Comparing the Personal Instagram Brands of Male and Female Athletes of Six Soccer Leagues

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Sport organizations increasingly invest in women’s sport teams to grow. Recently established European clubs have added women’s teams to their brand portfolio, such as Manchester United which founded their women’s team in 2018. Thus, the professionalization of female sports are surging globally (Nielsen, 2018). While female athletes do not have equitable media attention compared to male athletes (Cooky et al., 2015), social media has been identified to provide opportunities for female athletes to build relationships with their followers (Doyle et al., 2020).

These relationships are developed based on athletes promoting their personal brands and gaining followers and engagement from consumers in the form of views, likes, and comments, and can subsequently be monetized (Geurin, 2017). Most academic research has focused on male athletes (e.g., Doyle et al., 2020; Kunkel et al., 2020) or examined the challenges female athletes face (Geurin, 2017), leaving a gap in the literature that examines the relationships male and female athlete are able to form with their followers. Treating followers and engagement as a proxy for customer relationships, the following research question guides this investigation: How does the social media following and engagement of female athletes compare to the social media following and engagement of male athletes of the highest league within a country?

The Instagram following and engagement of athletes from male and female athletes of six soccer leagues forms the basis for this research. Data includes athletes from the USA’s MLS (N=726) and NWSL (N=224), Australia’s A-League (N=298) and W-League (N=164), and England’s EPL (N=523) and FA W-League (N=254). Athletes were included if their Instagram profile could be clearly identified and their most recent 12 posts were used to calculate the average engagement for each athlete. This resulted in 2,198 athletes and 26,268 posts examined in this research.

Findings show, in general, male athletes within the examined leagues post less content, but are more likely to promote their personal brand on Instagram (i.e., a higher percentage have clearly identifiable accounts) and have a higher number of followers than female athletes. However, female athletes have a higher engagement rate. This indicates male athletes are more successful to get consumers show initial interest in their personal brand (i.e., follow), reflecting relationship building processes, whereas female athletes are able to engage their existing audiences better through the content they post (i.e., like and comment), reflecting relationship maintenance processes (cf. Doyle et al., 2020). Results presented at the conference include detailed inter-league comparisons, and, in line with the conference theme, an overview of the influence of race on athletes’ engagement rate.

This research contributes to our understanding of athlete personal branding by providing an overview of the social media following and engagement of male and female athletes. The higher engagement rate female athletes garner on their social media accounts provides valuable insights for female athletes and agents aiming to monetize their personal brand and sponsors interested in using athletes to promote their commercial brands.