

Elite Female Athletes' Perceptions of New Media Use Relating to Their Careers: A Qualitative Analysis

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Today's elite athletes face increasing demands to develop a new media presence in order to build their personal brand and connect with a wide variety of stakeholders. Myriad studies have focused on athletes' new media use by examining content posted online; however, few studies have examined new media usage from the athletes' perspectives. Using the theoretical framework of self-presentation theory to uncover athletes' new media perceptions, goals, and strategies, semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted with six elite female athletes training for the 2016 Rio Olympics. Findings revealed that although athletes had goals for sharing their lives, developing connections, sponsorship, and self-promotion, they did not employ specific strategies to meet these goals or attempt to measure whether their goals were met. Gender-related findings included feeling pressure to post sexually suggestive images and receiving unwanted private communications from male fans. The implications are discussed within the paper.

Keywords: athlete brand, impression management, new media, self-presentation, strategy

Internet-based communication tools serve as a unique platform for self-presentation and impression management for both individuals and organizations (Rui & Stefanone, 2013) and can also be used to achieve marketing communication goals (Eagleman, 2013). Today's elite athletes face increasing demands to build a new media presence by maintaining their own website; providing frequent updates on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram; writing blog posts; and engaging with fans and other stakeholders online. Peña, Arauz, Sha, and Garcia (2011) stated that new media "is an advertising showcase in which athletes are shown as brands in all their magnitude" (p. 296), and this notion of athletes as brands was echoed by Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014), who coined the term "athlete brand," which they defined 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). Arai *et al.* (2014) asserted that athletes who successfully develop a brand are more likely to experience benefits such as endorsements, higher salaries, and more success after their athletic career has ended.

Successfully creating a brand image via new media usage requires a significant time commitment (Eagleman, 2013). Athletes are also expected to utilize

new media tools to create and maintain a certain image while focusing on their sport-related duties such as training and competing, educational endeavors, and in many cases, working part-time or full-time jobs to support their training (The International Olympic Committee, 2014). Although image creation via new media requires a noteworthy time commitment on the part of the athletes, recent literature highlights several potential benefits of athletes' new media use. Identified benefits include the opportunities to personally craft one's public image (Lebel & Danylichuk, 2012; Sanderson, 2008) and to engage and develop relationships with stakeholders such as fans, sponsors, and potential sponsors (Hambrick & Kang, 2014).

A recent review of social media and sport research by Filo, Lock, and Karg (2015) explained that this area has relied heavily on the use of content analyses and questionnaires for data collection, and there is an opportunity to utilize different data collection methods. Abeza, O'Reilly, Seguin, and Nzindukiyimana (2015) also stated that social media research should include a greater focus on the impact, role, and significance of social media in terms of branding. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to develop an understanding of elite athletes' perceptions of new media use relating to their careers and the ways in which these athletes utilize new media. This study sought to examine the perceptions of Olympic athletes specifically, as they face additional pressures to promote themselves and build their own brands in non-Olympic years when they do not

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typically receive mainstream media coverage and in many cases receive very little new media marketing or branding assistance from their sport's national governing body (NGB). For the purposes of this study, the term "new media" was used in order to capture athletes' perceptions on all aspects of new media, including websites and blogs, and not just social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), which is only one component of new media. Socha and Eber-Schmid (2014) defined the term "new media" as a catchall phrase used to describe all Internet-related interactions among technology, images, and sound. Through semistructured in-depth interviews with six elite athletes training in hopes of competing in the 2016 Rio Olympics, this research sought to uncover information such as which new media platforms athletes use in relation to their athletic career; their perceived benefits and challenges of using new media; their goals for new media use; what strategies, if any, they used to accomplish these goals; and the ways in which they measured success on new media.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of impression management is defined by Schlenker and Pontari (2000) as "the goal-directed activity of controlling information about some person, object, idea, or event to audiences" (p. 201). According to these scholars, impression management is not limited to the self but is a process in which people try to control information about others as well, such as friends, colleagues, organizations, or events.

Impression management involves two processes: impression motivation and impression construction (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Impression motivation relates to the level of motivation an individual feels to control how others perceive them. Three inter-related antecedents of impression motivation include goal relevance of impressions, value of desired goals, and discrepancy between desired and current images. Each antecedent "increases the degree to which people attempt to control others' impressions because each affects the attainment of desired outcomes, the maintenance of self-esteem, and the development of desired identities" (p. 39).

Impression construction relates to deciding on the desired impression one wants to make and determining how to achieve that impression. According to Leary and Kowalski (1990), five factors contribute to an individual's impression construction: self-concept, desired and undesired identity images, role constraints, target values, and current or potential social image. Leary and Kowalski called for future research to examine how these factors work together to impact self-presentation choices.

Related to the concept of impression management is self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959), which Schlenker and Pontari (2000) describe as a more specific term related strictly to the control of information about oneself. Self-presentation theory posits that individuals are

able to manage their image by strategically emphasizing and de-emphasizing certain characteristics about themselves. Goffman (1959) likened individuals to actors in a theater, stating that self-presentations tend to be either front stage, which means taking place in front of others, or backstage, where individuals are either alone or with a more familiar audience. In front-stage performances, individuals "tend to be more concerned with the impression they create in the minds of others" (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016, p. 134), whereas they tend to be less guarded and more candid in backstage performances.

Goffman's (1959) work stems from the concept of symbolic interaction, which views the self as a product of interactions involving language, gestures, and actions (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Therefore, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, a person's sense of self is actually their perception of what others think of them (Robinson, 2007). Goffman built on this idea of symbolic interaction with his metaphor of the self as an actor or a performer, and according to Robinson (2007), "through its performances, the self strives to convey an identity consistent with the expectations formed by the audience and with the situation, or stage, that frames the interaction" (p. 96). Goffman (1959) posited that when the audience's actual reaction deviated from the actor's expectations of their reaction, it resulted in powerful emotions, such as embarrassment, shame, humiliation, and in some instances pride. As a result, individuals attempt to manage their image in the eyes of others in an effort to minimize these emotions. For example, if an athlete received negative comments or messages based on his or her posts on new media, it might impact the athlete's future decisions on what content to post and what not to post.

Self-presentation theory has been used in examinations of content posted on new media by athletes and sport organizations, although no known studies have used interviews with athletes to advance the theory as it relates to sport management. Building on Leary and Kowalski's (1990) call for additional research on self-presentation choices, self-presentation theory is an appropriate lens from which to examine an individual's decisions regarding the impression they build of themselves in the minds of others.

Literature Review

Self-Presentation

Self-presentation theory has been applied to research both within the field of sport management and in other academic fields. Marshall (2010) drew on Goffman's work and stated that online settings now serve as a place for such self-presentation performances to take place, and the text, pictures, and other content posted on new media platforms all contribute to the creation of one's presentation of self. Similarly, Robinson (2007) posited that the Internet affords individuals the ability to serve as both a subject (e.g., content about an individual posted on their

website) and an object of interaction (e.g., responding to comments posted on the pages of that website). Robinson likened an individual's website to Goffman's idea of a stage and said that people express themselves through the text, photos, and digital formatting choices they make, and they do so with others' reactions in mind.

According to Marshall (2010), celebrities show evidence of embracing social media as a place to share aspects of both their personal and professional lives with fans and followers, and he identified three categories of self-presentation in online settings: public self (the official version of one's self from a career or professional sense), public private self (one gives the impression of engaging in the world of social networking), and transgressive intimate (one's true thoughts and feelings are revealed, exposing the person's true nature). The transgressive intimate self is closest to the backstage performances described by Goffman (1959).

Given the wide variety of motivations for and mechanisms by which to construct a social media presence, as evidenced by the work of Leary and Kowalski (1990), Marshall (2010), and Robinson (2007), it is necessary to understand the underlying factors or motivations guiding athletes in their self-presentation on new media. Therefore, the first of five research questions guiding this study is

RQ 1: What are elite athletes' goals for new media use?

In terms of self-presentation theory in the sport management literature, Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) noted gender differences in tennis athletes' self-presentation styles on Twitter. They found that athletes relied more on backstage performance strategies and concluded that Twitter serves as an extension of an athlete's brand, and it is a unique platform for self-presentation due to the athlete's control over the information presented and the style of that presentation. They also raised the question of whether athletes would be best served to hire a communication or public relations professional to monitor their Twitter accounts, stating that athletes are trained to compete in a sport, not to be a public relations expert.

Two recent studies used self-presentation theory to study pictures posted by athletes on new media. Similar to the 2012 findings by Lebel and Danylchuk, Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) found that the majority of Instagram posts by athletes were considered backstage performances, focusing on the athletes' personal lives. The backstage photos were the most popular with athletes' followers in terms of eliciting comments, whereas front-stage photos focused on the athletes' sport elicited the greatest number of likes. In an examination of athletes' Twitter profile pictures, Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) found that fans prefer to see some aspect of the athlete's sport in their picture.

Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) argued that one of the most intimate ways for athletes to share their lives is through photographic self-representation and that "it may be the truest behind-the-scenes look a fan can

experience" (p. 331), a sentiment also echoed by Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016). Both studies also stressed the importance of athletes developing an understanding of the negative implications a miscue, a negative incident, or a specific type of self-presentation on social media could have on the athlete's reputation and ultimately their brand, such as posting sexual images of oneself. In a study focused on pictures posted by males and females on Facebook, Rose *et al.* (2012) stated that women are more likely than men to be sexually expressive in their new media posts because "they perceive sexuality as a means of status in society" (p. 604). In relation to this point, Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) noted the popularity of sexually suggestive images athletes posted of themselves. Although these images were popular among the athletes' followers, the authors cautioned that posting such photos may have long-term consequences on the athlete's public image, and "it is imperative that the types of photos posted align closely with the brand image the athlete wishes to build" (p. 10). Fink (2015) pointed out that a growing body of scholarly work has begun to show that sex does not sell, and while people may enjoy looking at sexual images, it does not increase the likelihood that they will attend a women's sport event.

The work of Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) and Lebel and Danylchuk (2012, 2014) highlighted potential consequences, both positive and negative, of athletes' new media use based on the type of content they posted. Neither team of researchers, however, sought information on the outcomes of new media use directly from the athletes themselves. In an effort to fill this gap in the literature, the following two research questions were formed for the current study:

RQ 2: What do elite athletes perceive to be the benefits of using new media in relation to their athletic career?

RQ 3: What do elite athletes perceive to be the challenges of using new media in relation to their athletic career?

Athletes' Use of New Media

Additional work on athletes' new media use has been conducted from a variety of theoretical perspectives, most often by analyzing athletes' new media content. In one of the first studies to analyze an athlete's new media use, Sanderson (2008) argued that blogs allow athletes to present themselves as they wish to be viewed by the public, and in turn counteract any negative or unwanted portrayals made by the mass media. Researchers have since analyzed the content of athletes' and sport organizations' social media accounts on Twitter (e.g., Burch *et al.*, 2014; Clavio, Walsh, & Vooris, 2013; Pegoraro, 2010), Facebook (e.g., Geurin-Eagleman & Clavio, 2015; Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2011), Pinterest (e.g., Hambrick & Kang, 2014), and Instagram (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016).

In an examination of athletes' Twitter posts, Pegoraro (2010) concluded that social media provides athletes with benefits beyond those of traditional media, such as unmediated access to their fans. These findings were later echoed by Burch *et al.* (2014), who uncovered that athletes' tweets focused heavily on their personal lives and concluded that this one-sided portrayal could be a strategy for athletes to establish a specific brand personality relatable to fans.

Noting the overwhelming focus on athletes' personal lives, Pegoraro (2010) stated that there was still a great opportunity for athletes to use Twitter as a marketing tool by which to endorse products, direct fans to their websites, and mention their sponsors. In an examination of professional athletes' Facebook posts, Geurin-Eagleman and Clavio (2015) echoed this sentiment, stating that there was room for greater sponsor promotion via athletes' social media.

Athletes' and sport organizations' use of new media have also been examined through the lens of relationship building and engagement. Both Burch *et al.* (2014) and Geurin-Eagleman and Clavio (2015) focused on the potential relationships athletes could cultivate with their fans via social media. Geurin-Eagleman and Clavio concluded that "athletes have the opportunity to cultivate stronger relationships with fans via the sharing of personal aspects of the athlete's life such as family or hobbies" (p. 331).

Researchers such as Waters *et al.* (2011) have questioned sport organizations' return on investment from social media use. Thompson, Martin, Gee, and Eagleman (2014) suggested the use of return on objective when measuring social media success, as this allows social media users to base their success on set objectives that are unique to the organization itself. Although both Waters *et al.* and Thompson *et al.* focused on sport organizations and not individual athletes, the resulting questions brought about by these findings are certainly relevant to athletes and their measures of new media effectiveness or success.

Clavio *et al.* (2013) provided the first glimpse of athletes' perspectives on social media by interviewing seven race car drivers about their utilization of Twitter, though they did not attempt to ascertain how these drivers measured their success on Twitter. These interviews, however, revealed new media strategies utilized by the drivers. These included providing authentic personal and professional information about themselves, interacting with fans, promoting themselves and their race series, and using multiple new media platforms to relay their messages. Clavio *et al.* suggested that athletes' attempts to achieve authenticity and develop a personal brand should be further examined in future research on athletes and social media.

Building on the research reviewed in this section, the final two research questions seek to fill gaps in the literature relating to social media strategy from athletes' perspectives:

RQ 4: What strategies, if any, do elite athletes employ in order to achieve their goals relating to new media usage?

RQ 5: How do elite athletes measure the success of their new media endeavors?

Method

In order to answer the research questions and fulfill the study's purpose of developing an understanding of elite athletes' perceptions of new media use relating to their careers, semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted with elite athletes training in hopes of competing in the 2016 Rio Olympics. None of these athletes competed in professional leagues or teams in non-Olympic years, and therefore they were deemed to face the challenge of almost solely promoting themselves and their careers with little outside assistance. Conversely, athletes who compete in a professional league (e.g., Major League Soccer or the National Women's Soccer League in soccer) benefit from the marketing and communication efforts of their team and/or league in non-Olympic years. Because these athletes were training for Rio, it was posited that they were more likely than retired athletes to be active in building a new media presence in the lead-up to the games. The data were examined through the use of a qualitative thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. The following sections provide more details on the sample, interviews, and data analysis.

Sample

After receiving ethical clearance from the researcher's university, athletes were recruited for the study via a purposeful sampling approach. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research should select participants in a purposeful manner in order to best understand the problem and research question(s). U.S.-based NGBs' websites for sports that compete in the Summer Olympics (e.g., track and field, swimming, diving) were utilized to identify athletes. Potential participants were first identified by their public profile on their sport NGB's website. Next, Internet searches were conducted to determine whether each athlete had public social media accounts and/or a website relating to their athletic career. If social media accounts existed and/or a website was available, the researcher then checked to see if an e-mail address was made public on one of these platforms by which to contact the athlete. Athletes who met these criteria were contacted via e-mail or a feedback form on their personal website with an invitation to participate in the study. Of the 73 athletes (45 females and 28 males) who were sent an invitation, nine athletes responded (eight females and one male). Three athletes responded but did not participate in the study. Although the study was originally intended to focus on both males and females, only female athletes responded to the interview invitation, and therefore the focus of the study shifted to female athletes' perceptions of new media.

Gratton and Jones (2004) stated that in qualitative research, where small samples can provide rich data and large samples can actually be detrimental, a saturation point should be reached whereby no different information is gathered. After conducting six interviews, it was determined that a saturation point had been reached. Wimmer and Dominick (2006) noted that studies involving in-depth interviews typically use smaller samples, and this method also allows researchers to collect a wealth of elaborate data about a participant's opinions, experiences, motivations, and feelings. Results from studies using small sample sizes such as the one in this study are not generalizable (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006), and this limitation of the study is acknowledged. The findings, however, will be valuable in contributing to the advancement of self-presentation theory as it relates to sport management and will provide a valuable and much-needed component to the literature relating to athletes' use of new media from the athletes' perspectives. Auerback and Silverstein (2003) noted that qualitative research often constitutes the first step in building knowledge relating to phenomena.

Appendix provides an overview of the six athletes who participated in this study. To ensure participant confidentiality, each athlete was assigned a pseudonym to protect her identity. Additionally, minimal identifying information (e.g., age and sport) was revealed about each athlete in this paper. Athletes ranged in age from 24 to 35, and four of the six athletes competed in at least one previous Olympics. The two athletes who were not Olympians had represented the United States in international competitions such as world championships.

Interviews

Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher developed an interview guide based on self-presentation theory, impression management, previous research on athletes' new media use, and gaps identified in the literature. As this was one of the first studies to examine new media use from athletes' perspectives, several questions were quite broad in order to gain a basic understanding of the athletes' new media use. For example, the first question athletes were asked was simply, "Which new media outlets do you use for purposes relating to your athletic career?" Based on the answer, follow-up questions were asked regarding their length of time using each outlet, why they use each outlet, and their frequency of posting on or updating each outlet.

Because self-presentation theory focuses on the management of an individual's image in the eyes of others, and Robinson (2007) presented the Internet as a stage for such management, specific questions were designed to elicit responses in which the athletes could explain how they crafted their image on new media. For example, the athletes were asked to describe their strategy when posting on new media, whether (and how) their posts differed between their off-season/training

periods and competition season, and to describe their interactions with different stakeholder groups (e.g., fans, other athletes, sport organizations, sponsors, and media) in new media settings. Additionally, they were asked which strategies or types of posts they felt were most or least successful for them, and how they altered or revised those strategies, if at all. All of these questions allowed each athlete's self-presentation and impression management strategies to surface over the course of the interview, and the responses were especially relevant to Leary and Kowalski's (1990) concept of impression construction.

The six interviews took place between November 2014 and April 2015, and each interview was conducted via Skype on a mutually agreed upon date and time between the researcher and the athlete. Interviews began with the researcher reading a verbal consent statement to the participants, followed by a recording of verbal consent by the athlete to participate in the study. The researcher asked each participant a series of 16 questions relating to their new media use, some of which were detailed previously, with additional questions included at times to clarify the participant's answer or to follow up on information given in a previous answer that might be useful for the purpose of the study. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min, and all were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Upon completion of transcription, a member checking process (Krefting, 1991) was followed, in which the researcher provided the transcript to the athlete via e-mail to ensure that everything contained within the transcript was accurate. Additionally, upon completion of data analysis, the researcher sent a document containing the interpretation of results to each of the athletes. Member checking ensures that research participants' views have been accurately translated (Krefting, 1991). Cope (2014) indicated that conducting member checks substantially increases the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative analysis. They allow participants to further reflect on their experiences and the information conveyed during their interview, thus permitting participants to provide additional details or clarify aspects of their interview that were misinterpreted or misunderstood by the researcher. Although researchers attempt to be as objective as possible during data analysis, each researcher brings his or her own personal experiences and biases to the process. Member checks help to eliminate the threat of the researcher's personal biases impacting the interpretation of data (Kornbluh, 2015).

The participants responded to the member check e-mails and stated that they did not have any amendments or corrections to their transcripts. Additionally, none indicated that they had any issues with or questions about the interpretation of their interview. Some expressed that they found it comforting to know other athletes had similar experiences as their own, or that they thought the findings would be helpful in guiding their social media use in the future.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis, which is a “method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2008, p. 79). An individual coder was used, and all data were manually coded using notebooks and a Microsoft Word document. The data analysis process involved first cycle coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), in which several descriptors, or codes, were used to identify various areas within each athlete’s transcript that related to the study’s research questions.

Next, second cycle coding was employed, which involved summarizing and grouping codes from the first cycle into smaller categories or themes. Because of the lack of literature existing on this topic and the scarcity of studies employing a similar approach, the researcher purposely refrained from developing a list of *a priori* themes, and therefore all themes emerged from the data during the coding process. Miles *et al.* described this as an inductive approach in which the researcher discovers recurrent themes within the data.

Because this study utilized a single coder, peer debriefing was conducted with a sport management scholar who was not involved in data analysis for this study in order to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process involved conversations between the researcher and a colleague experienced in the in-depth interview method. Three formal peer-debriefing conversations took place throughout the data analysis process, and these involved the researcher explaining the interpretation of the results and asking the colleague questions about the clarity and completeness of the analysis. The colleague also asked questions to clarify points of confusion or areas where the researcher should include more detail. According to Krefting (1991), such peer debriefing is useful in qualitative research because it helps the researcher to openly express and discuss their interpretations and can lead to deeper analysis of the results. Creswell (2014) stated that this process enhances the accuracy of the results.

Results

The six athletes who participated in this study were quite similar in their use of new media. Four of the athletes maintained their own websites, four utilized Facebook pages, and all six maintained Twitter and Instagram accounts relating to their athletic careers. Five of the

athletes indicated that they made all posts to their website and/or social media accounts themselves, and one athlete said that her fiancé sometimes made posts on her behalf. She said, however, that he always sought her permission before posting content to her accounts. The following sections reveal the results of the study in relation to the five previously stated research questions, and Figure 1 provides an overview of the identified themes and subthemes.

New Media Goals

The first research question asked what goals elite athletes hoped to achieve through using new media platforms. The coding process revealed four themes in the data relating to goals. First, every athlete interviewed said that she used new media as a way to *share her life* with fans, both in terms of her athletic career as well as her personal life. Nicole illustrated this goal when she said that she created her career-specific social media accounts to “show fans and just people in general what our lives are like [as elite athletes].” Mia said she maintained a blog on her website, which she used specifically to “give people a little bit of a window into my life. I want people to be able to see it’s not just my name and times as a runner . . . that I actually have a life.”

The second theme relating to goals was *developing a connection* with fans and followers. For example, when asked about new media goals, the first goal Taylor stated was to “connect with fans and followers and family and friends; people that are interested in my cycling career, but also people that might be interested in learning more about me personally.” Paige echoed this sentiment and said that she tried to relay to her fans that she is a normal person just like them, and in return, she felt a greater connection with them. Nancy combined the goal of developing a connection with the third prominent goal that emerged from the data, *sponsorship*, as illustrated in this quote: “The more people I can engage and interact with and make them care about what it is I’m doing every day as a judo player, the more beneficial it is for me in terms of getting support and sponsorship.” Other athletes echoed this sentiment, as Mia gave several examples of sponsorships that she received as a result of her new media use. Paige also shared how she strengthened some relationships with sponsors through her social media use as she developed contests that her followers could participate in, which cross-promoted the sponsor and herself.

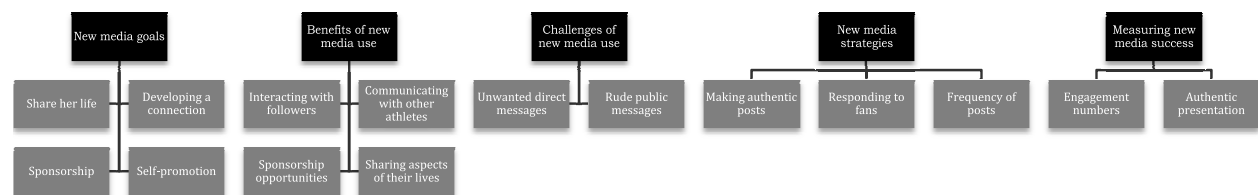


Figure 1 — Themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis.

The fourth major new media goal revealed through the data was *self-promotion*, in which the athletes talked about new media as a way to promote themselves and their images. Paige said that she uses new media “to put my name out there and my image because it helps me in the long-run with getting sponsors and all that stuff.” Nancy said that she views new media use as a necessity in order for people to know who she is, and Gretchen shared this sentiment, stating,

The reason I use them [social media] is to promote who I am as an athlete. Really, you have to stay popular and you have to stay current . . . I find that if you don't use social media then really you're irrelevant. And as an athlete, you don't want to be irrelevant.

Benefits of New Media Use

The second research question asked what elite athletes perceived to be the benefits of using new media in relation to their athletic career. Analysis revealed four themes. The first, *interacting with followers*, was consistent across all six athletes. Taylor talked about fans approaching her at competitions to talk about specific topics she wrote about on her blog or Twitter. Mia said, “It's a way to communicate with people that I've never met, who I've never talked to before, but somehow I can inspire them and in doing so it inspires me.” Gretchen, who trained in one state but grew up in another state, said that new media was a way for her to interact with the people from her home state who followed her boxing career.

The second theme relating to benefits was *communicating with other athletes*. The athletes indicated that through social media, they were able to stay in contact with athletes (competitors) from other countries. Nicole talked about meeting other synchronized swimmers at international competitions and then maintaining those friendships through social media:

For me it's really cool to kind of follow them through their journey and see how their training is different than mine . . . it's been really nice to keep up with them and see where they are and also kind of get inspired by them, too.

Gretchen said that she keeps in touch with multiple athletes she met at international competitions via Facebook. Mia told a story about how she met up with other athletes for training runs when she traveled, and they were able to do so because of their connection on new media.

Similar to a theme from the previous research question on goals, *sponsorship opportunities* also emerged as a theme for the benefits of new media. Nancy indicated that she was contacted by potential sponsors on new media “all the time,” which was an unexpected benefit of new media use for her. Mia also indicated that she was surprised to be contacted by

potential sponsors on new media, but one sponsor she gained this way has “been a huge supporter of mine the last two years. And that all happened over Twitter, so that was really cool.”

The final theme relating to benefits uncovered from the six interviews was *sharing aspects of their lives*. The athletes indicated that new media allowed them to provide glimpses into their lives—both their athletic lives and their personal lives—for fans and followers. Paige said, “I think the greatest benefit is allowing people to see your daily lifestyle. To know how much work goes into something, but then also there is some off-time.” Taylor said she wrote a blog post when she was in a slump with her cycling career and talked about the feedback she received from fans as a result. She said, “I think providing that perspective for people and providing sort of an open and honest view of what my experience has been like is really the biggest benefit.” Nicole also said that this was the biggest benefit for her:

This is a big one. I think a lot of us want people to know what it's like to be in our shoes. I think it's [new media] a good way to kind of express ourselves . . . just so people know kind of what we're going through.

Challenges of New Media Use

While many benefits of new media use were apparent in the previous section, the third research question sought to uncover the perceived challenges of new media use from elite athletes' perspectives. Results revealed two related themes: *unwanted direct messages* and *rude public messages*, both of which related to communication received from new media users. In terms of *unwanted direct messages*, the athletes indicated that they received a great deal of communication via private messages from men that made them feel uncomfortable due to the sexual nature of the messages. While some received these direct messages on Instagram, Facebook seemed to be the primary social media platform by which they were contacted. Nancy said, “People send a lot of really private messages and disturbing messages. I've got one guy who found me on Facebook and has literally become kind of a stalker.” Paige said that she received “very strange” unwanted messages, which she deleted immediately. Gretchen also experienced unwanted communications on Facebook, saying:

I've had a few people tell me that they want to be married to me and they send me inbox messages. One guy told me once that he dreams of me every day and another guy told me once that he knows everything about me. Like he's Googled every last thing about me. And then I've had a few guys send me pictures of their private areas through Facebook messages. I have a very long “block” list of people who cannot contact me.

While *unwanted direct messages* related to private messages, the next theme, *rude public messages*, refers to public messages posted directly on the athletes' new media accounts or comments made on their posts. Mia said that people often posted rude comments on her Facebook page, which she deleted or ignored. She also said that some people posted ads on her page for shoe or apparel companies who were her sponsors' competitors, which made her nervous about the possibility of losing her current sponsorships. She said one person in particular

would post Nike ads on my wall . . . and so I asked them first, "Please stop tagging me in these pictures and adding them to my wall," and then once they did it again I just blocked them so it wasn't an issue.

While in Abu Dhabi for a competition, Nancy said she visited a mosque where she was required to wear the traditional Muslim long dress (abaya) and headscarf (shaya). She posted a picture of herself at the mosque on Instagram and received an onslaught of rude and profane comments from anti-Muslim followers. She described her hesitation before posting the photo:

I sat there for a couple minutes and I was like, "Should I put this picture up?" I was like, "I don't know if I should share this or not. Like, someone's going to say something. There's no way that there's not someone out there who's so stupid that they're not going to realize it's just a photo of me being a tourist and respecting the local tradition," but they see it as something else.

She said that this incident caused her to think twice about what she posts and to shy away from anything that might be misinterpreted by her audience. She also said, "When you are somewhat of a public figure, people will say things that they would never normally say to you, which is kind of nasty, you know?"

Two additional challenges emerged, but neither were deemed prevalent enough to constitute major themes within this category. The first was pressure from sponsors, which both Taylor and Nancy felt. They felt pressured to post about their sponsors on new media but felt uncomfortable doing so or disagreed with their sponsors' posting requests (e.g., frequency of posts). Taylor said that she knew all of her sponsors would prefer it if she posted more about them and less about her personal life, but she also indicated that because her website and her social media accounts belong to her, "I feel that I sort of have a right to manage that and decide for myself what stuff I want to post or not." Nancy described a disconnect between her own new media posting habits and the demands of one of her sponsors, who wanted her to post

"four tweets a week and four Facebook posts a week," and I'm looking at them and I'm saying, "Dude, I don't even post two times a week on either

of those on average when it's just about me," but they want you to push products and sales and deals and in my experience, when you start pushing the same thing or posting too often, people tune you out.

Another challenge expressed by Mia, Nicole, and Nancy involved the pressure to post revealing or sexual photos of themselves. Mia described how she selects photos of herself to post on her social media accounts and indicated that one of her struggles is determining the line between what is acceptable and what might be viewed as sexually suggestive. Nicole talked about a teammate who posted pictures that might be deemed sexual in nature, and she noticed that these photos received a great deal of attention from her teammate's followers. She said,

Sometimes I'm kind of like, "Oh, should I be posting more of that kind of stuff?" But then I'm like, I would never post anything that would make me feel uncomfortable. I try to be conscious of who I'm representing and what my image is like out there.

Nancy echoed this struggle, noting that athletes who posted sexual images received much more attention on social media. She told a story about a time she was frustrated because she won a medal in a major international competition, but a photo of her with her teammates on the beach in their bikinis garnered much greater engagement from fans than the picture of her with her medal. She said that she personally tried to shy away from posting images that are sexual in nature but realized that "sex sells for women a lot."

New Media Strategies

The fourth research question sought to determine what strategies, if any, elite athletes employed to achieve their new media-related goals. As previously stated, the athletes' reported goals were to share their lives, develop a connection, cultivate sponsorship, and self-promotion. Although most of the athletes claimed they did not have a specific strategy for new media use, the qualitative analysis revealed three common strategies the athletes talked about to help achieve these goals: *making authentic posts*, *responding to fans*, and *frequency of posts*.

All six athletes talked about the importance of providing an authentic picture of themselves to their followers, which aligned with the goal of sharing their lives. As Mia said, "I try to be genuine. I don't want it to be fake or, I would never say things or support things I didn't really mean. So, I'm a big fan of being genuine and honest and open about things." Taylor said:

I've posted things before where I thought, "some people are not going to like this," and I thought, "you know what, it doesn't matter because that's who I am and not everyone likes me and not everyone's going to like me," and I'm not just about

posting things that are so vanilla or so, like, “this has to please everybody.” I want to be authentic and people to know where I stand on issues that I think are important.

Similar to Taylor, Gretchen expressed the importance of her Christian faith in her life and explained how it might be off-putting to some, but she does not refrain from posting about it because it is a big part of her identity. Nancy, Paige, and Nicole also discussed the importance of showing through new media that they are “real” people and do the same things as their fans.

The second strategy was *responding to fans*, which aligned with the goal of developing a connection. All six athletes stressed the importance of responding to fans who reached out to them via new media. Paige explained how she tried to put herself in her fans’ shoes and said,

I think it’s great to make your fans happy and a lot of your success comes through them and their excitement and their cheering and all that other stuff, so I do like to give back to them a little bit.

Nancy and Nicole also talked about taking their fans’ perspectives and said that they knew it would mean a lot to them if one of their idols responded to a comment or liked a post they made. Gretchen said that she realized how important her fans are to her career, and therefore she attempted to respond to every fan that reached out to her:

Most of the time I respond to everything everyone writes me. I think it’s important to let your fans know that you *are* paying attention because one thing people don’t understand is, your fans, they’re *for you*. I don’t mean the crazy fans who are in love and obsessed, but the fans who actually will stay up until 2 or 3 in the morning if you’re overseas competing, or stay up at those hours to go on the Internet and watch you compete. The fans who send donations to your fan page or the fans who take the time out to write you letters . . . So I think it’s very important to reply to those people.

The third strategy uncovered, *frequency of posts*, seemed to relate at times to the goals of gaining sponsorship and self-promotion, though at other times it did not seem to relate to any of the previously discussed goals. Taylor said that on average, she made one post on social media per day, and she tried to portray an authentic representation of herself to her fans. Paige noted that she tried to post on social media as frequently as possible because she felt like that would allow potential sponsors to notice her more than they would otherwise. Similarly, Nancy sets goals for herself each week and attempted to post original content at least once on Twitter and Facebook and two to three times on Instagram. She also said that she often retweeted or shared her sponsors’ posts on Twitter and Facebook. Conversely, Nicole did not feel that companies were likely to sponsor synchronized

swimmers, so she posted regularly because she knew her fans would appreciate it. One method Mia used to post consistently to maintain her fan following was to make a motivational post on her social media accounts every Monday:

Every Monday I try to find a good quote that I think is applicable for me or applicable for someone else that week and I’ll post that every Monday . . . I like to do that because I feel like people are inspired by that and I know that I follow people who do things like that and I would be disappointed if they missed a day or something.

Measuring New Media Success

The fifth and final research question asked how elite athletes measured success on new media. Two themes emerged from the data. The first, *engagement numbers*, was used by Paige, Nicole, Mia, and Nancy. These athletes indicated that they measured success through basic engagement numbers available via social media such as the number of likes, shares, or retweets a specific post received. Nicole also said that she tried not to compare her social media engagement numbers to other athletes’ because they all had a different number of followers, so she instead compared her own posts against other posts she had previously made. Mia indicated that she got excited when her number of followers increased, but she did not have any goals in terms of the number of followers she wanted to have. Similarly, Paige said, “I love when I post something and I go on and you get that little orange button on Instagram and it’s like, ‘This many comments, this many likes, and this many followers.’ It just makes me giddy.”

Three of the athletes who maintained their own websites said that they had analytics programs such as Google Analytics to provide basic information on the number of visitors, location of visitors, and number of comments on their website or blog posts. All three seemed interested in the numbers, but aside from looking at them out of curiosity, they did not use them in a strategic manner. When asked if they used any social media analytics, such as Facebook’s “Insights” or free third-party analytic applications such as those offered by the website “Simply Measured,” the athletes indicated that they did not use these for any strategic purposes, though Nancy and Nicole said they looked at their Facebook Insights out of curiosity.

The second theme relating to new media success, used by Gretchen and Taylor, was *authentic presentation*. Although neither of these athletes focused on engagement numbers to measure their new media success, they both considered themselves successful if they could present an authentic version of themselves to their followers and if they could reach people who identified with their authentic self. Taylor said, “For me, success is just staying authentic. I hate to keep saying that, but then the people that are interested and want to know about me or interact with me can do so and the people that aren’t

don't need to, and that's fine." Neither athlete indicated that they had a method for measuring their perceived authenticity, though.

Discussion

The results from this study, the first of its kind to interview elite female athletes about their overall new media perceptions and use, shed light on a wide variety of new media-related topics. Similar to Clavio *et al.*'s (2013) findings, the athletes in this study also indicated that they wanted to post authentic information and wanted to interact with their fans. This study, however, revealed additional information about athletes' perceptions of new media not included in the Clavio *et al.* study, including the challenges, benefits, and measurements of success. All of these aspects can assist sport management scholars and practitioners in better understanding new media use from the elite athletes' point of view and how they might be able to assist athletes to ensure that they are maximizing the benefits of their new media use. The following section discusses the most important findings and their implications for both scholars and practitioners.

Sexual Aspects of Communication

One of the most critical findings from this study was that all of the athletes dealt with unwanted private communication, which was often sexual in nature, and that three of the athletes felt pressure to post sexually suggestive images of themselves. Because the sample for this study was comprised entirely of females, it is unknown whether these two phenomena also apply to elite male athletes. Future research should certainly attempt to ascertain whether this is the case.

Research shows that both traditional and new media photographic coverage of sport tends to be more sexual in nature when women are the subjects (e.g., Clavio & Eagleman, 2011; Kim, Sagas, & Walker, 2011), and research on athletes' new media content also revealed female athletes mimicked this trend by posting more sexually suggestive images of themselves than did male athletes (e.g., Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016) and by posting more photos of themselves that portray a glamorized image (e.g., Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014). As Geurin-Eagleman and Burch warned, posting sexually suggestive images on new media may lead to short-term gains in the number of likes or comments on that post, but athletes must also be aware of the long-term consequences posting such images may have on their personal brand, which could impact elements of their career such as sponsorships or postathletic career opportunities.

Kane, LaVoi, and Fink (2013) stated, "As long as sportswomen are portrayed in ways that sexually objectify them, they will not be given the respect they deserve" (p. 293). It is disturbing that all of the athletes involved in this study received private messages from male "fans" that made them feel uncomfortable. This

finding highlights an outdated but long-held hegemonic societal view in which women are subordinate to men, who are dominant and powerful (Connell, 2005). According to Fink (2015), "there is no doubt sport is an institution steeped in sexism" (p. 337), and because society tends to overlook the sexism prevalent in sport, sexist acts go largely unnoticed. The unwanted messages described by this study's athletes seem to be a combination of hegemonic masculinity, sexism, and harassment, which is quite troubling for women's sport and highlights a larger societal problem with regard to women's equality.

It was evident from the interviews that the unwanted communication impacted athletes' image construction via new media. Goffman (1959) pointed out that reactions from others can cause an individual to experience powerful and often painful emotions, which in turn leads that individual to attempt to change their projected image. In this study, the unwanted communication and the rude public messages these athletes received led to changes in their interaction styles, strategic presentations of self, and uncertainty about what they should and should not post.

Leary and Kowalski (1990) called for research to help understand how their five impression construction antecedents impacted self-presentation choices. Based on the female athletes' feelings of pressure to post sexual images of themselves and the unwanted and rude communications they received in both private and public spaces, it appears as though they felt quite conflicted with regard to Leary and Kowalski's five factors, specifically role constraints, desired and undesired images, and current or potential social image. All of the athletes seemed cognizant of their role constraints based on their place in the public eye and their desire to represent their NGBs and/or sponsors in a positive light. Still, there was conflict between some of their desired and undesired identities, as evidenced by Nancy's assertion that although she did not want to post sexual images of herself, she realized sex sells for women and pictures in bikinis were much more popular than pictures with her judo medals. With tangible evidence of sexualized images' popularity in the form of "likes" or comments on these images, these female athletes are faced with a precarious self-presentation decision of whether to maintain a professional image on new media or bow to the long-standing and well-documented pressure to portray an image of sexiness, which may lead to short-term gains in terms of their new media engagement levels. Echoing the recommendations of both Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) and Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016), this decision could have a lasting impact on athletes' long-term image, and therefore it is important that athletes are educated about the potential outcomes of posting certain types of content and understand that it is not a choice to be taken lightly.

Also contributing to these athletes' self-presentation decisions and uncertainty about what to post were the private messages and rude public comments they

received. These negative comments and messages caused the athletes to place greater importance on their current and potential social images, as many began questioning their posts and communicated uncertainty about what to post based on potential follower reactions. Clearly, some of Leary and Kowalski's factors relating to impression construction impacted the self-presentation choices made by these athletes. These findings highlight the expectations female athletes must manage regarding their bodies, personal privacy, and safety and the resulting shifts in their self-presentation styles. These findings certainly merit further study, as these types of messages could eventually lead athletes to discontinue their new media use, which might have negative consequences for their own careers, their sports, their NGBs, and ultimately women's sport.

Lack of a Formal New Media Strategy

The finding that none of the elite athletes who took part in this study had a formal or organized strategy for their new media use is not as closely related to self-presentation theory, but it still has important managerial implications for academics, practitioners, and elite athletes alike. Contrary to their athletic careers, where goal-setting, strategy, and performance measurements are keys to their success, none of the athletes employed similar methods for their new media use. Taylor illustrated this best when she said, "I don't have a big strategy . . . I don't know, I just do it [post on new media] when I think it's a good idea."

Although goals for new media use were uncovered in the data analysis, the athletes did not appear to have concrete strategies for achieving these, nor did they have any measurement or evaluation plans in place. Previous research analyzing athletes' content on social media alluded to the notion that athletes put a great deal of thought into their social media use and posted content in a more strategic manner, and this study discovered that was not the case, at least for the athletes involved in this study. Researchers must exercise caution in the future when making these types of assumptions about athletes' new media use.

Although elite athletes can certainly continue to use new media in a nonstrategic manner, it would greatly benefit them to employ a strategy. Macnamara and Zerk (2012) stated that successful use of social media involved the creation of objectives, key performance indicators, and measurement methods. Athletes who use and manage their new media accounts strategically are likely to reap more of the benefits these platforms offer, such as creating and maintaining their desired image in the minds of fans and followers (Sanderson, 2008) and developing stronger relationships with stakeholders and greater brand loyalty for themselves as athletes (Hambrick & Kang, 2014). When athletes have a strong brand image among their fans and develop this loyalty, they will have greater success at reaping benefits such as increasing their potential for endorsements and

enjoying greater postathletic career success (Arai *et al.*, 2014).

Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) suggested that many athletes might not have the public relations skills or training necessary to achieve all of the benefits new media have to offer, and recommended that athletes might be better served to hire a communication professional to assist with their new media presence. The findings of this study also point to this suggestion, as elite athletes juggle many commitments relating to their sport such as training, competing, and traveling, and many of them are also in school or work part-time or full-time jobs to support themselves. Herein lies one of the challenges of hiring a communication professional for new media advice or strategy development—it is not likely that many Olympic athletes have the funds to do so. This does present an opportunity, however, for national Olympic committees and NGBs to develop or enhance training tools offered to athletes relating to their new media usage. This echoes the recommendation by Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016), who said that it is in these governing bodies' best interest to "educate athletes about social media practices, thus assisting them in developing their most effective possible personal brand" (p. 143).

Lack of Effective New Media Training

The athletes in this study were all asked if they received any form of new media training from their NGBs, and while some said they never received training, others said that they were only told what *not* to post on social media, which they said felt more like policing rather than supporting and encouraging new media use. This policing or monitoring strategy seems to align closely with other sport organizations such as the National Football League, National Basketball Association, and National Hockey League, which all have formal social media policies, according to Hopkins, Hopkins, and Whelton (2013). The authors noted that "the proliferation of social media restraints and the expanding use of social media have set up an interesting dichotomy between regulation and use" (p. 12), suggesting that simply placing restraints on usage might not be the most effective method.

Most NGBs have their own communication staff, many of whom feel quite comfortable using new media (Eagleman, 2013). These organizations could offer new media training for their athletes that goes beyond the basics of what to post and what not to post and instead focuses on how to use new media strategically. Along with offering resources on developing a new media strategy, the findings of this study point strongly to the recommendation that training should also address the topics of unwanted attention, handling negative comments, and how to post content in a way that allows the athletes to achieve their desired self-presentation outcomes via new media while feeling comfortable doing so. As previously mentioned, athletes should also be better educated on the potential benefits and consequences of the type of content they choose to post.

Other industries have already begun to implement similar educational processes. For example, Dizon *et al.* (2012) analyzed the social media policies of hospitals and other healthcare businesses to develop a best practices guide for oncologists who wanted to use social media as a means by which to relay health-related messages to their patients and audiences.

The Olympic Games take place every 2 years, and the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang and the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo are fast approaching. In the lead-up to an Olympic Games, athletes must begin building their desired image among their followers and stakeholders. Endorsement and sponsorship opportunities tend to be greater in Olympic years, mainstream media coverage of Olympic sports is far greater in these years, and athletes who have a strong new media presence will capture the attention of these sponsors and media outlets much more so than those who are not as visible. As illustrated in this study, athletes hope to gain new sponsorships via their new media use, and employing a new media strategy would assist them in doing so. Additionally, athletes who win Olympic medals might find their new media followings increase rapidly as a result of their success. New media training *prior* to an Olympic Games should assist these athletes with the aforementioned issues to ensure that they remain as comfortable and confident as possible with their new media use in front of a much larger audience. Although no literature exists on this in the sport management field, other industries show evidence of new media training benefits. For example, George (2011) found that healthcare professionals who took part in social media training found it beneficial for their careers and concluded that such training would be crucial in helping professionals to understand both the potential risks and benefits of new media use, and in teaching them to use new media effectively.

Self-Presentation Efforts

The final noteworthy finding from this study was related to the image that athletes attempted to portray. The goal of *sharing their lives* and the strategy of *making authentic posts* both aligned closely with previous research findings on the type of content athletes posted on social media (e.g., Burch *et al.*, 2014; Clavio *et al.*, 2013; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010). This finding also related to self-presentation theory, as athletes' perspectives on their own self-presentation was previously unknown. While past self-presentation studies pointed to athletes' front-stage and backstage performances based on the content they posted, the current study enriches this understanding, as the findings demonstrate how athletes attempt to share both their athletic lives and their personal lives, and they attempt to do so in a way that is authentic and provides an accurate picture of themselves to their followers. The "accurate picture" created via new media, however, is formed by a selection process on the part of the athletes. Because they control their new media presence and

image, they are able to select what to post and what not to post, ultimately leading to the brand image that others have of them. For example, Nancy's story about the backlash she received after posting a picture of herself at a mosque led her to be more selective about what she posted on her social media accounts. It could be argued, then, that her fans were not seeing an absolutely authentic version of her on social media because there were some aspects of her life she did not share.

While the athletes in this study described posting content that would be viewed as backstage performances (e.g., Paige posting pictures of her dog), the results also showed that these athletes were cognizant of what they were posting and the image it might create in their fans' and followers' minds, and therefore they were actually engaging in front-stage performances. The athletes appeared to use Marshall's (2010) "public private self" with their online self-presentation, although they wanted to appear as though they were engaging in the "transgressive intimate self" category. This begs the question of whether an elite athlete or a person in the public spotlight can ever truly fall into the "transgressive intimate self" category with their new media posts, or if the awareness of their audience and the potential negative implications of this type of communication might hold them back. That is, can a truly authentic version of one's self ever be presented online? Researchers should attempt to explore this area of self-presentation theory further in future studies. Additionally, future research should also focus on the perceptions of athletes' followers to determine whether they view the communication as authentic and to ascertain the brand image they feel athletes project via their new media posts. These types of studies could enhance the sport management literature on consumer behavior.

New media offers the opportunity for athletes to build relationships with stakeholders, and the athletes in this study appeared to have a keen understanding of this potential benefit and took advantage of it. All of the athletes discussed the importance of developing connections through their new media use and illustrated how they did this with their fans, followers, fellow athletes, and sponsors or potential sponsors. Although this study revealed that athletes engaged in relationship building via new media, it is still unknown whether some athletes are more successful at this than others, and what factors lead to greater success in this area. Sport management researchers should attempt to dig further into this issue through athlete interviews or questionnaires, along with analyzing the content of athletes' new media accounts to gain a better understanding of how they interact with their various stakeholders.

Conclusion

The current study offers new insights to the literature on athletes' perceived benefits and challenges of new media, their goals and strategies, and the ways they measure new media success. Additionally, it contributes to the limited line of research on sport and self-presentation

theory by offering a new perspective on athletes' self-portrayals from the athletes themselves. The athletes in this study were very well aware of their audiences and cognizant of the impression they wanted to portray via their new media efforts. Notably, the athletes' audiences had an impact on their self-presentation styles. In some instances, their audiences held the athletes back from presenting their most authentic self, and in other instances, the audiences contributed to feeling pressure to post certain things, such as sexual images of themselves. These findings point to the potentially powerful role audiences can play in an athlete's self-presentation style and also highlight the need for in-depth new media training for athletes in order to help them become more comfortable with their new media image and presentation and to ultimately be effective in their new media use. This training should go beyond the current "policing" approach of many sport organizations and instead provide the athletes with tools that enable them to achieve their desired image and to set and achieve strategic goals.

Although the current study offers several new insights, it is not without its limitations. The results of this study may not be applicable to male athletes or international athletes due to the fact that only American females participated. The qualitative research approach resulted in a high level of depth within the data, however, and the trustworthiness of the method and procedures lends credence to the transferability of these findings to other female American athletes.

A number of new research opportunities emerged as a result of the study's findings. First, an in-depth examination of the impact that audiences have on athletes' self-presentations should be conducted. Specifically, such a study should focus on the negative implications audiences' reactions (e.g., private messages, rude comments) can have on athletes' new media posts. Research on this topic would also build on the existing self-presentation literature in the sport management discipline. One of the greatest challenges of this study was recruiting elite athletes who were willing to take the time to talk about their new media use. Therefore, it is possible that other methods (e.g., surveys or questionnaires) might elicit a greater response rate and therefore provide a more representative and generalizable sample. The resulting depth of the data, however, would be less than that of this study. Future research might also attempt to interview a larger number of both male and female athletes from different countries in order to conduct a cross-cultural analysis. Additionally, researchers might also consider a mixed methods approach involving interviews with elite athletes and a content analysis of the athletes' new media accounts. Researchers would have to approach this design with caution so as to not compromise the confidentiality of the athletes involved.

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Appendix: Study Participants

Name ^a	Age	Sport
Gretchen	26	Boxing
Mia	24	Track and field
Nancy	28	Judo
Nicole	25	Synchronized swimming
Paige	26	Field hockey
Taylor	35	Cycling

^aPseudonyms used to protect athletes' identities.