

Strategic Branding Approaches for Women Professional Athletes via Self-Presentation Theory and Social Role Theory

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Abstract

The rise of social media has provided many opportunities for athletes to develop outside of traditional media, and the use of social media platforms by female athletes can overcome the limitations of traditional sports media and promote the development of their personal brands. The aim of this study is to analyse and discuss how female athletes use social media to develop their branding strategies based on self-presentation theory and social role theory using Serena Williams as the subject of the study. By analysing the links between self-presentation theory, social role theory and athlete branding, research done by researcher on athlete branding strategies based on the two theories is analysed and discussed. Based on the analysis of the study population, the article makes recommendations on how female athletes can use social media to develop branding strategies. In terms of athlete branding, the article argues that branding strategies for female athletes can be used to gain consumer trust and seek business development opportunities outside of the sports arena by marketing their athleticism, respectable appearance, and marketable lifestyles on social media. On the issue of athlete brand image representation, the article encourages female athletes to focus on social justice issues and suggests that athletes use a combination of public service and commercial marketing to strategically build and manage their athlete brands.

Keywords: self-presentation theory, social role theory, athlete branding, social media, Serena Williams

1. Introduction

The rise of social media has led to many opportunities for athletes to develop outside of traditional media, and in 2018 UNESCO published data showing that female athletes have far less coverage in sports media than male athletes. This has led to a limited range of sporting resources being allocated to female athletes in the markets available to them. Social media allows female athletes to fully express themselves. The use of social media platforms by female athletes can overcome the limitations of traditional sports media and facilitate the development of personal brands. The purpose of this research paper is to analyze and discuss how female athletes use social media to develop brand strategies based on self-presentation theory and social role theory, using Serena Williams as the subject of the study. The rationale for choosing Serena Williams as the subject of this study is that Serena's branding as a retired top female tennis player is undoubtedly successful (Wiebach, 2022). The rationale for choosing Serena Williams as the subject of this study is that it is useful to draw on Serena's social media behavior to provide a model of brand strategy for female athletes to follow. This paper provides a brief overview of the links between self-presentation theory, social role theory, and athlete branding. The analysis discusses scholarly work by scholars on athlete branding strategies based on two theories. Based on the analysis of the research population, the article offers advice on how female athletes can use social media to develop a branding strategy.

2. Theories

2.1 Self-Presentation Theory

Self-presentation theory refers to how individuals attempt to communicate personal information to the outside world through different means to present or shape a multifaceted personal image that will garner a positive public response (Baumeister & Hutto, 1987).

Self-presentation theory was first proposed by Irving Goffman (1959). At that time, the digital age had not yet arrived, and based on the social and environmental context of the time, Goffman's self-presentation theory construct was constructed using the theatre as the environmental framework (Wiebach, 2022). Goffman (1959) argued that the embodiment of personal image was influenced by different factors like theatre actors, such as audience feedback or the environment the individual was in. Goffman draws an analogy between people's everyday lives and actors' theatre lives and uses the terms 'frontstage' and 'backstage' as environmental descriptors to distinguish people's performances. 'Frontstage' is the environment in which the actor is on stage in front of an audience, and 'backstage' is the environment in which the actor rests behind the scenes. Goffman found that people present the same personal image to the public as actors present to the audience. This image is subject to the scrutiny and evaluation of the 'audience', so people present a modified image. Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation emphasizes the central idea of 'impression management', whereby people try to present the best possible image in public. The theory of self-presentation by Goffman (1959) emphasizes the central idea of 'impression management', where people try to present the best possible image to the public. Marshall (2010) emphasizes the need for public figures to blur the boundaries between 'front' and 'back', to take advantage of public interest in their daily lives, and to use the internet to modify their image. The aim is to use public interest to modify one's everyday image and present oneself through online media to attract more public attention.

Scholars have studied self-presentation theory through the lens of sport. Research has found that athletes presenting themselves through social media helps to build a marketable personal brand (Geurin-Eagleman & Brunch, 2016; Lebal & Danylchuk, 2014; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Scholars have divided the information athletes post through social media into frontstage and backstage content. Frontstage content consists mainly of athletic performance and fan interaction; backstage content conveys non-sports content, including personal life, intimate relationships, and social stances. Geurin-Eagleman and Brunch (2016) found that the public liked athletes posting backstage content on social media as much as sports-related frontstage content, and Kunkel et al. (2020) suggest that multidimensional self-marketing by athletes strengthens the connection with the target market (fans and sponsorship). Using social media platforms to blur the 'front' and 'back' content of self-presentation theory not only helps athletes maintain communication with their fans but also helps athletes better build their brand; a well-positioned personal image helps athletes' commercial. A good positioning of the individual helps the athlete to develop commercially (Wiebach, 2022).

2.2 Social Role Theory

Social role theory, proposed by Mead (1934), suggests that the performance and behavior of different roles in society are determined by social positioning and environment. Concepts in social role theory include role expectations, role-playing, and role conflict. Mead argued that individuals who play different roles that do not gain public acceptance and meet public expectations will cause public resentment, thus exacerbating the difficulty of identifying role positioning for individuals and intensifying conflicts with the public.

Moss-Racusin and Rudman (2010) explain that the gender characteristics (strength, strength, agility, etc.) and social positioning (power, competition, dominance, etc.) of male athletes are more in line with public expectations of athletes than those of female athletes. Lobpries et al. (2018) argue that scholars' application of social role theory to constrain female athletes in building their image is not consistent with public expectations of female roles (e.g., gentleness, sensuality, and vulnerability). Lobpries et al. (2018) emphasize that the confidence, strength, and competitiveness that female athletes demonstrate to project their brand image are necessary for female athletes to succeed in the sport. Banet-Weiser (2015) and Pegoraro et al. (2020) support Lobpries' argument and state that the gender norms that female athletes are subjected to are stereotypes and that female Pegoraro et al., (2020) explain that current society has a positive attitude towards diversity in social roles and that society's inclusivity and expectations are positively thought about. Banet-Weiser (2015) argues that female athletes' use of social media platforms for self-marketing, self-management, and brand-building meets the expectations of the general public as well as the current market for female athletes' role characteristics (self-confidence, personalization, and self-worth).

2.3 Athlete Branding

Traditionally, branding refers to an intangible asset that facilitates a bond between consumers and brand owners (Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012). Personal branding, on the other hand, has been defined as the notion of any well-known figure who markets himself or herself to the public to communicate his or her value (Thomson,

2006). Arai et al. (2013, 2014) introduced the concept of athlete branding. Athlete branding is the idea that athletes give value and meaning to themselves and convert their value into an asset by positioning their image and enhancing their competitiveness.

Ghodeswar (2008) suggests that there are four key elements to successful branding: brand positioning, brand message, brand communication, and brand equity. The use of social media is a strategic tool for athletes to complete their brand construction (Arai et al., 2014). Proper brand strategy deployment creates brand equity (Li et al., 2021). Arai et al. (2014) suggest that consumers focus on three main representations of athletes on social media: athletic ability, respectable appearance, and marketable lifestyle. Geurin-Eagleman & Brunch, (2016) Lebal & Danylchuk, (2014) Smith & Sanderson, (2015) Shreffler, Hancock & Schmidt, (2016) Frederick & Clavio, (2015) argued that athletes' use of social media as a marketing tool to build their brand is an effective branding strategy tool that actively promotes self-worth conducive to expanding target markets, gaining consumer trust, and building an athlete's brand equity.

3. Discussion

This section focuses on the interpretation of self-presentation theory and social role theory concerning the strategic approach to branding professional female athletes using social media. Compared to traditional broadcasting, social media platforms not only provide female athletes with more opportunities for personal branding but also shorten the distance between athletes and their fans and mutual stakeholders (Burch & Zimmerman, 2019). Strategies for female athletes to market their athlete brands can be implemented through both personal development and social influence. In the personal development direction, female athletes can build athlete brands on social media through three dimensions. Arai et al. (2013) suggested that consumers focus on three main representations of athletes on social media: athletic ability, respectable appearance, and marketable lifestyle.

The first dimension is an athlete's representation of athleticism on social media. Label and Danylchuk (2014) explain that fan groups and the public pay high attention to sport-related photos and videos. Serena Williams is a former top female professional tennis player with 23 career tennis Grand Slam titles. Serena's social media posts related to training or competition and comments about her personal or other athletic abilities received a high click-through rate (Wiebach, 2022). From a social role theory perspective, Serena's behavior fits the role of an athlete, and the sport-related behavior that Serena exhibits is a 'role-playing' task for athletes within the social role framework. Female athletes' sports performance on social media rationalizes athletes' sports branding.

The second dimension is the presentation of the female athlete's self-presentation on social media platforms, where Serena most often shares photos of her daily life and personal fashion photos that showcase the health and beauty of women. From a self-presentation theory perspective, an athlete's presentation of her personal life and self-presentation is backstage content; public interest in backstage information increases the athlete's visibility, and increased visibility and influence facilitates the expansion of the athlete's fan base (Milligan, 2009; Vincent et al., 2009). In December 2022, Serena had 16.06 million Instagram followers. In contrast, according to Wiebach (2022), Serena's Instagram followers were only 14.75 million as of May 2022. The continued rise in data suggests that Serena's positive self-presentation has been effective in identifying the preferences of her target group and expanding her fan base. In terms of social role theory, Serena is a black woman with a powerful muscular body and a flamboyant personality that makes her fit less into society's traditional female roles (Douglas, 2002). Serena's skin color and body type characteristics question the traditional social positioning of female gender identity (Litchfield et al., 2018). But recognizable personal characteristics and an attractive appearance make Serena stand out from other athletes (Kunkel et al., 2022). Serena's attitude toward personal image is in line with scholars' views on the changing role of female athletes based on social role theory. Confidence, strength, and competitiveness are necessary factors for female athletes to succeed in sports (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Pegoraro et al., 2020; Lobpries, Bennett & Brison 2018). The building of a female athlete's brand image needs to be responsive to society. Advances in social inclusion have diversified public expectations of female athletes, and a confident and personalized personal brand image is in line with society's expectations of the role of female athletes.

The third dimension is how female athletes present their personal lifestyles on social media. A marketable lifestyle is reflected in the way female athletes interact with their fans outside of the sporting arena. Social media platforms provide opportunities for female athletes to interact directly with their fans. Pegoraro and Jinnah (2012) argue that successful branding strategies blur the boundaries between commercial and other relevant messages and that the outreach of the commercial nature of a product gains consumer trust in the brand, allowing consumers to bring stakeholders on board and expand brand equity. content, with posts tagging other sponsors and partners (Wiebach, 2022). This suggests that female athletes can use social media platforms to find business possibilities outside of the sporting arena.

The implementation of a female athlete branding strategy can be considered from a social impact perspective in

terms of the embodiment of social justice for athletes. Athletes give voice to disadvantaged groups and focus on social well-being issues (e.g., global poverty, educational issues, ethical issues) on social media (Wiebach, 2022). Interpreting from social role theory, the role image of athletes is characterized by justice in the public eye and professional female athletes have a place in society (Banet-Weiser, 2015). This means that the actions of athletes receive more public attention on social media than the public. As a black female athlete, Serena's two roles as a woman and a black person are both disadvantaged, and Serena's social media posts in support of the Black Lives Matter movement and gender equality have been supported by her fan base and public interest organizations (Wiebach, 2022). In terms of self-representation theory, Serena's behavior is a form of good 'impression management', where public service statements with socially positive feedback are well received by the public (Goffman, 1959). Wiebach (2022) mentions another female athlete who collaborates with sports business sponsorships while spreading social justice messages. This type of co-sponsorship is a marketing tool that female athletes can use when building their athlete brand. Having both a public service and commercial marketing approach not only expands the fan base for the athlete but also benefits the athlete's brand equity.

4. Conclusion

This paper has described the key features of self-presentation theory and social role theory. It investigates how the branding strategies of top professional female athletes on social media affect the connection of athletes to specific target markets. The article discusses two directions in which female athletes can use social media platforms to develop their branding strategies. On the issue of athlete branding, the article suggests that female athlete branding strategies can be used to gain consumer trust and pursue business development opportunities outside of the sporting arena by marketing one's athletic ability, considerable appearance, and marketable lifestyle on social media. On the issue of athlete brand image representation, this paper encourages female athletes to focus on social justice issues and suggests that athletes strategically build and manage their athlete brands using a combination of public service and commercial marketing approaches. The study has limitations. Firstly, the paper only analyses one social media platform and does not consider the strategic approach of multiple social media brands working with each other. Secondly, the paper only analyses the impact of individual athlete performance and public evaluation on athlete brand building and does not consider the impact of other external factors on athlete brand building. Therefore, this paper's approach to athlete branding is not perfect. In conclusion, social media is beneficial to the development of athlete branding strategies, and the appropriate use of social media platforms can expand the fan base and gain the sponsorship of relevant stakeholders.

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