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Social Media as a Personal Branding Tool: A Qualitative Study of Student-Athletes' Perceptions and Behaviors

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Abstract

While previous research focused on social media and student-athletes, there is a lack of knowledge about positive functions of social media use for student-athletes, especially personal branding purposes. Thus, this study aimed to explore how student-athletes perceive and use social media for personal branding purposes. A total of 11 student-athletes at a Division I university participated in semi-structured interviews. Considering the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative inquiry and a phenomenology approach were employed to grasp an overall understanding of student-athletes' personal branding via social media. The self-presentation theory was adopted to help understand student-athletes' use of social media. Emerging themes included benefits and barriers of social media use, social media strategies, and concerns about negative consequences of social media. Findings from this study shed light on the importance of increasing awareness and knowledge of the concept of personal branding via social media for student-athletes. These findings also call for more effective social media training or education programs that can foster student-athletes' positive attitudes toward social media use for personal branding.

Keywords: : *personal branding, self-presentation, social media, social media education, student-athletes*

The concept of personal branding has become popular since the release of Peters' (1997) famous book, *The Brand Called You*. Peters (1997) defined personal branding as a marketing tool intended to permit self-promotion, allowing an individual to achieve their career goals (Peters, 1997). Both scholars and practitioners believe personal branding is an essential part of job placement and career advancement (Khedher, 2014; Parmentier, Fischer, & Reuber, 2013). While personal branding now seems to be more desirable for public figures such as celebrities, politicians, or professional athletes (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014; Thomson, 2006), Peters (1997) suggested that an individual actively should find ways to present, market, and promote his or her own personal brand with its distinctive characteristics.

Following the emergence of the concept of personal branding, a new idea of online personal branding recently has been introduced; this new type of personal branding utilizes social media, blogs, or websites (Belk, 2013). Due to its efficiency and con-

venience, social media is considered as one of the most effective and widely used vehicles to help an individual develop and establish an online personal brand (Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011). Furthermore, personal branding via social media has become crucial because employers use social media during the hiring process to obtain relevant information about candidates or look for negative content (Grasz, 2016). Since social media has a potential positive or negative impact on one's career development and success, understanding the significance of properly managing and utilizing social media is one of the key factors for those preparing to embark on their next career, such as student-athletes (Hood, Robles, & Hopkins, 2014).

Potential benefits of using social media for athletes have been highlighted, including interacting with fans, followers, and fellow athletes, constructing a public image, and presenting both athletic and personal lives (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Geurin, 2017; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014). However, there is limited knowledge about positive aspects of social

media use for student-athletes. Research on social media policies from NCAA institutions indicate that the majority of intercollegiate athletics exclusively focus on preventing student-athletes from misusing social media, which renders their social media education and policies as more restrictive and regulatory (Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson, Browning, & Schmittel, 2015; Sanderson, Snyder, Hull, & Gramlich, 2015). Other research has examined student-athletes' perspectives on their social media use, mostly Twitter, but their main focuses were not on the benefits of social media use but various other aspects, including how to respond to critical tweets (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; David et al., 2018), perceptions of social media training (Sanderson et al., 2015), and messages from athletic departments regarding their tweets (Sanderson & Browning, 2013). While the benefits of social media use often are under-appreciated compared to the negative impacts (Sanderson, Snyder, et al., 2015), it still is worthwhile for student-athletes not to blindside positive functions of social media and instead take full advantage of them, including personal branding.

Therefore, considering this research gap, it is imperative to examine how student-athletes perceive social media use for personal branding and the ways they utilize social media platforms for personal branding purposes. The purposes of this study were (a) to examine student-athletes' perceptions of social media use for personal branding and (b) to identify common themes regarding the ways student-athletes utilize social media. The present study will add to the body of knowledge on student-athletes' social media use in the context of intercollegiate sport. In terms of practical standpoint, the obtained knowledge will be beneficial not only to student-athletes in their effective social media management, but also to personnel in intercollegiate athletics who can properly assist them.

Literature Review

Personal Branding

The personal branding phenomenon appears to be one of the most important activities undertaken by an individual who is promoting or developing oneself in the market, and it entails a distinct concept com-

pared to the traditional notion of branding (Khedher, 2014; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). The fundamental assumption of personal branding is that everyone has his or her own brand with its distinctive characteristics (Peters, 1997). Though Peters (1997) popularized the idea, the primary concept was derived from Kotler and Levy (1969), who initially proposed the idea that a person could be an object of marketing like a product and that personal marketing is a normal human activity carried out as a means of impressing others. Kotler and Levy (1969) essentially treated individuals like products and asserted that "personal marketing is an endemic human activity, from the employee trying to impress his boss to the statesman trying to win the support of the public" (p. 12). Rein, Kotler, and Stoller (1997) extended this idea emphasizing the importance of personal branding, stating that anyone can develop a strong personal brand by positioning him or herself in unique ways that separate him or her from others in the context of competition for jobs. An individual's personal brand is strong and competitive when reflecting authentic characters and values of oneself (Rampersad, 2009).

Other marketing scholars have pointed out the similarities between product branding and personal branding (Kaputa, 2005; Keller, Calder, & Tybout, 2002; Parmentier et al., 2013). Akin to product branding, personal branding also involves a process of identifying a brand identity and positioning it in the market while considering a target audience and the characteristics of the market (Kaputa, 2005). Furthermore, marketing scholars emphasized two key concepts for personal brand positioning: differentiation and parity. Differentiation requires an individual to stand out from other people in a competitive market (Keller et al., 2002; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). In addition to differentiation, parity, or a match between market values and personal characteristics, is necessary to enter the desired career professions (Keller et al., 2002; Khedher, 2014). According to Parmentier et al. (2013), positioning or presenting a personal brand through an appropriate communication channel (e.g., social media) is essential for successful branding, just as product branding includes a positioning process. Since social media has become ubiquitous, the notion of personal branding has evolved with social media.

Personal Branding via Social Media

In recent years, social media has become one of the most efficient and widely used vehicles to help an individual create their personal brand (Edmiston, 2014). Marshall (2010) noted that social media has the ability to serve as a platform on which an individual can build a public image or perception. Research suggests that college students engage in personal branding via social media to prepare their transition from school to work sites (Edmiston, 2014, 2016; Hood et al., 2014; Johnson, 2017). For example, Hood et al. (2014) suggests that college students need to organize their social media pages, especially profiles or profile pictures, because hiring managers are most likely to pay attention to incomplete profiles or unprofessional pictures for screening. College students also need to take several critical steps to build a professional online presence, such as establishing an online identity, monitoring and measuring an online brand, networking, and engaging with an audience (Edmiston, 2014). Edmiston (2016) claimed that college students should create a positive first impression through any social media platform to highlight their personalities and values to potential employers. As such, it is crucial to develop and implement an effective program for college students from the school level (Edmiston, 2014, 2016). There is a growing need for inclusive education programs to help college students acquire the skills, experience, and knowledge essential for effective personal branding via social media, (Johnson, 2017) as people have vague social media branding strategies without knowing whether they work (Labrecque et al., 2011).

Athlete Branding and Social Media

Arai et al. (2014) proposed the term "athlete brand" by defining it 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). Accordingly, an athlete with a successful personal brand will be more likely to enjoy many associated benefits, such as career success, higher pay, and/or more endorsement contracts (Arai et al., 2014; Hodge & Walker, 2015). Previous athlete branding research in the field of sport marketing and management primarily examined professional athletes' significant roles, values, and impacts on many areas mainly due to their celebrity status (e.g., Agyemang & Williams, 2016; Arai et al., 2014; Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Green, 2016; Walsh & Williams, 2017; Williams, Walsh, & Rhenwrick, 2015). The majority of studies (e.g., Agyemang & Williams, 2016; Arai et al., 2014; Green, 2016; Walsh & Williams, 2017) have considered professional athletes as objects of the marketing, promotion, and management of their brand personalities and images. Professional athletes have been an effective marketing tool from the customers' viewpoints because an athlete can be seen as an extension of core products in sport (Arai et al., 2014; Gladden & Milne, 1999; Williams et al., 2015).

As the value of athlete brand has grown, the need to manage professional athletes' social media has increased (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014). Social media has proved an ideal channel for creating favorable public images and building collaborative relationships with fans, customers, and stakeholders of sponsors and endorsements (Abeza, O'Reilly, Séguin, & Nzindukiyimana, 2017; Hull, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuck, 2012). Agyemang and Williams (2016) supported this idea by discovering that current and former NBA players employ proactive brand management tactics on social media platforms (e.g., Twitter) to manage their celebrity. In the same vein, Williams et al. (2015) also emphasized the importance of personal branding via social media as it enables an athlete to produce, manage, and deliver messages to consumers, which may engender strong brand awareness and brand associations to consumers.

Considering the importance of athletes' social media use, numerous publications have examined professional and elite athletes' personal branding efforts carried out via social media and found that they actively were presenting and portraying themselves to develop their personal brands (Agyemang & Williams, 2016; Coche, 2014; Davies & Mudrick, 2017; Geurin, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Green, 2016; Hodge & Walker, 2015). For example, Hodge and Walker (2015) discovered that professional golfers acknowledged the importance of having strong personal branding skills but perceived a number of challenges to building an effective person-

al brand; these challenges included a lack of knowledge, time, and support. On the other hand, Green (2016) found that professional athletes use the three major social media platforms of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to portray their personalities, reveal behind-the-scene content, interact with fans, and produce authentic promotional images. Additionally, the athletes felt that it was necessary to understand both their target audience and the specific features of each social media platform in order to develop an effective personal branding strategy. Geurin (2017) found that elite female athletes used social media to interact with fans and to share their athletic and personal lives with followers. While no specific strategy was utilized, the elite female athletes appeared to care about producing authentic posts to directly connect with followers (Geurin, 2017). Each of these three studies revealed a lack of athlete knowledge with regard to personal branding via social media and ultimately called for a formal and effective social media training program for athletes.

Self-Presentation Theory

Self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959) has been widely used in the study of social media research in regard to how people utilize its functions to present or represent various content (e.g., Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Marshall, 2010). Self-presentation is defined as a mechanism by which wanted information can be delivered to others. Individuals tend to express different identities under different circumstances, which allows them to craft certain impressions for the public's benefit (Goffman, 1959). Personal websites and social media platforms have become important channels by which a person can express or present themselves to others. Many people aspire to favorably present themselves to the world by highlighting certain aspects of their identities they feel will please others and meet audience expectations. This idea was derived from the premise that individuals choose how to present themselves after deciding how to respond to certain situations, thus viewing social interaction as a dramaturgical performance.

Goffman (1959) explained and compared various methods of self-presentation by adopting the analogy of the front and backstage of a theater that

self-presentation can be two types of "performance": front stage and backstage (p. 49). In terms of front-stage performances, individuals mainly concern how other people view them, thus, filter their words and actions in order to present themselves in a desired fashion. On the contrary, regarding backstage performances, individuals become more honest and natural in expressing their opinions, presenting themselves and sharing personal opinions when there is no audience present (Goffman, 1959). Thus, individuals constantly strive to create or maintain their preferred self-images in public by negotiating various identities and performances.

In the sport management literature, the concept of self-presentation has become extensively popular in social media research on athletes, especially focusing on the social media platform, Twitter. Athletes utilize Twitter as a podium to present themselves in both frontstage performance and backstage conversations (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Marshall, 2010). Regarding athletes' frontstage performance, previous research found that athletes use sport-themed Twitter profile pictures to create strong impressions about their athletic abilities and build their personal brands in public (Hull, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014; Li, Stokowski, Dittmore, Malmo, & Rolfe, 2017). Previous studies also indicated that athletes are engaged in backstage performance as they often post their private lives, which would not be exposed via traditional media, and share personal opinions with their followers (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Hull, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). The presentation of backstage elements on social media as well as interacting with followers allowed athletes to build their own unique personal brands.

Athletes' use of social media in terms of both frontstage and backstage becomes highly important in building and developing their professional brands (Shreffler et al., 2016). The extant literature has focused on athletes' self-presentation through social media in various contexts, such as professional athletes (Green, 2016; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012), elite athletes (Geurin, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016), and female athletes (Coche, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014; Shreffler et al., 2016). In a similar sense, self-presentation theory should provide a sa-

lient lens to scholars when examining how student-athletes present themselves and utilize different social media platforms for personal branding purposes.

Research Gap and Purpose of Study

Overall, whereas a significant number of studies have focused on professional athletes' social media use for personal branding, there is a lack of studies on student-athletes' social media use for personal branding. Li et al. (2017) undertook the study examining student-athletes' patterns of social media presentation and found the patterns of profile pictures and biographies. Their findings focused primarily on what student-athletes showed on their social media pages, and thus called for further investigation on student-athletes' logic on their use of social media and how they strategically utilize social media platforms. While a few studies discussed the importance of student-athletes' use of social media for building personal brands (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; David et al., 2018), they did not delve into how student-athletes perceive social media use for personal branding purposes and in what ways they utilize social media platforms to present themselves.

Furthermore, our literature review indicates that professional athletes exclusively commit to their athletic success and tend to involve more with stakeholders, mass media, and corporate sponsors (Abeza et al., 2017; Hodge & Walker, 2015). On the other hand, most student-athletes have a different status themselves, as they have to assume both academic and athletic roles in a higher education setting (Harrison at al., 2009). Considering the unique status of student-athletes separating from professional counterparts, it is critical to understand perceptions and behaviors of student-athletes related to social media use for personal branding within the context of intercollegiate athletics.

Therefore, the purposes of this study were (a) to examine student-athletes' perceptions of social media use for personal branding and (b) to identify common themes regarding the ways student-athletes utilize social media. Three overarching research questions were developed to guide this study based on the abovementioned research gaps in the literature and the purposes of the study:

RQ1: How do student-athletes perceive personal branding via social media?
RQ1-a: What are the perceived benefits associated with social media as a means of developing their personal brands?
RQ1-b: What are the barriers to using social media as a means of developing their personal brands?
RQ2: How does student-athletes' social media use relate to their future career aspirations and personal branding?
RQ3: What strategies do student-athletes implement for personal branding via social media?

Method

Research Design

Considering the exploratory nature of this study and the research questions, a qualitative research design deemed appropriate to best understand student-athletes' use of social media for personal branding (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). As Geurin (2017) called for more qualitative research seeking to understand athletes' social media use, a qualitative approach would offer the researchers a great opportunity to explore the under-explored area of study, in this case, student-athletes' social media use for personal branding.

Among several qualitative approaches, a phenomenological approach was adopted to explore student-athletes' personal branding via social media. Phenomenological research is best suited for understanding common social phenomena shared by a group of individuals (Creswell, 2013). The approach aligns well with the concept of personal branding via social media. In particular, hermeneutical phenomenology was used for this study (Van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutical phenomenology is not solely a description but involves an interpretive process in which researchers actively interpret the meaning of certain phenomena while reflecting on individual experiences or characteristics (Van Manen, 1990). This leads to an interpretive framework and a philosophical assumption of the current study, which is social constructivism from the perspective of epistemological beliefs.

In social constructivism, the subjective meanings of individuals' experiences and social phenomena are developed, and an interpretation reflects the individuals' own experiences and background (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Eventually, social constructivism served as an ideal interpretive framework for this study, as it enabled the construction of the subjective meanings of individuals' experiences or views based on the contexts of the world in which they live (Creswell, 2013).

Sample

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, a total of 15 student-athletes' email addresses were obtained from a senior athletic director who works in media relations in a Midwestern Di-

vision I university's athletic department. The primary researcher then contacted potential participants via email and explained the general purpose of the study, highlighting that participation was completely voluntary. A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit a specific population of student-athletes who were enrolled full-time at a Division I university in the Midwestern region of the U.S. at the time of data collection. Of the 15 student-athletes who were initially selected as potential participants, 11 student-athletes agreed to participate in the study, which was sufficient for a phenomenology study (Dukes, 1984). Demographic information of the participants is available in Table 1.

Table 1.
Participants' Background Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Year in School	Major	Sport	Career Aspiration
Akeem	M	Sophomore	Sport Management	Football	High School Coach
Andy	M	Junior	Sport Management	Baseball	Sport Broadcasting
Anna	F	Senior	Sport Management	Soccer	Professional /Coach
Ashley	F	Sophomore	Sport Management	Tennis	Sport Organization
Evan	M	Senior	Sport Management	Swimming	Professional Team
Gale	M	Junior	Sport Management	Baseball	Professional /Coach
Maria	F	Senior	Business	Rowing	Marketing Company
Mason	M	Sophomore	Sport Management	Baseball	Professional/Athletic Director
Ruby	F	Freshman	Undecided	Field Hockey	Accountant
Sara	F	Freshman	Undecided	Field Hockey	Athletic Trainer
Steve	M	Sophomore	Secondary Education	Football	School Teacher

Interview Questionnaire

The interview questionnaire was developed based on the purpose of this study and three research questions. The interview questionnaire includes three primary areas: Background information, social media use, and perceptions of social media use for personal branding. It should be noted that the participants were informed of the definition of personal branding prior to the interviews because it clarified a set of questions regarding their social media use for personal branding purposes. First of all, the questions regarding the student-athletes' background information include major, sport, year in school, and desired career path (e.g., Tell me about your educational background including your major, year in school, and sport, what are your career aspiration and specific goals and how did you become interested in that career path?"). Second, the interview questionnaire includes a set of questions on their social media use. For example, the questions include, "What social media platforms do you primarily use for your personal branding?", "Can you explain why you choose to utilize that platform over others for your personal branding?", and "Please share more details on how you utilize various functions of social media platforms." A follow-up question was asked such as "Please share your logic or primary reason behind your profile picture or biography in your social media page." Lastly, the questionnaire covers the student-athletes' perceptions of social media use for personal branding. The sample questions are as follows: "What do you think about using social media for your personal branding?", "Do you think it is important and beneficial for your future career? Why or why not?", "Which social media platform(s) would you use for your personal branding?", and "Please describe how you would utilize it or any strategies you have in mind."

Data Collection Procedures

Given the under-known area of the study, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the 11 participants to explore student-athletes' social media use for personal branding (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). The interviews were conducted on campus, such as in the cafeteria, in a classroom, or in the public lobby of a school building. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes and was audio-recorded by the primary researcher's device. During these interviews, the primary researcher used the interview questionnaire and asked follow-up questions in order to capture additional—and potentially critical—information relating to the research topic. In order to protect the participants' confidentiality, the obtained data were stored in the researchers' individual electronic devices with passwords. Pseudonyms also were assigned to each participant in the process of verbatim transcription to protect their identities.

Data Analysis

After verbatim transcription of each interview was completed, the researchers executed a structured analytic approach as suggested by Moustakas (1994) to identify major themes regarding the research questions. First, the researchers arranged a full description of the participants' interviews related to each research question. Second, the researchers identified and developed major themes and significant statements about the themes, which allowed the researchers to have an idea of main themes. Then, a set of significant statements were inductively placed into new categories rather than placing them into preexisting categories from extant literature. Lastly, the researchers provided a comprehensive description of the statements including the textual and structural descriptions, which indicated what perceptions or experiences the participants described and how they occurred.

During the data analysis process, trustworthiness was ensured through peer debriefing and constant comparative analysis (Creswell, 2013). Peer debriefing involved a total of three conversations between the primary researcher and the secondary researcher. Each researcher coded the data independently and did not discuss the identified themes until after completion of the first round of coding to prevent any peer influence. Upon completion of transcription, the primary researcher also performed member checking via email to ensure that the researchers' data analyses fully and accurately reflected the original intent of the participants' statements.

Results

The interviews conducted with the 11 student-athletes yielded several important and interesting themes and sub-themes regarding student-athletes' perceptions and uses of social media for personal branding purposes. Overall, the identified themes include benefits and barriers of social media use, social media strategies, and concerns about negative consequences of social media. The following sections unfold the results in more detail.

Benefits of Social Media Use for Personal Branding

The first research question asked student-athletes' perceptions of potential benefits of using social media for personal branding purposes. Results revealed that all 11 student-athletes agreed that social media use would be beneficial for them to build good online presences and images in the pursuit of careers. The sub-themes identified with regard to potential benefits using social media for personal branding include *connecting with potential employers*, *exhibiting skills and achievements*, and *convenience of social media*. In terms of *connecting with potential employers*, Ruby talked about potential opportunities to connect with future employers through social media: "I think one of the pros about social media is you are able to reach out to so many people and if they seem interested in hiring you, they can have an idea of who you are." Ruby went on to add, "There are social media sites that help you get in touch with others who can further hire you in the future with a possible job." In a similar sense, Mason stated, "Personal branding via social media is very beneficial because on my social media, I can show that I can be professional within the workplace." He added, "Image on social media to me is one of the major things that recruiters and future bosses look at and can have a major impact on my future job."

In addition to the benefit of *connecting to potential employers*, the second emerging sub-theme was *exhibiting skills and achievements*. Sara mentioned the ability to showcase athletic accomplishments through social media: "People use social media platforms to see what other people are doing, so one

of the purposes of my social media platforms is to make other people aware of what I am doing and keeping them updated of my life, mostly athletics." She added, "I could post pictures of my accomplishments, if we win a game or a tournament."

The last sub-theme relating to benefits of social media for personal branding was *convenience of social media*. Sara said, "I think in our society, social media makes many things quick and easy, including getting information or knowledge to the general public in very short amounts of time." Further, Anna noted the convenient nature of social media, such as showcasing skills and achievements to several audiences simultaneously. Anna stated:

> I do think that personal branding via social media is important because now that is where people are able to find you fast and easy. It is also a place where I am able to distribute a message to a big audience in a short amount of time. It is also beneficial because then people are aware of who I am, what I do and stand for. It is also a way to show others my development and keep them updated about what I have accomplished and what I am about to do next.

Barriers to Social Media Use for Personal Branding

While several benefits of social media use for personal branding emerged, the student-athletes acknowledged various potential barriers and limitations associated with developing an effective personal brand on social media. The sub-themes identified regarding barriers to social media use for personal branding included: *unwanted posts from others*, *content that others dislike*, and *lack of awareness on personal branding via social media*. First, regarding *unwanted posts from others*, the student-athletes were concerned that social media platforms allow other people to engage in their social media sites (e.g., message board, comment, and tag), and this potentially could harm their personal brand. For example, Madelyn elaborated on the inability to control what other people post on social media sites, which she said could serve as a significant barrier preventing her from building a desired online image via social me-

dia. Madelyn said:

> I know I have to be extremely careful about posting something bad or inappropriate on my platform, but just because I didn't post something inappropriate on my platform, it doesn't mean my friends can't. This can be for pictures or even stories which disappear after 24 hours. I just hope my friends don't do something to hurt my image.

Similarly, Ethan talked about situations when friends metioned bad things about him or tagged him in inappropriate pictures on Instagram. "Social media for my personal brand is becoming more important, but having clean social media can only help me," Ethan said. "My friends really like to talk about everything on my social media, so I know I have to make sure to go through and clean up my social media accounts when time comes."

Second, another emerging sub-theme of barriers and limitations was *content that others dislike*. Five of the 11 student-athletes discussed their worries regarding whether others liked the content they posted to their social media site; they worried that poorly received content could damage their personal brand images on social media. For example, Anna explained how social media postings could negatively influence an online image:

> If there are people that don't like something, then they are able to talk bad about it, or they will be able to insult me, which would influence others how they think about me, and that would limit me to be able to express my beliefs the way that I want to. In addition to that, if I say something that is not pleasing to everyone, then that could have consequences, but I would have to deal with them.

Sara added: "It's easy to promote yourself once people start following you, then you can promote and sell to larger crowds." She went on to caution what can happen if content is posted that others dislike. "However, if a person doesn't promote the best image of themselves or saying about controversial topics, which causes a great deal of attention, people can form stereotypes and no longer follow or stay in touch with that person," Sara continued. "You don't want that happen to you," she said. Akeem also agreed: "Not everyone is going to like what you put out there

so you can't control that. That's the biggest barrier (of social media use for personal branding)."

Lastly, while the participants in this study engaged in social media activities for personal branding purposes to varying degrees, nine of the 11 student-athletes indicated that *lack of awareness on personal branding via social media* could be a major barrier to develop an effective personal brand. For example, Steve said, "People would not necessarily know the specific term and concept of personal branding even if they know it has benefits." Aligning with Steve's point, Gale also pointed out the importance of realizing the benefits of personal branding via social media by stating, "I understand how personal branding via social media would help student-athletes make a good image online and potentially coaches or recruiters can see and get a good impression, but I do not think many people know about this." Moreover, Ashley even said social media use is to basically contact people and share interesting things but had not thought about something beyond that, which implies that this may be the case for other student-athletes.

Social Media Strategies

The current study sought to examine the ways student-athletes utilize social media for personal branding purposes and if any, what strategies they implement for more effective personal branding. Results revealed that all the student-athletes did not adopt any specific social media strategy for personal branding. Nevertheless, the qualitative analysis of the data uncovered the following sub-themes relating to social media strategies: *representing athletic identities* and *showing authentic personalities*.

First, seven of the 11 student-athletes explained they tended to choose social media platforms and utilize different functions within the platforms (e.g., profile picture, picture, and biography) to show their athletic identities and to build strong images of themselves related to the sports they played. For instance, Akeem used profile pictures on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat to represent an athletic identity as a football player and, more broadly, the team and school as well. Akeem stated, "I have football pictures for all of my profile pictures. I do this just to let everyone know I am a football player

and represent my school." Similarly, Anna used an Instagram profile picture of her in uniform in a shooting pose on the soccer field. Anna primarily wanted to show everyone a high athletic identity as a soccer player:

> Instagram is a platform where I post more. I like to show that I have what it takes to play soccer. Also, because I wanted to show that I have skills and that I love this sport with the quote that I posted the picture with. The reason for why I posted this kind of picture is to let everyone know that I love this sport and that my passion is so big that I do this all day.

Andy wrote an Instagram biography so other people would know about athletic activities at the school. Andy believed that showing an athletic identity on social media would help connect to other people:

> I personally like and follow the posts and pages that are of my interest, which are mostly baseball related. In my biography, I have something about playing for the school because it helps me connect with other people that I may not otherwise connect with. As of now, I am just a collegiate athlete, so I do not really try to reach out to other people often, but next year, I will put a lot of effort in connecting with other people, and I believe presenting myself as a baseball player on social media will greatly help.

On the other hand, some student-athletes used friendly, casual, and private profile pictures on social media to *show their authentic personalities*. Gale explained a rationale behind using an Instagram profile picture. He intended to present a laid-back personality while acknowledging the potential benefits of having professional pictures or pictures that represent athletic identities. "My profile picture is just a picture of myself relaxing on a boat and I put little effort into making it professional, but it does represent my laid-back personality," Gale said. "I feel that changing my profile picture to a more professional picture would help me in the search for jobs or internships, but showing my true personality is important as well." Maria explained that instead of using a sport-related image, she rather chose to include a profile picture that depicts the outdoors, with intention to show authentic personalities such as friendly, outgoing, and sociable:

> I am a sport marketing major, but my goal is to be employed by a company who focuses more around the outdoor aspect of sport. So my social media has many pictures of me hiking and snowboarding, including the Instagram profile picture. I generally love pictures and expressing my individuality through my pictures. But I think I care more about my image built on my social media because my pictures express who I am.

While the abovementioned sub-themes related to what to show and represent through social media, our findings additionally uncovered noteworthy information regarding the student-athletes' uses of social media for personal branding purposes. More than half of the participants (n = 6) expressed they would use Instagram to develop and enhance their personal brands in the future. Most of the student-athletes (n = 9) currently use Twitter, but claimed the primary purposes were to keep up with followers' news in general and to stay in touch with friends and family, not personal branding purposes. The student-athletes shared their thoughts on why Instagram will be their primary choice for personal branding via social media in the future. They believed they had more followers and views on Instagram than on any other social media platforms; thus, they expected their social media activities on Instagram will be more influential than their activities on other platforms. Andy echoed this point by saying, "I would probably use Instagram for personal branding. I think that it gains more views and popularity than that of Twitter or Snapchat. I also have more followers on Instagram, which would allow more people to see it." Sara agreed that Instagram would be the best social media platform for student-athletes to build strong personal brands due to its popularity. Sara said:

> I would use Instagram for my personal branding. I think Instagram is more beneficial over all the other social media because a profile can be set to public, in which everyone can see the activity on that account. There are many people who have become "Instagram famous," now starring in movies, health brands, music videos, and so on, all from promoting themselves on Instagram.

Concerns about Negative Consequences of Social Media

The last theme that emerged regarding student-athletes' perceptions of personal branding via social media was *concerns about negative consequences of social media*. Throughout the interviews, the majority of the student-athletes (n = 9) indicated they cared more about avoiding or minimizing negative effects of social media on their personal brand compared to taking advantage of the benefits of social media use. For example, Andy tried not to post anything that potentially could be harmful to an online image. "I make sure not to post or repost any sort of post that involves cursing or any sort of negative connotation," he said. "I try to avoid political posts and comments as well. I know those things can hurt my image even online, and that's why I like to post about my personal life or baseball and that's about it." Maria talked about Instagram and the potential negative impacts certain pictures could have on personal brand and eventually on job search. "Swearing or drinking pictures are a hard 'no' for my personal brand image not only because I'm an athlete and I represent the school, but also because I am a senior and I will be looking for a job soon," Maria said. "Those types of pictures just show immaturity." Andy pointed out the double-edged sword aspect of social media use, believing that the benefits of personal branding via social media only come when there is no inappropriate use of social media. "I think that posting inappropriate things could definitely hurt the future of an individual," Andy said. "I think there is a lot more to lose than to gain by using social media, but if the individual is careful and smart, then they can be a great tool." Akeem said he made every effort to avoid posting negative content to social media that could damage his image:

> I do care about my image even to the point where I make sure anything I associate with doesn't have profanity in it. I won't even allow my friends to tag me in anything with a negative outlook. Neither will I allow my girlfriend to post or associate with anything negative because they're all associated with me. Anything with bad profanity, it would put a dagger in my brand.

Discussion

The current study sought to qualitatively explore student-athletes' perceptions of social media use as a personal branding tool and the ways they utilize social media for personal branding purposes. Results revealed several significant themes to discuss, including self-presentation efforts through social media, lack of a formal strategy, and concerns about negative consequences of social media. The researchers believe these findings will fill the existing research gap and contribute to the research of student-athletes' personal branding via social media, which currently is not sufficiently studied.

Self-Presentation Efforts through Social Media

In terms of social media use for personal branding, the student-athletes in this study appeared to utilize various functions of social media to represent their athletic identities as well as show their authentic personalities. This finding could be explained through the lens of self-presentation theory and its core components of frontstage and backstage performance (Goffman, 1959). In frontstage performances, the student-athletes attempted to express their identities as college athletes and build professional images through social media, as most of them intented to pursue careers in the sports industry (e.g., athletic directors, athletic trainers, coaches, and professional athletes). These student-athletes acknowledged their potential and intended audiences for social media and thus attempted to display accordingly their identities and images for their desired audiences (Goffman, 1959). Utilizing athletic images as a frontstage impression is consistent with previous research that found professional and elite athletes used formal, sport-related, and athletic pictures to develop a strong and impressive personal brand online (Coche, 2014; Hull, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014; Geurin, 2017). While professional athletes' audiences are not only casual fans but also potential sponsorship or endorsement stakeholders (Abeza et al., 2017; Davis & Mudrick, 2017), non-celebrity student-athletes' target audiences on social media for personal branding might be different as they primarily brand them-

selves to impress potential employers. However, it still is important for student-athletes to represent their unique athletic identities and create favorable online images related to their desired career paths, making themselves more marketable and competitive in the job market (Edmiston, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014).

Second, the student-athletes in this study also used friendly and casual profile pictures on their social media sites to express their authentic personalities, which can be seen as backstage performances. It is interesting to note that the student-athletes who used casual profile pictures, however, did acknowledge the benefits associated with professional profile pictures that would effectively allow them to present their athletic identity and build a strong personal brand of an athlete. Still, these student-athletes explained their logic behind choosing casual profile pictures over professional or athletic profile pictures; that is, they desired to present their true personalities that were closely related to their future career aspirations. This aligned with previous research that found some athletes tend to present more private content on social media, an act that exemplifies the backstage performances of self-presentation theory, because it helps them to build their own unique personal brand (Geurin, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hull, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012, 2014). In a study of elite female athletes, Geurin (2017) supported the notion of backstage performances in that the athletes actively engage in sharing their private lives and post authentic pictures of themselves on social media so fans and followers can get a glimpse into their personal lives. In a similar sense, Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) also pointed out the value of sharing private lives, which can provide a behind-the-scenes look at the sport world. Hence, it can be argued that showing their true personalities to other people may be as important for student-athletes as building athletic and professional images on social media.

Lack of a Formal Social Media Strategy

One of the interesting findings from this study was that the student-athletes claimed they did not have any formal or specific social media strategy for

personal branding while their social media activities and behaviors were carried out to represent athletic identities and authentic personalities. This contradictory phenomenon could be explained by one of the perceived barriers identified by the student-athletes in this study: a lack of awareness or knowledge of the concept of personal branding via social media. It is reasonable to assume that student-athletes have no specific social media strategy when they are not quite familiar with the term or the notion of personal branding via social media in the first place. As briefly mentioned earlier in the introduction, social media branding is relatively new to student-athletes and the field of intercollegiate athletics, although it has been prevalently used for professional athletes and figures with celebrity status (Belk, 2013).

This finding should be alarming for student-athletes and personnel in intercollegiate athletics because the lack of knowledge of personal branding via social media may be derived from the fact that student-athletes are not educated enough about social media, especially focusing on the positive aspects of social media. Still, some may argue that student-athletes will benefit from personal branding and self-presentation behaviors, even if these behaviors may be unconscious and non-strategic. Nevertheless, the literature suggests that using fully developed social media strategies is more likely to lead to success for athletes building salient personal brands online (Geurin, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Green, 2016; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014; Sanderson, 2008). For example, Hodge and Walker (2015) found the lack of knowledge and strategy in personal branding to be a significant challenge for athletes attempting to create and build effective personal brands. Guerin (2017) also found that elite female athletes did not employ any formal strategy aimed at achieving their goals through social media, and the study called for developing more effective social media training for athletes. Hence, to increase awareness, college athletic departments should provide social media training and education programs that contain components about personal branding via social media. In addition, while Guerin's (2016) study was originally suggested for elite athletes, student-athletes should utilize some of the social media strategies provided by Geurin, finding the best ones that work for them (e.g., determine

goals and intended audiences, develop key messages, and choose the best platforms).

Another noteworthy result to discuss was that 6 out of 11 student-athletes claimed they would use Instagram for personal branding purposes in the future because they believed it would allow them to reach and influence more people than other social media outlets. This finding is consistent with social media researchers' suggestions that athletes should strategically choose primary outlets for personal branding and understand the specific features of the outlets (Geurin, 2016; Green, 2016). Additionally, several student-athletes expressed they had a Facebook account but only used it to view others' content rather than to post their own. This is best captured when Evan stated, "Yes, I have Facebook, but I am not really actively using it. I think it is going down and not many people are actually using it." Taken together, the findings may reflect the current trends of social media usage for the college-aged population, such as the decreased use of Facebook and increased use of Instagram (Hutton, 2013; Sanderson et al., 2015). Although these results are not necessarily applied to other student-athletes due to the qualitative nature of the study, future research should understand if these patterns continue in the investigation of student-athletes' social media use.

Concerns about Negative Consequences of Social Media

The last notable finding from the current study was student-athletes' concerns about potential negative consequences of social media use on their personal brand image. One potential explanation for these substantial concerns might be drawn from more severe consequences of social media misuse for student-athletes compared to the ones professional athletes receive. For instance, professional athletes typically only are fined for their improper comments on social media. Unlike professional athletes, student-athletes would face much more serious consequences for an inappropriate use of social media, such as being dismissed from the team and losing eligibility to play in college (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). For instance, former college football player Jamal Shuman was suspended indefinitely from the team

after his tweet complaining about his lack of playing time. In another case, North Alabama college football player Bradley Patterson was dismissed from the team over a tweet that included a racial comment. This type of news tends to spread out widely and quickly, so student-athletes certainly are aware of these types of situations and consequently may become more cautious and passive about their own social media use.

Another compelling reason for the exclusive focus on the negative consequences of social media could stem from the current climate and culture in which most intercollegiate athletics view social media as a risky business. Previous research found that social media training, education, and policies tend to highlight the negative aspects of social media and predominantly contain restrictive elements that discourage student-athletes from promoting their social media (Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson, Snyder, et al., 2015; Snyder, 2014). Consistently, student-athletes understand that social media policies and monitoring systems are extremely negative-outcome oriented (Sanderson & Browning, 2013; Sanderson et al., 2015; Snyder, 2014). Therefore, student-athletes may become extremely concerned about the negative consequences of social media because they are more than sufficiently educated regarding the negative aspects of social media. While this study did not delve into the educational influence on their concerns, future research should examine how student-athletes perceive the current social media education and policies set by institutions. More specifically, how student-athletes' perceptions relate to the ways of using social media for personal branding purposes, potentially deterring them from actively utilizing social media, should be examined. Future research also should continue to investigate how social media education and policies evolve in terms of which components reflect various student-athletes' needs.

Social media education should consider including a self-monitoring guide for student-athletes. One of the barriers identified in this study was the inability to control other people's posts that may have profane elements and negative lasting impacts on their personal brand. While student-athletes may implement unconscious self-monitoring on social media content, it would be more effective if social media training or education emphasized the importance of

self-monitoring and provided student-athletes with systematic methods or tools. Self-monitoring should be more encouraged, especially considering the high level of concerns about the negative consequences of social media use that were identified in the current study. Moreover, engaging in self-monitoring could be far more effective than forcing student-athletes to use the social media monitoring software provided by athletic departments, which is perceived as ineffective and burdensome (Sanderson & Browning, 2013; Sanderson et al., 2015).

Practical Implications

From the practical standpoint, the current study offers useful insights into the field that could be utilized in the future. Considering the findings that student-athletes claimed no specific social media strategy for personal branding and showed extensive concerns about potential negative consequences of social media use, the current social media training, education, and policies need to be refined and ameliorated. Practitioners, such as athletic administrators, advisors, and staff, should develop and provide more effective, enlightening, and inclusive social media education programs and policies that cover both the potential benefits and drawbacks of social media use (Sanderson et al., 2015). Such an effort would be an initial step to overturn student-athletes' negative and passive attitudes toward social media use when social media education moves beyond just "restriction" or "policing," which is the current approach of most athletic programs.

Furthermore, intercollegiate athletics personnel, who work closely with student-athletes, could benefit from the results of this study to better understand the current status of student-athletes' social media use for personal branding. They should be aware of student-athletes' passive approach toward social media use for personal branding when advising and mentoring student-athletes. Simply reinforcing student-athletes not to utilize their social media would not be the most effective advice to offer. In addition, the findings revealed that student-athletes tended to utilize certain social media platforms more than the others for personal branding. Intercollegiate athletics personnel and career advisors need to have a salient

understanding of which social media platforms student-athletes primarily use and how those platforms can be utilized for personal branding. Social media policies and monitoring systems also need to be reflexive based on a comprehensive understanding of the identified patterns of student-athletes' social media usage, especially considering the fast-changing trend of social media in this digital era.

While the current passive approach taken by athletic departments may not hurt student-athletes' personal brand, student-athletes need to realize the benefits could outweigh the risks of social media when exercising caution. Student-athletes should not be blindsided by the downsides of social media, but should acknowledge more of the benefits and positive aspects of social media as a personal branding tool. Student-athletes should learn how to capitalize on social media for successful career development while still being selective in its use and cautious about potential negatives.

Conclusion

The current study provides a comprehensive understanding of student-athletes' perceptions and behaviors related to personal branding via social media and offers several important theoretical and practical implications contributing to the under-explored area of study on student-athletes' social media use for personal branding within intercollegiate athletics. Beyond the application of self-presentation theory, the findings revealed additional themes to discuss for researchers, such as the lack of formal social media strategy and concerns about the negative consequences of social media. While the student-athletes in this study engaged in self-presentation via social media to varying degrees, they appeared to have little knowledge of the concept of personal branding via social media and no specific social media strategy. The insights and knowledge obtained from the student-athletes in this study may provide pivotal groundwork for researchers to build upon in further examining student-athletes' personal branding via social media.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contribution to the body of knowledge on intercollegiate athletics, this study has a few

limitations to address. First, as the scope of this study is narrowed to one institution at the Division I level, the results of the study might not be generalized to other contexts or should be applied with caution. Future research should extend and further examine student-athletes' social media use for personal branding within different contexts, such as Division II or III schools. Second, considering the exploratory nature of this study, student-athletes across all sports were recruited without purposefully dividing the sample into the two categories of high-profile and low-profile sports. As a result, student-athletes in this study did not appear distinctly different with regard to their perceptions and behaviors as they related to personal branding via social media. As such, it would be interesting to examine whether any differences exist between students who play high-profile sports (e.g., basketball and football) and low-profile sports regarding personal branding efforts through social media.

Lastly, in terms of self-presentation through social media, while the results of this study uncovered the ways of personal branding via social media that student-athletes utilized, it remains unclear whether their original intent is accurately delivered or not. Future research should examine how student-athletes' effort to represent athletic identities or authentic personalities is perceived by viewers, potentially career-related personnel or employers. In addition, applying the set of questionnaires used in Geurin (2017) to measure elite athletes' perceived success based on the personal branding strategies used on social media, researchers should examine how student-athletes assess their own social media contents and how their assessment is similar or different from what others perceive. Measuring social media success would be essential for student-athletes, as it allows social media users to set appropriate social media goals and objectives based on their success. Conducting these types of research could enrich the body of knowledge in social media and athletes from the lens of self-presentation.

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