepancies from the initial coding round. For example, athletes were found to frequently post about their success. While this practice fit within the definition of athletic competence, the quantity of posts seemed to warrant a stand-alone category. Another common theme that persisted throughout the first round of coding was the practice of athletes providing fans with backstage access into their everyday lives in their athletic setting; therefore, a “*behind-the-scenes*” athletic category was created to more appropriately capture this strategy. The “*trendy*” category was established to accommodate the common Instagram practice of posting photos of things like food, memes, and quotes. Finally, a “*glamorized*” category was created to ensure overly posed photos of athletes didn’t fall under the *down-to-earth* category. A full description of each new category can be found in Table 3. It is important to note that for the purpose of coding, visual representation took precedence over any textual representation. If the caption and visual representation were ambiguous, the coders would favour the visual representation.

A second round of coding was conducted after the creation of the new categories. A subset of the athletes’ posts were coded by both researchers and classified into one of the eight categories established. Inter-coder reliability was found to be 96.6% among these posts, well above the 80% minimum percentage recommended by Riffe et al. (2005) to continue content analysis. The discrepancies were discussed and the code definitions were slightly modified to avoid ambiguity. Given the high agreement level, the remaining posts were coded by the primary researcher.

To address the second research question, the total number of likes for each post were collected. The number of likes each post garnered were divided by the total number of followers

for each athlete in order to provide a benchmark for the engagement rates of each post. For the purpose of this research, comments were not collected or analyzed; therefore, the number of “likes” was the main variable used to determine engagement rates.

**Table 3. Category Definitions for Instagram Posts**

<b>Photo Category</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Down to Earth	The athlete is portrayed with minimal or no indication of athleticism, portrayed in a wholesome pose, off-court.
Promotional	The athlete is blatantly promoting products, events, or their personal brands.
Celebratory	The athlete is celebrating athletic success on-court or off-court, with or without fans. Posts might include fist pumping, high-fiving, or posing with a trophy.
Athletic Competence	The athlete is portrayed in uniform, on court, in action during competition, or in a training session.
Behind-the-scenes	The athlete is featured in an athletic setting; however, they are not in action, or celebrating.
Trendy	This category includes everyday life pictures or videos e.g., food, scenery, quotes, memes, current events.
Glamorized	The athlete is featured in stylish or fancy attire with no indication of athleticism. These portrayals are highly posed, with the goal of being trendy and stylish.
Sexualized	The athlete is portrayed in an overtly sexualized manner with little to no indication of their sport present.

## Results

The first research question of this study asked how male and female professional tennis players presented their brands on Instagram in order to uncover if any differences exist between genders. The results revealed that *down-to-earth* posts, depicting the athletes as wholesome, were the most common strategy for both genders. For the male athletes, *down-to-earth* self-presentations comprised 24.3% ( $n = 116$ ) of the sample. For the female athletes, *down-to-earth* posts comprised of 25.5% ( $n = 124$ ) of the sample. Combined, this category comprised an overall 24.9% ( $n = 240$ ) of the total sample. *Behind-the-scenes* posts were the second most frequent strategy for male athletes, comprising 17.2% of all posts ( $n = 82$ ) and *glamorized* posts were the second most used strategy for female athletes with 24.7% ( $n = 120$ ). The third most posted category from each gender was *celebratory* posts for male athletes at 14.9% ( $n = 71$ ) and *promotional* representations for the female athletes at 14.8% ( $n = 72$ ). A full list of results from the content analysis is presented in Table 4.

The second research question looked to uncover gender differences in the self-presentation strategies of this sample. The categories of *behind-the-scenes*, *celebratory*, and *athletic competence* were intended to reflect the athlete participating in or being involved in their sport. A total of 45.5% ( $n = 217$ ) of all male posts were attributed to these three categories, whereas these categories comprised just 24.3% ( $n = 118$ ) of the female sample. On the men's side, the athlete that posted the most in these three categories was Jo Wilfried Tsonga with 64.0% ( $n = 32$ ) of his photos considered to be sport related. Monica Puig posted 36.2% ( $n = 17$ ) of her sampled photos in these three categories.

**Table 4. Self-Presentation Strategies of Male and Female Professional Tennis Players**

Photo Category	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
	$n$ %	$n$ %

Down to Earth	116	24.3	Down to Earth	124	25.5
Behind-the-scenes	82	17.2	Glamorized	120	24.7
Celebratory	71	14.9	Promotional	72	14.8
Athletic Competence	64	13.4	Behind-the-scenes	53	10.9
Promotional	59	12.4	Athletic Competence	49	10.1
Glamorized	35	7.3	Trendy	31	6.4
Trendy	35	7.3	Sexualized	19	3.9
Sexualized	11	2.3	Celebratory	16	3.3

*Note.* Male Posts ( $n = 477$ ), Female Posts ( $n = 486$ )

Finally, differences between genders relative to fan engagement were examined. The male tennis players had a cumulative 13,486,000 followers, while the female tennis players had a following that totalled 16,045,000 followers. Together, they collected 50,845,356 likes on 963 posts. The men comprised 60.3% ( $n = 30,655,301$ ) of the likes, while the women comprised 39.7% ( $n = 20,190,055$ ) likes. Each male athlete averaged a total of 3,065,530 likes in their analyzed posts, while each individual female athlete averaged a total of 2,019,006 likes. The men ( $n = 477$ ) had an average of 64,627 likes per post, while the women ( $n = 486$ ) collected an average of 41,543 likes per post.

The findings suggest that the *down-to-earth* ( $n = 778,177$ ), *celebratory* ( $n = 621,920$ ) and *behind-the-scenes* ( $n = 467,297$ ) categories have the highest average number of likes per male athlete. Contrarily, the *glamorized* ( $n = 723,510$ ), *down-to-earth* ( $n = 467,101$ ) and *promotional* ( $n = 193,758$ ) categories were the three categories with the highest average number of likes for female athletes.

The most engaging male athlete post in the sample was a photo of Juan Martin del Potro showing off his Olympic Gold Medal, which was liked by 24.7% ( $n = 199,819$ ) of his followers. The most engaging female post was a photo of Victoria Azarenka breastfeeding her newborn baby, which was liked by 12.2% ( $n = 45,127$ ) of her followers. The lowest percentages of engagement for a single post for both genders were *promotional*: 0.5% ( $n = 2,132$ ) of fan engagement for Jo-Wilfried Tsonga on a photo that promoted the babolat brand, and 0.4% ( $n = 21,999$ ) for Serena Williams on a photo of her friend’s book. The athlete with the highest average percentage of engagement for all categories was Juan Martin del Potro for the men and Angelique Kerber for the women. Altogether, an average of 9.5% ( $n = 76,760$ ) of del Potro’s followers engaged in his posts, while 6.1% ( $n = 19,093$ ) of Kerber’s followers engaged in hers. The lowest average percentage of engagement was Serena Williams at 2.0% ( $n = 114,000$ ) and Jo-Wilfried Tsonga at 2.4% ( $n = 9,552$ ). Overall, the average percentage of engagement for the collective categories was 4.8% for the male athletes ( $SD = 1.9$ ) and 3.5% for the female athletes ( $SD = 1.3$ ).

The most engaging content category among male athletes was *celebratory* posts with an average of 7.3% of followers “liking” these types of posts. The most engaging content category among female athletes was *sexualized* posts with an average of 5.0% of followers “liking” this type of post. Conversely, *promotional* and *trendy* posts garnered the least amount of engagement for both men and women, respectively. On average, 4.9% of male fans engaged in the posts placed in each of these categories, while the female fans engaged at a rate of 3.5% with this type of content. A full list of the photo engagement rates per category is presented in Table 5.

**Table 5. Average Engagement Rate Per Category Between Genders**

Photo Category	% Engagement by Category	
	Men	Women

Down to Earth	4.9	3.9
Behind-the-scenes	4.1	3.4
Celebratory	7.3	4.6
Athletic Competence	4.0	3.3
Promotional	2.9	2.9
Glamorized	6.3	3.4
Trendy	3.0	1.8
Sexualized	6.5	5.0

---

*Note.* Engagement rates calculated by dividing number of likes by number of followers.

### **Discussion**

This study examined how professional tennis players present their brands on the Instagram platform. A content analysis examined 486 female posts and 477 male posts for a total of 963 data points. *Down to earth* posts, defined as an athlete portrayed with minimal or no indication of athleticism, was the most frequent presentation of self for both genders, accounting for 24.9% of the total sample. Findings suggest that despite the control provided through digital platforms, female athletes continue to present themselves as females first, and athletes second. Data demonstrated a clear tendency of the females in this sample to present themselves in non-athletic contexts and they often favoured *glamorized* images, largely reflecting documented traditional media practices (Coakley, 1998; Cuneen & Sidwell; 1998). The male athletes in this study frequently self-presented as *down-to-earth*, but tended to post in a wider variety of categories compared to females, potentially challenging traditional media portrayals that tend to present men as athlete’s first, and males second. Sport specific presentations of self (*athletic competence, behind-the-scenes* and *celebratory*) existed as another important differential

between genders. These types of posts constituted 46.1% of the male sample, compared to 24.5% of the female sample.

Engagement rates between genders suggest that hegemonic values still persist; while followers of male athletes engaged with *celebratory* content most often, fans of female athletes engaged the most with *sexualized* posts. Followers of male athletes were found to “like” *celebratory* posts at a rate of 7.3%, making this their most engaging category. The most engaging category for female athletes was the *sexualized* category, with an average engagement rate of 5.0% per post. An average of 15.4% of the male athlete followers and 11.3% of the female athlete followers engaged in the three athletic categories combined.

### *Self-Presentation*

Researchers who have used Goffman’s (1959) theory of self-presentation to guide their digital studies have concluded that when athletes are given full control to present their brands on social media, they more often than not engage in backstage performances as opposed to frontstage performances (Burch et al., 2014; Hambrick et al.; 2010; Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010). The findings from this study are consistent with this research. In this sample, *down to earth* photos were posted most frequently, implying a desire for athletes to present truer versions of themselves. This finding is consistent with Geurin-Eagleman and Burch’s (2016) study of Instagram, which found personal life photos were represented to a much greater extent than any other type of post analyzed. It should be noted, however, that while previous studies (Burch et al., 2014; Hambrick et al.; 2010; Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010) have suggested that authentic presentations of self were put forward in response to audience expectations, the engagement metrics calculated in this research tell a different story. While

*down to earth* posts were the most popular among the athletes, athletes did not receive their highest engagement rates on these posts.

The findings from this study suggest that female athletes self-presented in highly *glamorized* ways, a close second to *down to earth* posts. Overall, *glamorized* posts constituted 24.7% of the female sample. This finding is not surprising, as female athletes have been and continue to be trivialized in traditional media, with commentary often highlighting everything but their athletic skill (Collins, 2011; Fink, 2015). The highly feminine and posed posts that the female athletes presented in this study could stem from the mainstream media's "hetero-sexual ideal" (Griffin, 1998) that continues to be ingrained into the minds of female athletes. Horky (2012) concluded that the recipe for increased media attention in today's landscape is still largely based on success and good looks. Interestingly, *glamorized* posts garnered 2.5 million ( $n = 7,235,101$ ) more likes than *down to earth* posts ( $n = 4,671,014$ ) illustrating the greater appeal this type of content seemed to have among followers.

Female athletes posted a seemingly low number of *sexualized* self-presentations; however, the *sexualized* category garnered the greatest fan engagement. This finding perpetuates the premise that "sex sells". Although posting sexually suggestive photos or video may seem like a strategic branding tactic for female athletes, studies have shown otherwise (Antil, Burton & Robinson, 2012; Fink, Cunningham & Kensicki, 2004; Kane, 2011; Kane and Maxwell, 2011). While female athletes may reap certain short-term benefits, such as increased visibility and high numbers of "likes", in practice, they are likely doing little for their brands as athletes (LaVoi & Calhoun, 2014). Despite the various options available for female athletes to control their self-presentation in the digital sphere and the many studies that have highlighted the benefits of posting athletic content, the findings of this study suggest that female athletes have not

internalized this wisdom. Just 24.5% of their total sample was coded to athletic content categories (*athletic competence*, *behind-the-scenes* and *celebratory*). This number is vastly smaller than the male sample (46.1%). The main category that stood out in this study's findings was the *celebratory* category; 3.3% of female and 14.9% of male posts were coded under the *celebratory* category. This suggests that men are more overtly proud of their accomplishments, while women continue to hide in the shadows and focus more on their femininity (Reichert-Smith, 2015), as opposed to their success.

Practically, public platforms like Instagram allow female athletes to inspire younger generations of athletes. Sexualized posts communicate the wrong message to these young fans (Daniels & LaVoi, 2013) and may in fact risk the development of brand recognition and recall among this important demographic (Wirtz, Sparks & Zimbres, 2017). In their recent study, Kane, LaVoi, & Fink (2015) concluded that elite female athletes preferred to be depicted in athletically competent photos. These findings are consistent with other studies (Daniels, 2012, Daniels & Wartena, 2011; Kane and Maxwell, 2011; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014), suggesting that female athletes are more credible when they post athletically competent photos, and may not be respected if they continue to self-present in sexually objectifying manners (Kane et al., 2013). Findings from this study run counter to these findings, instead supporting a tendency among female athletes to pose in off court images that do not demonstrate their athletic abilities, and instead highlight their femininity. This practice might be the result of the superficial reinforcement (i.e., likes) athletes receive for this type of content. In light of previous research, it is recommended that educational programs be developed around this knowledge; such that athletes are more aware of the impact these practices have on their credibility as athletes (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012), the heart of their brand.

## *Engagement*

It is interesting to note that two of the athletes in this sample, one male (Roger Federer) and one female (Sania Mirza), had the same number of followers, however, their engagement levels were drastically different. On average, Federer was found to engage 6.4% of his followers with each post, while Mirza had an average engagement rate of 2.4%. Both athletes had 49 posts analyzed. Federer posted in a broad range of categories, while Mirza's self-presentation strategy was lopsided, with the majority of her posts ( $n = 29$ ) being coded under the *glamorized* category. Neither athlete posted in the *sexualized* category. Federer's personal branding strategy aligned closely with Arai et al.'s (2014) model of athlete brand image. In their model, Arai et al. suggested that for athletes to build brand equity, they should present three different sides of themselves: athletic performance, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle. The researchers argued that presenting these three dimensions of self could potentially garner a wider reach of more diverse and engaged followers (Arai et al., 2014; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). One clear difference between Federer and Mirza's self-presentation strategies arose in their athletic performance dimension, a key component to building a successful athlete brand. This dimension incorporated the three athletic categories of this study (i.e., *athletic competence*, *behind the scenes* and *celebratory*). Federer posted a far greater amount of this dimension in comparison to Mirza; specifically, 11 more posts, a difference of 22.5%.

Despite the fact that female athletes combined for more than two million more followers than their male counterparts, they garnered more than 10 million less cumulative likes. It is interesting to note that although female athletes posted only 4.1% of their posts within the *sexualized* category, these posts had a greater average number of likes per post, and garnered the highest average engagement rates among their followers. Conversely, the highest engagement

level for male athletes was in the *celebratory* category, with these types of posts engaging 7.3% of their followers on average. On a more positive note, however, the second most engaged category for the female athletes was *celebratory*, with this type of content found to engage 4.6% of female athlete followers on average.

Having a higher engagement rate in *celebratory* posts is positive for female athletes. Not only was it their second highest engaged category, but a *celebratory* photo posted by Venus Williams had the highest rate of engagement amongst all posts on the female side. Making up only 3.3% of their sample, females can learn from this and should be encouraged to post more of this type of content. Based on the findings from this study, it is evident that followers of female tennis players enjoy seeing the female athletes in confident self-presentations. Not only can this increase their credibility as athletes, it can also potentially increase interest in their sport, which could have a snowball effect on all types of media. If females were to portray themselves in athletic poses—particularly celebration poses—media might begin to follow this trend. This finding highlights the importance of female athletes as role models and should ideally embolden female athletes with the importance of presenting themselves as confident athletes who are not afraid to show off their successes.

### *Implications*

Based on these findings, it is plausible to propose that female athletes could benefit from presentations of self that highlight their athletic success. The high engagement level in celebratory posts for women is an encouraging statistic; posting more of this type of content could result in an increased engagement among followers. Female athletes are perceived as role models (Daniels, 2012) and representations of them in proud, victorious poses is a positive step toward breaking down certain barriers the mainstream media has inflicted. Overtly displaying

their athletic successes on social media could resonate with audiences that are following female athletes, whereas posting sexually suggestive content may attract a different type of audience, with different motivations. Fink, Cunningham and Kensicki (2004) concluded that the portrayal of a female athlete as an athlete “produced a stronger association than highlighting that athlete’s physical attractiveness” (p. 363). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that when female athletes post athletic content, fans that are athletically motivated may be more likely to purchase tickets and merchandise, ultimately enhancing the athlete’s brand. This shift of self-presentation strategy can, according to LaVoi and Calhoun (2015), “increase interest in, and respect for women’s sport, reconstruct the media landscape, resist sexist backlash, and shift the institutional and ideological control of sport away from men” (p. 326). We argue that this can create a domino effect: female athletes will be less scrutinized if they collectively deviate from the traditional and idealized expectations, so they too could be celebrated for their accomplishments like their male counterparts.

The concept of a balanced self-presentation should also be noted. Collectively, the male athletes in this sample were consistently found to post content in a more varied and dynamic manner. This finding is positive and highlights how male athletes have broken down barriers by posting more backstage performances, something not typically highlighted in traditional media. This varied self-presentation strategy could expand the typical presentations of hegemonic masculinity commonly associated with male athletes; rather than being portrayed as aggressive and powerful, male athletes might also be recognized as wholesome. In addition to posting backstage performances, the male athletes in this sample continued to mirror traditional media presentations by posting athletic content. It is reasonable to argue that this strategy supports Arai et al.’s (2014) model of athlete brand image and leads to higher follower engagement. The

female athletes' average level of engagement per category was lower than the men, resulting in more than 10 million less cumulative likes, despite their two million more followers; this statistic implies that hegemonic values continue to persist. Despite the reinforcement female athletes may receive from sexualized posts via superficial engagement metrics, these results indicate the longer term health of athlete brands may be better served by focusing on Arai's et al.'s (2014) model, as evidenced by the male athlete's in this study.

Finally, while the Instagram platform is often heralded for its promotional value, the response to posts of this nature were dismal, receiving an average engagement rate of only 2.9% for both male and females in this study. One explanation for this might be that this type of content is simply not of interest to followers. A second possible explanation may be that "likes" do not necessarily reflect the interest this type of post might inspire. Awareness of product affiliations may be internalized by followers, but not "like-worthy". Qualitative interviews and focus groups that delve beyond superficial engagement metrics and into deeper consumer sentiment are well warranted to better understand these abstract engagement issues.

### *Conclusion*

The sample of athletes in this study represented a variety of National Sport Organizations (NSOs), brands and events. Although athletes are their own personal brands, they are, in some capacity, representing other brands simultaneously. An athlete's large following on social media "creates avenues for advocacy that are generally unattainable by the average citizen via traditional media" (Sanderson & Gramlich, 2016, p. 120). The power they hold to influence and inspire a younger generation of athletes warrants proper social media training. Social media training could result in a snowball effect on all parties involved with the athlete, including the athletes themselves. Visual platforms like Instagram leave no room for error; pictures and videos

are interpreted in multiple ways, so it is best the athlete thinks about the impact of their post before posting it. A major consequence of an ill-thought-out post can be a tarnished brand image, which can have a negative impact on all stakeholders connected to the athlete.

Self-controlled platforms like Instagram hold great influence over social change (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). When used strategically, social media has the capacity to alter the traditional ways the world perceives male and female athletes. Based on our findings, we argue that athletes can increase their brand equity when they present themselves according to Arai et al.'s (2014) model, resulting in more engagement. The first step towards the new normal is to help these athletes, specifically female athletes, understand the major benefits of this type of strategy. It is important that gender continues to be a part of the discussion surrounding social media education, particularly when it comes to athletes. Through ongoing research on social media, we can continue to demonstrate the new strides needed for a more gender equitable sports world. Scholars have indicated the positive and negative self-presentation branding choices for athletes. The next challenge should be to ensure that athletes and their teams have access to this literature and receive the necessary support required to successfully implement these recommended tactics. Social media is a powerful tool. A partnership between social media researchers and savvy athlete marketing managers will allow athletes to fully realize the power of digital brands and best develop their overall image among their NSO's, sponsors, and fans.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Although this study analyzed a large sample of posts, engagement rates were only analyzed through number of likes. For future research, it would be beneficial to examine comments as part of the engagement analysis to see if any consistent trends arose. In addition, visual representations took precedence over the caption of the post. Future research could

examine whether or not there are consistencies between the visual content presented and the caption: are they consistent, or do they contradict one another? Furthermore, it would be interesting to compare athletes' self-presentation strategies when they are in competition versus when they are out of competition. Lastly, future research could also compare genders from other sports to see if the same self-presentation strategies arise, allowing for a greater generalizability of results. This additional research could lead to findings that serve as a foundation for the creation of a positive athlete brand, which can be utilized by athletes with the help of their managers and NSOs.

## References

- Antil, J. H., Burton, E., & Robinson, M. (2012). Exploring the challenges facing female athletes as endorsers. *Journal of Brand Strategy*, 1(3), 292-307.
- Arai, A., Ko, Y. J., & Ross, S. (2014). Branding athletes: Exploration and conceptualization of athlete brand image. *Sport Management Review*, 17(2), 97-106.
- Bernstein, A. (2002). Is It Time for a Victory Lap?: Changes in the Media Coverage of Women in Sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 37(3-4), 415-428.
- Bruce, T. (2016). New Rules for New Times: Sportswomen and Media Representation in the Third Wave. *Sex Roles*, 74 (7-8), 361-376.
- Bruhn, M., Schoenmuller, V., & Schafer, D. B. (2012). Are social media replacing traditional media in terms of brand equity creation? *Management Research Review*, 35(9), 770-790.
- Burch, L. M., Clavio, G., Eagleman, A. N., Major, L. H., Frederick, E. L., & Blaszkowski, M. (2014). Battle of the sexes: Gender analysis of professional athlete tweets. *Global Sport Business Journal*, 2(2), 43-62.
- Chadwick, S., & Burton, N. (2008). From Beckham to Ronaldo - Assessing the nature of football player brands. *Journal of Sponsorship*, 1(4), 307-317.
- Christensen, J., & Deutsch, J. (2015). Media exposure and influence of female athlete body images. *International Journal of Human Sciences*, 12(1), 480-486.
- Christensen, K., & Deutsch, J. (2015). Media exposure and influence of female athlete body images. *International Journal of Human Sciences*, 12(1), 480-486.
- Clavio, G., & Kian, T. (2010). Uses and gratification of a retired female athlete's Twitter followers. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 3(4), 485-500.
- Coakley, J. J. (1998). *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies*. Boston, Mass: Irwin/McGraw-Hill.
- Cohen, J. (2015, May 5). *Eight Reasons All Brands Should Be On Instagram*. Retrieved July 3, 2017, from Forbes: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jennifercohen/2015/05/05/8-reasons-all-brands-should-be-on-instagram/#775aae544b20>
- Collins, R. L. (2011). Content Analysis of Gender Roles in Media: Where Are We Now and Where Should We Go? *Sex Roles*, 64, 290-298.
- Collins, T. (2017, August 3). *Real Madrid scores big-time goals across social, too*. Retrieved August 10, 2017, from CNET: <https://www.cnet.com/news/real-madrid-soccer-instagram-facebook-social-media/>
- Cooky, C., Messner, M., & Hextrum, R. (2013). Women Play Sports, But Not on TV: A Longitudinal Study of Televised News Media. *Communication & Sport*, 1(3), 203-230.

- Cooky, C., Messner, M., & Musto, M. (2015). "It's Dude Time!": A Quarter Century of Excluding Women's Sports in Televised News and Highlight Shows. *Journal of Communication and Sport*, 3(3), 261-287.
- Cortsen, K. (2013). Annika Sörenstam - A Hybrid Personal Sports Brand. *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*, 3(1), 37-62.
- Cuneen, J., & Sidwell, M. J. (1998). Gender Portrayals in Sports Illustrated for Kids advertisements: A content analysis of prominent and supporting models. *Journal of Sport Management*, 12(1), 39-50.
- Daniels, E. A. (2009). Sex Objects, Athletes, and Sexy Athletes: How Media Representations of Women Athletes Can Impact Adolescent Girls and College Women. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 24(4), 399-422.
- Daniels, E. A., & LaVoi, N. (2013). Athletics as solution and problem: Sports participation for girls and the sexualization of women athletes. In Z. E., & T. Roberts, *The Sexualization of Girls and Girlhood: Causes, Consequences, and Resistance* (pp. 63-83). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Daniels, E. (2009). Sex Objects, Athletes and Sexy Athletes: How Media Representation of Women Athletes Can Impact Adolescent Girls and College Women. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 24(4), 399-422.
- Daniels, E. (2012). Sexy versus strong: What girls and women think of female athletes. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 33 (2), 79-90.
- Daniels, E., & Wartena, H. (2011). Athlete or Sex Symbol, What Boys Think of Media Representations of Female Athletes. *Sex Roles*, 65(7), 566-579.
- Davies, M., & Mudrick, M. (2016). Brand Management in a Niche Sport: An LPGA Golfer's Use of Instagram. *2016 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2016)*, (pp. 309-310). Orlando.
- DeMers, J. (2017, March 28). *Why Instagram Is The Top Social Platform For Engagement (And How To Use It)*. Retrieved July 3, 2017, from Forbes: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jaysondemers/2017/03/28/why-instagram-is-the-top-social-platform-for-engagement-and-how-to-use-it/#10a02a3c36bd>
- Duncan, M. C., & Hasbrook, C. A. (1988). Denial of Power in Televised Women's Sports. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 5(1), 1-21.
- Duncan, M. C., Messner, M. A., Williams, L., & Jensen, K. (1990). *Gender Stereotyping in televised sports*. Los Angeles, CA: Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles.
- Eagleman, A. (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.

- Eagleman, A. (2015). Constructing gender differences: newspaper portrayals of male and female gymnasts at the 2012 Olympic Games. *Sport in Society*, 18(3), 234-247.
- Fink, J. (2015). Female athletes, women's sport, and the sport media commercial complex: Have we really "come a long way, baby"? *Sport Management Review*, 18(3), 331-342.
- Fink, J., Cunningham, G. B., & Kensicki, L. J. (2004). Using Athletes as Endorsers to Sell Women's Sport: Attractiveness vs. Expertise. *Journal of Sport Management*, 18, 350-367.
- Frederick, E. L., Lim, C. H., Clavio, G., & Walsh, P. (2012). Why We Follow: An Examination of Parasocial Interaction and Fan Motivation for Following Athlete Archetypes on Twitter. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 5, 481-502.
- Geurin, A. N. (2017). Elite Female Athletes' Perception of New Media Use Relating to Their Careers: A Qualitative Analysis. *Journal of Sport Management*, 31(4), 345-359.
- Geurin-Eagleman, A. N., & Burch, L. M. (2016). Communicating via photographs: A gendered analysis of Olympic athletes' visual self-presentation on Instagram. *Sport Management Review*, 19(2), 133-145.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books.
- Griffin, P. (1998). *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Hambrick, M. E., & Kang, S. J. (2014). Pin It: Exploring How Professional Sports Organizations Use Pinterest as a Communications and Relationship-Marketing Tool. *Communication & Sport*, 3(4), 434-457.
- 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.
- Harrison, L. A., & Sexarea, A. M. (2010). College Students' Attitudes Toward the Sexualization of Professional Women Athletes. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 33(4), 403-426.
- Hookit. (2017, May). *Hookit Engagement 100*. Retrieved May 29, 2017, from Hookit: <http://www.hookit.com/ranks/tennis/may2017/>
- Horky, T. (2012). Facts and Figures: The International Sports Press Survery 2011. *Presentation to the UEFA and Sport and Citizenship workshop "The mediatisation of women sport in Europe: What is at stake and how to improve the coverage?"*. Nyon, Switzerland.
- Instagram Business Team. (2017, April 26). *700 Million*. Retrieved July 7, 2017, from Instagram Business Blog: <https://business.instagram.com/blog/700-map>

- Johnson, K. M. (2017). The Importance of Personal Branding in Social Media: Educating Students to Create and Manage their Personal Brand. *International Journal of Education and Social Science*, 4(1), 21-27.
- Kane, M. J. (2011, July 27). *Sex Sells Sex, Not Women's Sports*. Retrieved April 19, 2017, from The Nation: <https://www.thenation.com/article/sex-sells-sex-not-womens-sports/>
- Kane, M., & Maxwell, H. (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*, 202-216.
- Kane, M., LaVoi, N., & Fink, J. (2013). Exploring Elite Female Athletes' Interpretations of Sport Media Images: A Window Into the Construction of Social Identity and "Selling Sex" in Women's Sports. *Communication & Sport*, 1(3), 269-298.
- Kassing, J. W., & Sanderson, J. (2010). Fan-Athlete Interaction and Twitter Tweeting through the Giro: A Case Study. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 3(1), 113-128.
- Keller, K. (1993). Conceptualizing, measuring, and managing customer-based brand equity. *Journal of Marketing*, 57(1), 1-22.
- Koetsier, J. (2013, December 13). *Instagram is the 'best platform for brands' in 2013, beating out Facebook, Twitter, and Google*. Retrieved July 3, 2017, from Venture Beat: <https://venturebeat.com/2013/12/05/instagram-the-best-platform-for-brands-in-2013-beating-out-facebook-twitter-and-google/>
- Krane, V., Choi, P., Baird, S., Aimar, C., & Kauer, K. (2004). Living the Paradox: Female Athletes Negotiate Femininity and Muscularity. *Sex Roles*, 50(5/6), 315-329.
- Krane, V., Ross, S. R., Miller, M., Rowse, J. L., Ganoë, K., Andrzejczyk, J. A., et al. (2010). Power and focus: self-representation of female college athletes. *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise*, 2(2), 175-195.
- Krane, V., Ross, S., Miller, M., Ganoë, K., Lucas-Carr, C., & Barak, K. S. (2011). It's cheesy when they smile: What girl athletes prefer in images of female college athletes. *Research Quarterly for Exercise & Sport*, 82(4), 755-768.
- Krippendorff, K. (2004). Reliability in Content Analysis: Some Common Misconceptions and Recommendations. *Human Communication Research*, 30(3), 411-433.
- LaVoi, N. M., & Calhoun, A. S. (2016). Digital Media and Women's Sport. In A. C. Billings, & M. Hardin, *Routledge Handbook of Sport and New Media* (pp. 320-330). New York: Routledge.
- Leary, M. R., & Kowalski, R. M. (1990). Impression Management: A Literature Review and Two-Component Model. *Psychological Bulletin*, 107(1), 34-47.

- Lebel, K., & Danylchuk, K. (2014). Facing Off on Twitter: A Generation Y Interpretation of Professional Athlete Profile Pictures. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 7(3), 317-336.
- 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(4), 461-480.
- Marshall, D. (2010). The promotion and presentation of the self: celebrity as marker of presentational media. *Celebrity Studies*, 1(1), 35-48.
- Paramentier, M.-A., & Fischer, E. (2012). How athletes build their brands. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 1, 107-124.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pegoraro, A. (2010). Look Who's Talking - Athletes on Twitter: A Case Study. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 3(1), 501-514.
- Reichart-Smith, L. (2015). What's the Best Exposure? Examining Media Representations of Female Athletes and the Impact on Collegiate Athletes' Self-Objectification. *Communication & Sport*, 4(3), 282-302.
- Reichart-Smith, L., & Sanderson, J. (2015). I'm Going to Instagram It! An Analysis of Athlete Self-Presentation on Instagram. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 59(2), 342-358.
- Riffe, D., Lacy, F., & Fico, F. G. (2005). *Analyzing media messages: Using quantitative content analysis in research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Rui, J. R., & Stefanone, M. A. (2013). Strategic Image Management Online: Self-presentation, self-esteem and social network perspectives. *Information, Communication & Society*, 16(8), 1286-1305.
- Sabo, D. & Curry Jansen, S. (1992). 'Images of Men in Sport Media: The Social Reproduction of Gender Order', in S. Craig (ed.) *Men, Masculinity, and the Media*. London: Sage.
- Sanderson, J. (2008). "You are the type of person that children should look up to as a hero": Parasocial Interaction on 38pitches.com. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 1(3), 337-360.
- Sanderson, J. (2011). It's a whole new ball game: How social media is changing sports. *Journal of Sport Management*, 27, 261-262.
- Sanderson, J., & Gramlich, K. (2016). "You Go Girl!": Twitter and Conversations About Sport Culture and Gender. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 33, 113-123.

- Schlenker, B. R. (1980). *Impression Management: the self-concept, social identity, and interpersonal relations*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Schmidt, H. C. (2016). Women's sports coverage remains largely marginalized. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 37(3), 275-298.
- Schneider, D. J. (1981). Tactical self-presentations: Toward a broader conception. In J. T. Tedeschi, *Impression Management Theory and Social Psychological Research* (pp. 23-40). New York: Academic Press.
- Schreffler, M. B., Hancock, M. G., & Schmidt, S. H. (2016). Self-Presentation of Female Athletes: A Content Analysis of Athlete Avatars. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 9, 460-475.
- Shaw, S. M. (1994). Gender, leisure and constraints: towards a framework for the analysis of women's leisure. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 26, 8-23.
- Shively, K., & Hitz, L. (2016). *The State of Social Marketing: 2016 Annual Report*. Simply Measured.
- Smallwood, R. R., Brown, N. A., & Billings, A. C. (2015). Female Bodies on Display: Attitudes Regarding Female Athlete Photos in Sports Illustrated's Swimsuit Issue and ESPN: The Magazine's Body Issue. *Journal of Sports Media*, 9(1), 1-22.
- Smallwood, R. R., Brown, N. A., & Billings, A. C. (2014). Female Bodies on Display: Attitudes Regarding Female Athlete Photos in Sports Illustrated's Swimsuit Issue and ESPN: The Magazine's Body Issue. *Journal of Sports Media*, 9(1), 1-22.
- Statista. (2017). *Number of daily active users from October 2016 to April 2017*. Retrieved July 3, 2017, from Statista: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/657823/number-of-daily-active-instagram-users/>
- System, K. (2013, June 20). *Introducing Video on Instagram*. Retrieved July 7, 2017, from Instagram Blog: <http://blog.instagram.com/post/53448889009/video-on-instagram>
- The Association of Tennis Professionals. (n.d.). *ATP Rankings*. Retrieved May 12, 2017, from The Association of Tennis Professionals: <http://www.atpworldtour.com/en/rankings>
- Thompson, A.-J., Martin, A. J., Gee, S., & Eagleman, A. N. (2014). Examining the Development of a Social Media Strategy for a National Sport Organization: A Case Study of Tennis New Zealand. *Journal of Applied Sport Management*, 6(2), 42-63.
- Watkins, B., & Lee, J. W. (2016). Communication Brand Identity on Social Media: A Case Study of the Use of Instagram and Twitter for Collegiate Athletic Branding. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 9, 476-498.
- White, M. D., & Marsh, E. E. (2006). Content Analysis: A Flexible Methodology. *Library Trends*, 55 (1), 22-45.

Wimmer, R. D., & Dominick, J. (2006). *Mass media research: An introduction* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.

Wirtz, J. G., Sparks, J. V., & Zimbres, T. M. (2017). The effect of exposure to sexual appeals in advertisements on memory, attitude, and purchase intention: a meta-analytic review. *International Journal of Advertising*, 1-31.

Women's Tennis Association. (n.d.). *WTA Rankings*. Retrieved May 12, 2017, from Women's Tennis Association: <https://venturebeat.com/2013/12/05/instagram-the-best-platform-for-brands-in-2013-beating-out-facebook-twitter-and-google/>