ATHLETE BRANDING IN THE DIGITAL ERA: ATHLETE PERSONAL BRANDING

THROUGH SELF-PRESENTATION ON TWITCH

A Dissertation

by

BO YU

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have developed a burgeoning stream of literature on athlete personal branding and athlete social media usage, with a focus on athlete impression management via social media. While digital media like Twitch have emerged as a new platform that allows athletes to live broadcast, little is known about how the synchronous interaction may alter the athlete impression management in the digital media context. Specifically, additional research is needed regarding the personal branding behaviors and self-presentation of athletes on Twitch. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how athletes use the live streaming platform Twitch for personal branding and self-presentation. I observed 12 Twitch channels that were created and owned by professional athletes. Using a netnography, I explored athlete personal branding behaviors on Twitch. Findings suggested athletes created positive personal brands through four steps: identity, positioning, image, and relationship. I further adopted the thematic analysis method to explore the athlete self-presentation on this digital media. Findings from the thematic analysis indicated that athletes perform four types of self-presentation: frontstage, backstage, onstage, and offstage. Finally, I conducted a sentiment analysis to examine how fans perceive the athlete self-presentation on the live-streaming platform. Results show the majority of comments had neutral or positive sentiment scores. A one-way ANOVA was conducted and suggested a significant difference between backstage and offstage athlete self-presentation in sentiment scores. This study adds to the athlete branding literature by exploring athlete personal branding and impression management in the digital media Twitch. More importantly, this study contributes to the development of Self-presentation Theory in a digital media context by adding

two types of performance (i.e., onstage and offstage). Practical implications regarding athlete personal branding and self-presentation strategies are discussed.

Keywords: athlete brand; Twitch; self-presentation; personal branding; impression management

DEDICATION

To my mother and father, Li Wang and Zhen Yu, who support me unconditionally all through

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All other work conducted for the dissertation was completed by the student independently.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Athlete brand, conceptualized as the public persona of an athlete that has established his or her symbolic meaning and values using his or her name, face, voice, or other brand elements in the market (Arai et al., 2014), has recently received considerable attention from scholars and marketing practitioners alike (Arai et al., 2013, 2014; Linsner et al., 2020). A stream of research, developed from this recent scholarly attention, has focused on how athletes utilize digital media to develop personal brands, build brand image, and share their candid individual lives (Li et al., 2021; Na et al., 2020; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Kunkel, 2020). Clearly, this focused interest has contributed to our understanding of athletes as brands, and their self-promoting process to create a positive and differentiated brand image of oneself, a specific form of personal branding (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Shepherd, 2005).

Since personal branding is a strategic self-marketing process that aims to make positive impressions on audiences (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Shepherd, 2005), it can be argued that how athletes position themselves on digital media is critically important. Digital media are often strategically utilized by individuals, including athletes, to build their personal brands (Doyle et al., 2020; Kunkel et al., 2022; Sharifzadeh et al., 2021). Unlike traditional media, digital media is delivered electronically (Livingstone, 1999). Such features of digital media have empowered athletes to strategically build their brands, which used to be shaped largely by public media, in a more personal and

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different manner (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014; Pegoraro, 2013). Extant literature suggests athletes potentially have a variety of reasons to use digital media for personal branding purposes (Sharifzadeh et al., 2021; Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Kunkel, 2020). For example, athletes depend on digital media to increase brand awareness at special sporting occasions, such as the NFL Draft (Su, Baker, Doyle, & Kunkel, 2020). Digital media like Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, has enabled athletes like Serena Williams, Naomi Osaka, and Simone Biles to present their social activism on a variety of issues such as gender equality, racial discrimination, and mental health (Harwaitt, 2017; Mendis et al. 2021, Rosenberg, 2021). Further, athletes may also use digital media to disclose information that facilitates fan identification and interaction (Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Kunkel, 2020).

When athletes develop their brands on digital media, one of their most important personal branding strategies is self-presentation (Doyle et al., 2020; Sharifzadeh et al., 2021). When an individual enters the presence of others, the individual attempts to control impressions among the audience (Goffman, 1959). Based on this assumption of impression management, Goffman (1959) conceptualized self-presentation as a process in which an individual acts as a "performer" on the stage, presenting different activities to the audience, in order to foster positive impressions. Such activities from the "performer" on a given occasion that serve to influence any audience are called "performance" (Goffman, 1959). According to the self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959), individuals present distinctive performances when they are at the "frontstage" and "backstage". When individuals present in the presence of audiences, which is the

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"frontstage", they tend to protect their positive image; while at the backstage, which means without other individuals, they prefer to present the true "self" (Goffman, 1959). Individuals are usually motivated to perform self-presentation because they want to present their ideal selves or they aim to please the audience (Baumeister, 1982, Baumeister & Hutton, 1987). In addition, through the self-presentation process, individuals want to control how they are perceived by others (Leary, 1995).

Athletes rely on various forms (e.g., text, picture, and video) of self-presentation via digital media to express their identities at the frontstage and backstage, so as to tell personal stories, build positive brand impressions, and foster interactive relationships among fans (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012. 2014; Li et al., 2021; Sharifzadeh et al., 2021; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Athletes could utilize digital media to brand themselves at the frontstage, such as engaging with tweets from fans to enhance fan interaction on Twitter (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). More importantly, athletes employ digital media as a personal branding platform at the backstage. For instance, they may post behind-the-scenes pictures and videos on Instagram to share their uncensored personal lives (Li et al., 2021).

Extant literature has examined the frontstage and backstage performances of athlete self-presentation using the self-presentation theory (Doyle et al., 2020; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012, 2014; Li et al., 2021; Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2016). Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) conceptualized frontage athlete self-presentation as conversationalist, sport insider, behind-the-scenes reporter, super fan, informer, and analyst; while backstage athlete self-presentation includes publicist, superintendent, fan aficionado, and

brand manager. These athlete self-presentation frames have been adopted to examine the self-presentation on Twitter by tennis, golf, and soccer players (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012, 2014; Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2016). Li et al. (2021) reconstructed the self-presentation frames when studying elite women soccer players on Instagram. Li et al. (2021) suggested information sharing, opinion expression, promotion, and match-related info as frontstage self-presentation, while interaction and behind-the-scenes stories are backstage self-presentation. Adopting the model of athlete brand image from Arai et al. (2014), Doyle et al. (2020) articulated that athletic performance is athlete self-presentation at the frontstage, while attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle are backstage. Doyle et al. (2020) introduced offstage as a new frame of athlete self-presentation, which refers to the content that does not center on portraying the athletes. However, current athlete self-presentation research only examines digital media like Twitter and Instagram, with a focus on textual and visual athlete self-presentation. Limited scholarship has been conducted to investigate the self-presentation of athletes in video-based digital media, such as TikTok, YouTube, and Twitch. In particular, how those digital media platforms may alter frontstage and backstage athlete self-presentation remains unexplored.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted athletes to use such video-based digital media platforms for building or maintaining their brand via showcasing their image attributes, such as attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle (Su, Baker, Doyle, & Yan, 2020). Video-based digital media is just one example of the technology innovations in Web 3.0. Web 3.0 technological innovations in human digital interactions have

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contributed to the evolution of various digital media platforms and features (Gardner &

Lehnert, 2016; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). For example, each of the digital media

platforms, including social audio (i.e., Clubhouse & Twitter spaces), video social (i.e.,

YouTube, TikTok, Facebook stories & Instagram reels), ephemeral (i.e., Snapchat), and

shoppable (i.e., Pinterest) provide differing consumption capabilities and functions.

These digital media platforms have emerged as ideal spaces for athlete self-presentation,

through which athletes can further interact with existing fans and appeal to new market

segments (Hughes et al., 2019; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Yan, 2020). Live streaming, another

emerging digital media feature, allows athletes to connect with fans spontaneously.

YouTube, TikTok, and Twitch are prominent and popular live streaming platforms,

while Facebook and Instagram also recently provided a livestream option for their

constituents. Twitch, however, is the only application created solely for live streaming

and it remains the most used and popular among the livestream options (Taylor, 2018).

Fueled by the phenomenal growth of esports, Twitch has emerged as a unique

personal branding tool for athletes through which they can present esports expertise to

their fans. The live streaming platform attracted over 2.6 million average concurrent

viewers who watched 1.6 billion hours in July 2021 (TwitchTracker.com, 2021). Twitch

has remained popular mostly among young males to engage with streamers on the

platform, likely influenced by its history and background with gamers (Kavanagh,

2021). The popularity of Twitch and the coveted young male audience may not be the

only reasons that motivate athletes to stream on Twitch. Unlike TikTok or Instagram,

Twitch provides a platform for athletes to live broadcast their talents in video games to

esports fans. Different from its competitors Facebook Gaming or YouTube Gaming, Twitch relies exclusively on live streaming rather than on-demand content (i.e., pre-recorded videos), which allows streamers and fans to interact in real-time (Wells & Harrolle, 2019).

More specifically, Twitch allows individuals to create their own channels where they can live stream video content to exhibit their distinctive expertise and personalities (Qian, 2022). Such personalized features have recently encouraged athletes to live stream on this new medium. For instance, Devin Booker, a fan favorite All-star guard who plays for the Phoenix Suns, live streamed himself playing NBA2K on Twitch to engage with existing basketball fans and new esports fans (Stratton, 2020). The real-time interactions and personal channels have provided opportunities for athletes to disclose their off-court personal lives to fans synchronously, and at the same time have empowered fans to interact with their favorite athletes virtually and instantly with no limits on geographic locations. Twitch even provides alternative revenue for athletes who can benefit financially from subscriptions to their Twitch channels as channel owners. Twitch streaming may also become profitable for athletes through business cooperation and sponsorships. For instance, Pittsburgh Steelers wide receiver JuJu Smith-Schuster was paid $100,000 to watch an NFL Thursday Night Football match on Twitch (Rand, 2019). Athletes have realized the uniqueness of Twitch, and started to embrace the opportunities to communicate their personal stories (e.g., engaging with esports) on this digital media platform (Ocal & Wolf, 2020).

Although an increasing number of athletes are using digital media to build personal brands, research assessing this phenomenon remains limited (Doyle et al., 2020; Sharifzadeh et al., 2021; Kunkel et al., 2022). Most previous studies have focused on how athletes use their self-presentation via digital media like Twitter and Instagram, to develop personal brands that were once largely shaped by public media (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012, 2014; Li et al., 2021; Sharifzadeh et al., 2021). However, more forms of self-presentation, especially through video-based digital media, need to be investigated (Doyel et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021). Live streaming is growing indisputably as a new form of broadcasting medium that has the ability to create a special kind of online sport media environment where fans and athletes interact in real-time (Clavio, 2013; Taylor, 2018). As a live streaming platform, Twitch empowers athletes to interact with fans through synchronous self-presentation. However, there remains a paucity of research examining the real-time athlete self-presentation on live streaming platforms like Twitch.

Self-presentation theory has been widely adopted to study personal branding behaviors via digital media (Doyle et al., 2020; Gorbatov et al., 2018; Kunkel et al., 2022; Sharifzadeh et al., 2021). Previous studies have focused on examining athlete self-presentation at the frontstage and backstage (Doyle et al., 2020; Na et al., 2020; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Yan, 2020). However, current personal branding studies have not fully addressed the uniqueness of digital interaction by personal brands and audiences in the virtual environment (Gorbatov et al., 2018). The real-time interaction on Twitch makes the medium an appropriate context to study the special human interaction with personal

brands. Twitch acts as a platform where athletes "perform" synchronously in front of fans. Therefore, how the traditionally defined athlete "frontstage" and "backstage" self-presentations may have shifted on Twitch plays a vital role in the theoretical development of self-presentation theory within the digital context.

In addition to filling the literature gap on athlete personal branding through self-presentation on Twitch, this study has the potential to provide some managerial implications. Esports scholarship has suggested the need to obtain a better understanding of how influencers use Twitch (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018; Patterson & Ashman, 2020; Pollack et al., 2020; Sjöblom et al., 2019). While athletes are a unique form of influencers, the current investigation could provide personal branding suggestions for athletes and other influencers to manage and build their brands on Twitch. In particular, this investigation may suggest what types of self-presentation content are more effective for athlete personal branding on the live streaming platforms. Digital media has become a predominant choice for athletes and fans to engage in parasocial interactions, through which fans can get a candid and uncensored look at the lives of athletes (Pegoraro, 2013). This indicates the need to understand fan impressions of athlete self-presentation on Twitch. This study provides insights into how athletes may use real-time interactions on the live streaming platforms to foster positive fan relationships. Furthermore, this study contributes to understanding how engaging in video games may help athletes develop personal brands.

Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to describe athlete personal branding behaviors on the live streaming platform Twitch. In short, this study

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investigates how athletes use Twitch for personal branding. The secondary purpose of this study, based upon the foundational description of athlete Twitch usage, was to explore how athletes rely on their self-presentation on Twitch for personal branding. Lastly, the third purpose of this paper was to assess fan perceptions of athlete self-presentation on Twitch.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Human Brands

During the past two decades, branding research has emphasized creating and

developing brands (Oh et al., 2020). The definition of a brand is "a name, term, design,

symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or service as distinct from

those of other sellers" (AMA, 2017, "Definition of Brand section"). While the concept

of a brand has traditionally been used to study how consumers identify the goods and

services of different product providers, brands have emerged among several categories

of new "products" (Keller, 2013, p. 36). A person, organization, place, or idea can all be

recognized as a brand (Keller, 2013). With regard to persons as brands, scholars have

developed the concept of a human brand, which focuses on people, celebrities, athletes,

or influencers (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019; Osorio et al., 2020). The origins of human

branding date back to McCracken's (1989) and Thomson's (2006) former works on

celebrities. McCracken (1989) defined a celebrity brand as any well-known persona with

public recognition used in an advertisement to sell products. Thomson (2006) extended

the celebrity concept of the celebrity brand and conceptualized a human brand "as any

well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts" (p. 104).

Close et al. (2011) applied the concept of human branding to study the personal branding

of faculty seeking positions in marketing, and defined a human brand as "the persona,

well-known or emerging, who are the subject of marketing, interpersonal, or inter-

organizational communications" (p.923). Research on human brands also has contributed to the development of personal brands. The concept of personal brands stems from the self-promotion action of an individual's own brand (Peters, 1997; Shepherd, 2005). Recently, Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) suggested that a personal brand has dual attributes of being a human and a commercialized entity at the same time. The dual nature of a personal brand indicates the inherent interdependencies between the person and its brand (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). Personal branding explains how individuals use branding strategies to promote themselves and seek personal development (Gorbatov et al.,2018; Osorio et al., 2020). The focus of personal brands on self-branding efforts and their engagement in social media helps to develop the concept of influencer brands, who have created an authentic "personal brand" via social networks and generate a form of "celebrity capital" (Brown & Hayes, 2008; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). Influencer brands have a more than average impact on the thoughts, attitudes, and actions of followers, because of their distinctive characteristics, such as communication, persuasiveness, and social networks (Cornwell & Katz, 2020).

2.2 Athlete Brands

The concepts of brands, human brands, personal brands, and influencer brands together have built the foundations of athlete brands (Arai et al., 2013, 2014). This is because athletes and other celebrities are highly conducive to personal branding activities (Gorbatov et al., 2018). With the increasing interest in employing celebrities, especially athletes as endorsers, the term athlete brand was created and defined as brands that have established their symbolic meaning and values using their names, faces, voices,

or other brand elements in the market (Arai et al., 2013, 2014). Sport management scholars have discussed the importance of studying athlete brands and built a lens of scholarship to understand athlete branding based on the concepts of athlete brands and human brands (Arai et al. 2013, 2014; Hasaan et al., 2018; Linsner et al., 2020). The current athlete branding literature suggests three research directions: athlete perspective, consumer perspective, and firm (or business) perspective (Agyemang, 2011; Arai et al., 2014; Carlson & Donavan, 2008, 2013; Doyle et al., 2020; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Lee & Koo, 2015; Lobpries et al., 2017, 2018; Lohneiss & Hill, 2014; Parker & Fink, 2012; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Yan, 2020; Till, 2001).

The firm perspective examines athlete brands as endorsers, focusing on the benefits of utilizing the athlete to promote a company's product or services (Agyemang, 2011; Lee & Koo, 2015; Lohneiss & Hill, 2014; Parker & Fink, 2012; Till, 2001). This is one of the most researched areas in the athlete brand literature because businesses often use athlete endorsers to transfer fans' positive attributes and attitudes toward individual athletes to their brands (Erdogan, 1999; McCracken, 1989; Parker & Fink, 2012). Previous athlete branding studies that focus on the firm perspective have explored the fit between athletes and the endorsed brands or products (Parker & Fink, 2012; Till, 2001). Researchers have also examined the source credibility of athlete endorsers and their positive impact on consumer attitudes towards the endorsed brand (Brison et al., 2016; Lee & Koo, 2015). A stream of research has attempted to evaluate the influence of athlete transgressions on consumer behaviors associated with the endorsed brands (Agyemang, 2011; Lohneiss & Hill, 2014).

The athlete perspective studies athletes as human brands. Being athlete-centric, this research perspective has focused on exploring athlete use of digital media and athlete personal branding strategies (Doyle et al., 2020; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Lobpries et al., 2017, 2018). A number of studies have begun to examine how athletes use social media as a personal branding platform to tell personal stories (i.e., self-presentation) (Doyle et al., 2020; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Sharifzadeh et al., 2021). Although many posts that athletes share on social media are personal in nature (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016), they have relied on social media to develop personal brands and attract higher fan engagement (Doyle et al., 2020; Sharifzadeh et al., 2021). Scholars have realized the need to examine the athletes' personal branding process and strategies (Lobpries et al., 2017, 2018). Lobpries et al. (2017) investigated two elite female softball players about their brand positioning and presentation strategies, and suggested that the intangible facets of athlete brand personality could impact athlete personal branding strategies. Lobpries et al. (2018) further explored the barriers that elite female athletes may encounter when creating their personal brands.

The consumer perspective treats athletes as role models for their fans, and has examined consumer perceptions about athlete brand identity, athlete brand image, as well as fan engagement with athlete brands (Arai et al. 2013, 2014; Carlson & Donavan, 2008, 2013; Doyle et al., 2020; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Yan, 2020). A stream of research on the consumer perspective has examined fan perceptions about the athlete brand identity and brand image (Arai et al., 2013, 2014; Carlson & Donavan, 2013, 2018). Arai et al. (2014) conceptualized athlete brand image as consumers' perceptions of athlete brand

attributes, and built a model of athlete brand image (MABI) based on the customer-based brand equity framework from Keller (1993). The MABI has three second-order dimensions (i.e., athletic performance, attractive appearance) and marketable lifestyle) and ten first-order dimensions (e.g., physical attributes) (Arai et al., 2014). Arai et al. (2013) further examined the impact of athlete brand image on fans' psychological commitment. Scholars have also assessed the effect of athlete brand identity on consumer behaviors (Carlson & Donavan, 2013, 2018). Carlson and Donavan (2008) examined how the perceived athlete brand identity can be transferred to fans 'attitudes towards the team and purchase intention. Carlson & Donavan (2013) further investigated how brand personality affected perceived athlete brand identity and fans-athlete relationships. Some recent studies have attempted to explore the positive impact of athlete brands on fan engagement (Doyle et al., 2020; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Yan, 2020). For instance, types of social media posts by athletes could affect the fan engagement rate with the content (Doyle et al., 2020). As a result, athletes have started utilizing digital media like TikTok as a strategic communication tool to foster effective fan engagement (Su, Baker, Doyle, & Yan, 2020).

As athletes become more aware of their engagement in the branding process, a number of recent studies in all three research directions have emphasized the athlete personal branding phenomenon (Na et al., 2020, Doyle et al., 2020, Su, Baker, Doyle, & Kunkel, 2020). Studies in the firm perspective have shifted to an athlete-centered approach, and have started to explore personal branding strategies for athletes to enhance source credibility and reputation as endorsers (Sato et al., 2015; Na et al., 2020). From

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the athlete perspective, research has continued to examine how digital media advances as a platform for athletes to gain new followers and develop fan relationships (Doyle et al., 2020; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Kunkel, 2020). Researchers of the consumer perspective have also taken the athlete-centric perspective and focused on fan engagement with athletes' social media (Doyle et al., 2020, Su, Baker, Doyle, & Yan, 2020; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Since all three research directions of athlete branding are moving towards an athlete-centric direction, it is crucial to understand the athlete personal branding phenomenon.

2.3 Athlete Personal Branding

Personal branding is a self-marketing process that is self-centered and highly individualistic (Shepherd, 2005). The personal branding concept emerges from the self marketing process of one's own brand in front of the consuming public (Peters, 1997; Shepherd, 2005). Gorbatov et al. (2018) defined personal branding as a strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, through differentiated narrative and imagery, to establish a competitive advantage. Because of the popularity of personal branding on social media, researchers have begun to explore the personal branding process in a Web 2.0 context (Labrecque et al., 2011; Shaker & Hafiz, 2014). The personal branding process in an online platform involves building brand identity, positioning, and image (Labrecque et al., 2011; Shaker & Hafiz, 2014). Gorbatov et al. (2018) further proposed that the process of personal branding includes: raising self-awareness, needs analysis and positioning, constructing brand architecture, self-reflection and feedback-seeking, and sense-making. Gorbatov et al. (2021) also

examined personal brand equity and suggested it consists of brand appeal, brand differentiation, and brand recognition.

Athlete personal branding is a growing field that explores personal branding strategies and processes of athletes (Hodge & Walker, 2015; Lobpries et al., 2017, 2018). Some case studies of professional athletes (e.g., David Beckham, Ryan Giggs, Suzann Pettersen, Jennie Finch, Cat Osterman) have suggested that athletes may adopt various personal branding strategies to build their brands (Kristiansen & Williams, 2015; Lobpries et al., 2017; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). For instance, Parmentier and Fischer (2012) suggested that professional image and mainstream media coverage together construct athlete personal brand equity. Kristiansen and Williams (2015) examined how organization-induced antecedents could help build and manage athlete brand equity. Scholars have also explored the specific branding strategies that athletes and their agencies adopt (Green, 2016; Hodge & Walker, 2015). Hodge and Walker (2015) investigated professional golfers and suggested that athlete personal branding strategies include athletic success, differentiation, and relationships with sponsors. Green (2016) studied International Rugby Union players and provided a PERFECT (i.e., personality, exposure, response, follow, endorse, consistent, and target audience) personal branding principle for the personal branding of athletes on social media. Researchers also explored the self-promotion barriers for athletes (Hodge & Walker, 2015; Lobpries et al., 2018). Hodge and Walker (2015) found that the lack of knowledge, lack of time and/or support, and differences in career stages are primary challenges for the personal branding of professional athletes. Further, Lobpries et al. (2018) identified five personal

branding barriers for elite female athletes: bold and assertive, assumption attractiveness matters, performance and something else, invisible and lacking, and proper brand management.

A key driver for personal branding is the ease of access to technology, especially the Web 2.0 tools such as social media (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Harris & Rae, 2011; Holton & Molyneux, 2017). Therefore, a burgeoning literature has focused on how individuals use various social media platforms for personal branding (Chen, 2013; Harris & Rae, 2011; Holton & Molyneux, 2017; Labrecque et al., 2011; Shaker & Hafiz, 2014; Sharifzadeh et al., 2021). Scholars have examined the brand identity, image, and positioning of personal brands on social media (Labrecque et al., 2011; Shaker & Hafiz, 2014). Digital media skills even become an additional brand identity (Gorbatov et al., 2018). In a professional sports context, when sports-related characteristics are similar, an online profile creates differentiation among athletes (Green, 2016). Therefore, it is essential to understand how digital media contributes to the athlete personal branding process.

2.4 Athlete Brands and Digital media

2.4.1 Social Media

Social media provides a virtual platform for athletes to tell their personal stories and interact with fans, in order to leverage off-field athlete brand attributes (Brison et al., 2016; Geurin, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hambrick et al., 2010). Researchers have examined the vicarious purposes of athletes to use social media (Brison et al., 2016, Hayes et al., 2019; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). For example, the

trustworthiness of athletes has brought them opportunities to endorse products and sports brands on social media (Brison et al., 2016). Social media also allows athletes to communicate with family and friends when they face high pressure (Hayes et al., 2019). Social media has recently become an important tool for athletes' active self-presentation — the personal story that is typically portrayed in traditional media coverage (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). When compared with traditional media, social media has more advantages for athletes to generate personalized content and manage their self-impression (Mitchell et al. 2021; Smith & Sanderson, 2015).

Athletes' self-presentation on social media is not a recently discovered topic, but the use of social media for personal branding purposes is relatively understudied (Hambrick et al., 2010; Geurin, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Hambrick et al. (2010) raised awareness of athlete branding on social media and indicated that professional athletes relied on Twitter to interact with fans, but did not take the opportunity to self-promote their personal brands. Scholars examined athletes' self-presentation on social media, and suggested that though athletes had specific social media use goals (e.g., self-promotion), they did not employ specific strategies to meet those goals (Geurin, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Studies also recognized how fan attitudes could impact the self-presentation of athletes on social media (Geurin, 2017; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Geurin (2017) articulated that female athletes felt pressured to post sexually suggestive images because they did not want to receive rude or unwanted fan engagement. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) further adopted the athletic labor of femininity framework to examine how fan attitude influences the self-

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presentation of female athletes on Instagram. Scholars have further examined how social

media usage may contribute to athlete branding (Doyle et al., 2020; Su, Baker, Doyle, &

Yan, 2020). Doyle et al. (2020) developed a model of Athlete Branding via Social Media

to understand how types of social media content may help athletes build their brand

attributes. Similar to the way social media helps athletes with personal branding, digital

media like TikTok could provide athletes a channel to display their post-stage or off-

field life (Su, Baker, Doyle, & Yan, 2020).

2.4.2 Digital media

Technological innovations have deeply shaped the development of digital media

(Gardner & Lehnert, 2016; Kaplan, & Haenlein, 2010; Livingstone, 1999). The birth of

the internet has transformed the traditional screen-based media (i.e., television) into

digital media (Livingstone, 1999). The technological foundations of Web 2.0, especially

the notion of User Generated Content, have contributed to the significant multiplication

of personally owned media, which led to the creation of social media (Kaplan, &

Haenlein, 2010; Livingstone, 1999). Changes in virtual human interactions of Web 3.0

have prompted the evolution of digital media, such as YouTube and TikTok (Gardner &

Lehnert, 2016; Kaplan, & Haenlein, 2010). Digital media like YouTube and social

media are all user-generated media where users can fulfill their social, self-expression,

and self-actualization needs through enhanced social connections in virtual communities

(Shao, 2009). Recently, the breakthrough in synchronous technology and the fast-

growing gaming industry have brought forth live streaming platforms like Twitch. Live

streaming is a new synchronous digital media form that is different from traditional

social media in attributes, such as simultaneity and authenticity (Cai & Hohn, 2019).

Twitch is a leading live streaming platform that originally focused on games, but is

increasingly extending to creative content and mobile broadcasting (Cai & Hohn, 2019).

The game live streaming appears thanks to the mix of television transformation, internet

culture, and multiplayer experiences (Taylor, 2018). Twitch allows users to live stream

(broadcast) themselves playing videos or simply chat with their audience in real-time

(Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018; Pollack et al., 2020; Taylor, 2018). While Twitch shares

some commonalities with social media platforms, the ability to provide live televised

content is unique (Cai & Hohn, 2019; Taylor, 2018). The highly-interactive gaming

network on Twitch and the capabilities to create customized streaming channels have

made Twitch one-of-a-kind from going live on social media or other live streaming

platforms.

2.4.3 What is Unique about Twitch as a Digital media

The unique interaction and special audience make Twitch an innovative new

medium for influencers to communicate with fans. Twitch was founded in 2011 as

Justin.tv, and was acquired in 2014 by Amazon, which contributed to the transformation

of Twitch into a leading live-streaming platform (Gandolfi, 2016; Qian, 2022; Sjöblom

et al., 2019). Launched as the first gaming-exclusive social live streaming service,

Twitch has rapidly become one of the most popular digital media that enables live

streaming and social interaction (Gandolfi, 2016). A recent industry report from GWI

suggests that 65% of Twitch viewers are male, while 72% of the audience are between

16-34 years old (Kavanagh, 2021). This may indicate that Twitch largely attracts a

younger male market segment, despite growing interest from female gamers. Instead of mainly allowing users to create videos on demand (VOD) like YouTube, Twitch allows users to live stream (broadcast) themselves playing videos or simply chat with their audience (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018; Pollack et al., 2020; Taylor, 2018). The synchronous interaction on Twitch supports broadcasters in engaging with their audience lively, such as greetings and answering questions, fostering a long-term relationship (Taylor, 2018).

Another interesting feature that attracts influencers to use Twitch is the user-generated revenue on the platform. Twitch channel owners can benefit from viewers who choose to follow certain channels (i.e., subscription) and contribute financially based on three subscription levels ($4.99, $9.99, or $24.99). Premium are users of Amazon Prime, while Turbo subscribers are viewers who pay extra money to Twitch for an ad-free environment. Twitch allows channel owners to develop certain emotes (i.e., unique personalized emojis or pictures) as an incentive to paid subscribers. To buy those emotes, subscribers need to spend Twitch's virtual currency "Bits", which can also be used to cheer or support their favorite streamers financially. Channel owners may also assign certain subscribers as moderators to help manage the virtual community. Some users become channel partners when they co-stream or sponsor the channel.

The popularity and uniqueness of Twitch have even encouraged professional sports leagues (i.e., the International Basketball Federation (FIBA), the National Football League (NFL)) and athletes (e.g., Juju Smith-Schuster, Blake Snell) to stream on Twitch (McCaskill, 2021; Qian, 2022; Rand, 2019; Stratton, 2020). Thursday Night

Football has been continuously broadcasted on Twitch after Amazon took over the streaming rights from Twitter in 2017 (Qian, 2022). Recently, FIBA announced its multi-year collaboration with Twitch, which allows the digital media to live-stream around 600 hours of basketball annually (McCaskill, 2021). Just like esports influencers, some athletes found their passion to stream on Twitch to interact with their sports and esports fans, and present their off-field stories within the video games context (Rand, 2019; Stratton, 2020). The unique way that those sports leagues and professional athletes use Twitch suggests a need to explore how athletes use Twitch.

With the growth of digital media like Twitch (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017), it is imperative to investigate how athletes use these types of digital media to interact with fans in the virtual environment. Given limited scholarship on athlete Twitch usage, especially how athletes use this digital media platform for personal branding, I proposed the following research question:

RQ1: What are the personal branding behaviors of athletes on Twitch?

2.5 Self-presentation Theory

Impression management is the driving force behind the positioning of personal brands (Gorbatov et al. 2018; Khedher, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2011). The process of controlling how an individual is perceived by the audience is defined as impression management (Leary, 1995; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Literature has used self-presentation as an alternative name for impression management (Leary, 1995; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The theory of Self-presentation has been predominantly adopted in personal branding literature to explore impression management through digital

interactions on social media (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Sharifzadeh et al., 2021). Self-presentation is the process of conveying a desired impression to the audience through an individual's tailored expressions of self (Mitchell et al., 2021) Built upon the assumption of impression management, Goffman (1959) conceptualized self-representation as a process that explains how an individual, like an "actor", exhibits unique identities on the "stage", to manipulate the impressions of others. Self-presentation is the process of conveying a desired impression to the audience through an individual's tailored expressions of self (Mitchell et al., 2021). Based on the self-presentation theory, individuals perform differently at the "frontstage" and at the "backstage" (Goffman, 1959). While frontage performance displays when audiences are watching, backstage performance happens in the absence of actual audiences when the individual "performer" is more relaxed to show candid behaviors (Goffman, 1959). Self-presentation is a process to accentuate positive characteristics to engender favorable impressions among peers (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012).

Goffman's (1959) metaphor of individuals as performers on the stage is known as the dramaturgical perspective of impression management. The dramaturgical self-presentation theory "is a predominant way to understand the activities around personal branding" (Gorbatov et al., 2018, p. 6), which has shaped the growth of impression management research. While the self-presentation theory from Goffman (1959) emphasizes managing impressions of audiences, scholars have extended the meaning of "self-presentation" and explored the various components of self-presentation (Baumeister, 1982; Baumeister & Hutton, 1987; Hochschild, 1979; Leary & Kowalski,

1990). Distinguishing from the dramaturgical perspective from Goffman (1959), Hochschild (1979) proposed an emotion-management research perspective that fosters attention to the inner feelings rather than impression management.

Leary and Kowalski (1990) further suggested that self-presentation involves two processes: impression motivation and impression construction. Impression motivation explains under which conditions that individuals are motivated to manage public impressions (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Following impression motivation is the impression construction subprocess, during which individuals need to decide which tactic to adopt to create the desired impression (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Likewise, scholars indicated that self-presentation has two purposes: pleasing the audience and constructing the ideal self (Baumeister, 1982; Baumeister & Hutton, 1987). Pleasing the audience designated the purpose of self-presentation as the favorability of the viewers (Baumeister, 1982; Baumeister & Hutton, 1987). On the other hand, self-presentation may be motivated by the desire to portray an individual's ideal self in front of the public (Baumeister, 1982; Baumeister & Hutton, 1987). In addition to those motivations of self-presentation, Baumeister and Hutton (1987) further suggested that self-presentation could impact the attitude change among the groups and group emotions. The factors that influence self-presentation and its effects were presented in Figure 1.
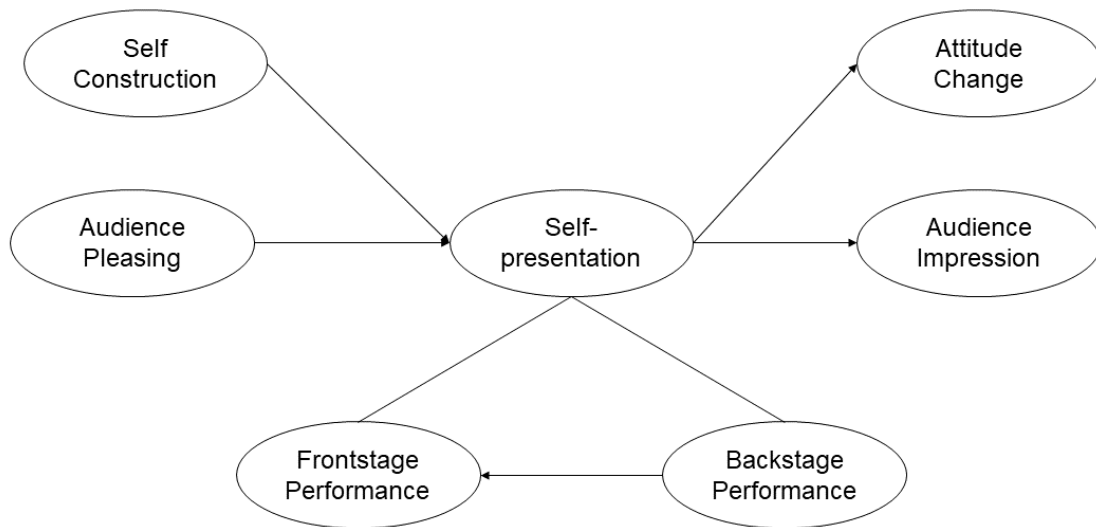
Figure 1 Self-presentation Theory

Self-presentation theory has been adopted to explain the self-promoting behaviors across various contexts. Gardner and Martinko (1988) applied Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory to understand impression management in organizational settings. Recently, researchers have realized the advantages of using Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory to examine the impression management of the computer-mediated communication (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Tufekci, 2008). Tufekci (2008) suggested that a less anonymous online environment like Facebook makes individuals more realistic and honest when presenting themselves. The networked communications from social media audiences could influence the individuals' self-presentation, such as the way they respond to the audience and the content they create in the future (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). These results extend the theory of self-presentation to focus on identity construction, which emphasizes that identities are social products and results of a given social environment, and thus act differently in varying situations (Tufekci, 2008).

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Scholars have also attempted to differentiate the self-presentation frontstage and backstage performances, and have explored how the digital environment of digital media may influence the frontstage and backstage self-presentation (Hogan, 2010). Hogan (2010) extended the self-presentation by considering an exhibitional approach, which focuses on exhibitions as the subjects of selective contributions and the role of a third party. Individuals will shape a consistent self-presentation across platforms if they aim to self-promote strategically (Van Dijck, 2013). However, current research on personal branding using self-presentation theory has not fully addressed the uniqueness of digital interaction, and may also exaggerate the outcome of personal branding (Gorbatov et al., 2018). In an age of virtual reproduction, a clearer articulation of the self-presentation, specifically the distinction between frontstage and backstage performances is needed (Hogan, 2010).

With the advent of the internet and social media, self-presentation literature has shifted from a focus on interpersonal interactions that occurred in the physical world to the online community (Mitchell et al., 2021). Social media provides athletes greater control over their self-presentation because the virtual interactions allow athletes to engage in the impression management process without much audience interference (Mitchell et al. 2021; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Therefore, self-presentation theory has become a widely adopted theory to examine the self-presentation of athletes on social media for personal branding purposes (Doyle, et al., 2020; Geurin, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) conceptualized six backstage frames (conversationalist, sport insider, behind-the-scenes reporter, super fan, informer,

analyst), and four frontstage frames (publicist, superintendent, fan aficionado, brand

manager). The self-presentation frames from Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) have been

adapted to study backstage and frontstage brands of sports teams (i.e., U.S. women

teams) and professional athletes (Major League Soccer players) (Doyle et al., 2020;

Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2018). Hayes Sauder and Blaszka (2018) suggested that

athletes from the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team relied on backstage self-

presentation strategies more often to maintain candid communications with fans on

Twitter before, during, and after the 2015 World Cup. Doyle et al. (2020) conceptualized

athletic performance as frontstage performance, attractive appearance, and marketable

lifestyle as backstage performance (adding offstage performance). Sharifzadeh et al.

(2021) examined two types of self-presentation strategies for Iranian professional

athletes: branding, cultural/social challenges.

While mainstream media coverage may provide a platform to generally

communicate stories to present the frontstage image of athletes (e.g., athletic

performance), social media has become a special personal channel for athletes to tell

their own stories and build their backstage brand attributes (e.g., attractive appearance,

marketable lifestyle) (Doyle, et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Yan,

2020). Accordingly, self-presentation theory has advantages in explaining the purpose of

personal branding by professional athletes on social media, and contributes to

understanding athlete self-presentation on social media. With technology development

and the popularity of digital media like TikTok, YouTube, and Twitch, athletes can take

advantage of these digital media platforms to reach novel market segments, and

communicate their backstage content on these digital media synchronously. Therefore, it

is appropriate to adopt Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory to examine how

athletes use self-presentation on Twitch for personal branding.

While scholars have attempted to understand athlete personal branding on social

media using the self-presentation theory (Doyle et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021; Sharifzadeh

et al., 2021), there remains a few problems that have received scant attention. Table 1

shows the recent studies that examine athlete self-presentation.

Table II-1 Literature Review of Athlete Self-presentation

Article	Type of New Media	Type of Athletes	Self-presentation frames		Source
			Frontstage	**Backstage**	
Sharifzadeh et al., 2021	Instagram	Iranian professional athletes	Branding Strategies Cultural/Social Challenges		Self-developed
Li et al., 2021	Instagram live stories	Elite women soccer athletes	Information sharing Opinion expression Promotion Match-related info	Interaction Behind-the-scenes stories	Hull, 2014; Self-developed
Doyle et al., 2020	Instagram	MLS players	Athletic performance	Attractive appearance, marketable lifestyle	Arai et al., 2014
			Offstage		
Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2018	Twitter	US Women National Team Players	Publicist Superintendent Fan aficionado Brand manager	Conversationalist Sport insider Behind-the-scenes reporter Super fan Informer Analyst	Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012
Shreffler et al., 2016	Twitter avatar	Female athletes	Athletic competence Ambivalence All-American "girl next door" Hyperheterosexual "Sexy babe" Soft pornography		Self-developed
Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016	Instagram	International Olympic athletes	Relating to athlete's personal life Relating to athlete's business life Relating to athlete's sport Other sport or athlete Reposting photos/content originally posted by fans Pop culture or landmark-focused photos		Pegoraro, 2010 Fink & Kensicki, 2002 Clavio & Eagleman, 2011

Table II-1 Continued Literature Review of Athlete Self-presentation

Smith & Sanderson, 2015	Instagram	Professional athletes of various sports	Humanitarian Family Driven Personality Traits and Interests Dedicated Athlete Endorser Socialite		Self-developed
Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014	Twitter	Golfers	Publicist Superintendent Fan aficionado Brand manager	Conversationalist Sport insider Behind-the-scenes reporter Super fan Informer Analyst	Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012
Hull, 2014	Twitter	Golfers	Engager Promoter Informer	Behind-the-scenes reporter Golf observer Fan	Self-developed
Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012	Twitter	Tennis players	Publicist Superintendent Fan aficionado Brand manager	Conversationalist Sport insider Behind-the-scenes reporter Super fan Informer Analyst	Self-developed
Pegoraro, 2010	Twitter	Top athletes	Relating to personal life Relating lo business life Relating to their sport Other sport or athlete Reference Responding to fans Pop culture or landmark reference		Self-developed

As shown in Table II-1, previous research has mostly investigated how athletes use Twitter and Instagram as their self-presentation platforms, focusing on athlete self-presentation in asynchronous forms such as texts and pictures (Li et al., 2021; Sharifzadeh et al., 2021). Limited scholarship has recently begun to explore athlete impression management in the synchronous format (e.g., Instagram live stories) (Li et al., 2021). An exploration over new forms of digital self-presentation, such as live streaming, is essential to the development of self-presentation theory, because it has the potential to redefine the "stage" and distinguish the frontstage and backstage

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performances in the digital age (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Hogan, 2010). Besides, previous studies have not well defined the "stage" when adopting the self-presentation theory as the theoretical framework. Whether it is the "sport" (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012), the "media" (Li et al., 2021), or even the "athlete branding" (Doyle et al., 2020) is still under discussion. Therefore, what the "stage" is for athletes on synchronous digital media remains unknown.

The ambiguity of "stage" results in various interpretations of "frontstage" and "backstage performances". For instance, some researchers considered sport insider as frontstage self-presentation (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012), but some others perceived the same construct as a backstage performance (Li et al., 2021). Similarly, fan interaction was a backstage performance within Lebel and Danylchuk (2012)'s categories, however, it advanced as a frontstage self-presentation under the classifications from Li et al. (2021). A clear definition of the "stage" and distinguishing between frontstage and backstage could help future researchers to set up a good framework to understand athlete self-presentation on digital media.

To address those literature gaps of athlete presentation on digital media, I proposed the following research question:

RQ2: What types of self-presentation do athletes perform on Twitch?

2.6 Influencers, Consumers, and Digital media

2.6.1 Athletes as Influencers

Source credibility and trustworthiness of personal brands could positively influence consumer behaviors (Breves et al., 2019; Jin et al., 2019). Source of fame and

follower status has prompted athletes to become influencers that could potentially impact

the attitudes and behaviors of their fans (Cornwell & Katz, 2020). The likeability and

similarity between athletes and fans provide rationales for why fans admire those

athletes as role models, who will possibly impact the social behaviors of fans (Biskup &

Pfister, 1999; Yu et al., 2022). Athlete self-presentation on digital media is "the core of

an athlete's level of engagement and social influence with their followers" (Brison &

Geurin, 2021, p. 124). Compared to other types of influencers, professional athletes are

more likely to attract a larger viewer base on digital media (Zhao et al. 2019). Extant

literature on athlete branding on social media suggests that athlete self-presentation on

social media has positive influences on fan engagement, fan-athlete relationship, and

consumption behaviors (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Na et al., 2020; Su et al.,

2020). One important personal branding objective for athletes on social media is to

foster a positive relationship among fans, which allows athletes to build a positive brand

image (Arai et al., 2013, 2014; Doyle et al., 2020). Therefore, to better understand

athlete personal branding on Twitch, it is imperative to explore how fans perceive the

athlete personal branding behaviors, especially their self-presentation on Twitch.

2.6.2 Influencers and Twitch

Social media influencer connotes a digital celebrity who is able to inform and

encourage special consumer choices (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). Literature has

examined various kinds of influencers (e.g., politicians, athletes, gamers), their

behaviors on social media (e.g., Instagram, YouTube), and their interactions with fans

(Burgess & Green, 2018; Chen, 2013; De Veirman et al. 2017; Harris & Rae, 2011;

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Holton & Molyneux, 2017). While there has been important research on YouTube and Instagram, personal branding of influencers on the live streaming platform Twitch has yet to be explored empirically (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). Current research primarily has focused on influencer behaviors on Twitch (Cai & Hohn, 2019; Johnson & Woodcock, 2017; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). Twitch influencers were found to devote significant working time to the live streaming platform (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017). Woodcock and Johnson (2019) articulated that the effective impact of Twitch influencers includes authenticity, community engagement, relationship management with brand, and method of communication. Cai and Hohn (2019) suggested that Twitch influencers rely on automated promotional tools to help with creating synchronous interactions on Twitch.

A flourishing stream of scholarship has examined how influencers, especially esports streamers use Twitch (Pollack et al., 2020; Qian, 2022; Sjöblom et al., 2019). Influencers or esports streamers, rely on many forms of Twitch elements to build their brand and brand community (Sjöblom et al., 2019). A shared element that most streamers have utilized is the microphone and webcam, which creates a virtual stage where streamers become the opinion leaders, or so-called micro-celebrities, to share their expertise within the community (Sjöblom et al., 2019). Twitch influencers also rely on a social revenue affordance element, which is the acknowledgment of subscribers and donors through social revenue generation and dynamic notifications, to encourage purchasing behaviors from fans (Sjöblom et al., 2019). Furthermore, social affordance positively impacts both the cumulative and current popularity of streamers (Zhao et al.,

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2019). Professional streamers may even need to find ways to evoke viewers' imagination that they are in the game themselves, rather than simply chat to increase audience interactions (Bingham, 2020). Like other social platforms, Twitch has the potential for influencers to drive positive product attitudes and consumption (Pollack et al., 2020). For instance, some notable streamers co-stream with the NFL to broadcast football, and their expertise in the sport has positively impacted their virtual interactions with football fans (Qian, 2022).

2.6.3 Consumers and Twitch Influencers

Influencers rely on personal attributes and characteristics that are exhibited through digital media to create an "influence" over the behaviors and attitudes of their followers (Brown & Hayes, 2008; Cornwell & Katz, 2020; Kadekova & Holienčinova, 2018). Influencers are usually endorsed by brands to convey branding messages to their audiences, aiming to stimulate the consumption of certain products (Cornwell & Katz, 2020; Kadekova & Holienčinova, 2018). The strengths of influencers come from their fame, personality, authority, knowledge, or relationship with their audience (Cornwell & Katz, 2020; Kadekova & Holienčinova, 2018). Influencer credibility, and the congruence between the influencer and the audiences positively impact the attitudes as well as consumption and social behaviors of followers (Belanche et al., 2021; Cornwell & Katz, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Thus, examining consumer perceptions about the power of influencers may contribute to understanding their personal branding behaviors.

While previous literature suggests that athletes and influencers have started using Twitch for personal branding (McCaskill, 2021; Qian, 2022; Rand, 2019; Sjöblom et al.,

2019; Stratton, 2020), how fans perceive athlete personal branding via Twitch remains unknown. Scholars have attempted to investigate fan perceptions of influencers who live-stream on Twitch (i.e., streamers) (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018; Zhao et al. 2019). Based on Uses and Gratifications Theory, consumers seek to satisfy their various needs by watching Twitch channels (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). Therefore, their perceptions towards certain Twitch channels are likely to impact their spectating intentions. Moreover, Hilvert-Bruce et al. (2018) suggested that the emotional connectedness of fans to Twitch may positively influence their future consumption behaviors. Understanding fan perceptions toward the Twitch usage of streamers may help explain why fans use Bits, a virtual currency on Twitch that requires monetary investment as well as time and effort, to cheer and support their favorite streamers (Abarbanel & Johnson, 2020). Researchers also found that fans on Twitch hold distinctive perceptions towards streamers (Ruberg et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2019). For example, fans responded more positively to female streamers than male streamers who broadcast competitive games on Twitch (Ruberg et al., 2019). Unlike traditional social media, Twitch fans found Twitch streamers less popular if the streamers had high openness and conscientiousness (Zhao et al., 2019). Twitch fans would easily switch between channels if they had low levels of engagement with certain streamers (Spilker et al., 2020). Twitch literature also suggests that consumer perceptions about Twitch influencers and their Twitch usage could impact their consumption behaviors and their attitudes towards the channel owners (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018; Spilker et al., 2020; Zhao et al. 2019).

Consequently, the following research question is proposed:

RQ3: How do fans perceive the athlete self-presentation on Twitch?

Self-presentation has effects on audience impression (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987, Leary, 1995). Previous research has suggested that athletes rely on self-presentation to foster positive impressions among fans (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Li et al., 2021; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Therefore, considering RQ2 and RQ3 together, I developed the following hypothesis:

H1: Fan impressions of various types of athlete self-presentation are different from each other.

CHAPTER III

STUDY 1: ATHLETE PERSONAL BRANDING ON TWITCH

3.1 Methodology

To address RQ1, a netnography was conducted to explore how athletes utilize

Twitch in an effort to provide a foundational understanding of this phenomenon. Data

mining was performed using Twitch API through Python 3.8 to gather existing data

(e.g., channel information, video details, and chats) from the Twitch channels of the 12

professional athletes. A scraping script was created through Python 3.8 to collect

channel information and video details from Twitch using Twitch API. After observing

the initial data mining results, channel information, video posts, and comments were

extracted. A netnography was then performed using observations and field notes to

provide an original inquiry of athlete Twitch usage from a personal branding

perspective.

3.1.1 Researcher's Positionality

The differences in various paradigms make it essential to state my own

positionality. While I tend to hold a postpositivism paradigm that emphasizes critical

realism and objectivity, I believe that there exists an absolute reality, but humans can

only apprehend the truth imperfectly (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Guba & Lincoln, 1994;

Zhang et al., 2016). I support the argument that both quantitative and qualitative

paradigms have strengths and can be applied to understand research questions that are

unique to certain conditions (Zhang et al., 2016). It is not about choosing between

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qualitative or quantitative methods, but about finding the best combination of approaches to understand, explain, or predict a phenomenon (Zhang et al., 2016).

Along with my postpositivism research paradigm, my worldview also has an impact on the current research. Citizenship played an important role in the ethnography observations (Jensen et al., 2020). My citizenship as a "Chinese", who lives in a foreign country "United States", had an impact on the data analysis and findings of this study. Growing up in a different culture, I may not be able to identify some culture-specific phenomena. For instance, when an athlete played a song that is trendy in the US culture during the live streaming, I may not recognize the name of the song. Likewise, my race as "Asian" and my gender as "male" both have affected my data analysis and the findings of this research. Because being an Asian male, my observations would be limited and may not be the same with individuals from a different racial background or gender. Sharing culture and knowledge with the research subject can be both beneficial and detrimental to a researcher (Jensen et al., 2020). My previous knowledge of certain video games, including Dota 2, Overwatch, and Fortnite, may limit my ability to interpret some results of this study. For example, I may have more familiarity if the athletes live streamed content in Dota 2, but I could not understand some game-based phenomena if athletes portray themselves playing Call of Duty. Lastly, I had research experiences in the areas of athlete branding and esports marketing. I may have the tendency to emphasize the positive effects of video games and Twitch on athlete personal branding.

3.1.2 Athlete Pool

A convenience and purposive sampling method was adopted to identify potential athletes for this study. I first reviewed news articles from ESPN and esports websites (e.g., celebrity streamers) that introduced professional athletes who streamed on Twitch (Celebritystreamers.com; Ocal & Wolf, 2020). To select athletes for the sample in this study, I adopted the five-step netnography data collection method (i.e., simplify, search, scout, select, save) from Kozinets (2020). I searched on Google using the keywords "athlete" and "Twitch" or "video game" or "esport" to determine which athletes were active gamers and were popular on Twitch. In the search step, Sports media like ESPN and Sports Illustrated were also included in the process. I further included a research website (Celebritystreamers.com) to decide on samples for this study. A total of 19 athletes were identified through those search procedures. I then searched for those athletes on Twitch. Athletes were excluded from the current study if they did not have an active channel or they had not stored any past videos. For athletes included in this study, I initially examined their profiles on Twitch, and recorded their Twitch bio information.

The following inclusion criteria were adopted to select suitable athletes: the athlete built a personal channel on Twitch; the athlete streamed or created videos on demand (VOD) on Twitch; the athlete channel had videos available for public view in the archive; and the athlete streamed in the English language. For instance, Devin Booker (Guard for Phoenix Suns), was excluded from this study because all his previous live-stream videos were not available to watch. Additionally, Sergio Aguero (Argentine soccer player) constantly spoke Spanish on Twitch, so he was not included in the current

research. Although MMA wrestlers Colt Cabana and Paige were active on Twitch, they were not included in this research because their videos were only accessible to subscribers. A total of 12 professional athletes were included in this study (see Table III-1). Those athletes together produced 311 videos.

Table III-1 Twitch Information of Professional Athletes

Athlete	Channel	Sport	Position	Team	Game	Followers#	View#	Video #
Juju Smith-Schuster	Juju	Football	Wide receiver	Kansas City Chiefs	Fortnite	257000	1016002	9
Blake Snell	classiclyfamous	Baseball	Pitcher	San Diego Padres	MLB The Show	46300	275248	146
Demetrious Johnson	MightyGaming	MMA	N/A	N/A	Call of Duty	174000	5399064	25
Trevor Mays	iamtrevormay	Baseball	Pitcher	New York Mets	Fortnite	191000	2302392	4
Hunter Pence	hunterpence	Baseball	Right fielder	N/A	Overwatch	27100	843821	24
Josh Hart	JHartShow	Basketball	Guard	Portland Trail Blazers	Call of Duty	86900	752513	10
Max Holloway	Blessedmma	MMA	N/A	N/A	Call of Duty	66600	323742	4
Jens Pulver	JensPulver	MMA	N/A	N/A	N/A	31500	729656	26
Charles Leclerc	charlesleclerc	F1	N/A	N/A	Formula One	671620	9983735	2
George Russell	GR63	F1	N/A	N/A	Formula One	209917	873207	2
Austin Ekeler	AustinEkeler	Football	Running back	Los Angeles Chargers	Call of Duty	28400	1496870	2
Sean O'Malley	seanomalleyufc	MMA	N/A	N/A	Fortnite	108000	458177	57

Note: Data recorded on September 9, 2021.

3.1.3 Data Collection

I decided to use a netnography using field observations and content analysis to describe how athletes use Twitch. Netnography (or internet ethnography) is a qualitative research approach that uses ethnographic research methodologies to investigate the cultures and communities that are forming as a result of computer-mediated

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communication (Kozinets, 2002, 2010, 2015, 2020). Netnography is developed from ethnography, which is an anthropological qualitative inquiry that researchers used to understand the shared patterns of cultural symbols of a subcultural group over a certain period of time (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Fetterman, 2019). Scholars have adopted netnography in various contexts to explore human brands on Twitch and athlete brands on TikTok (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Yan, 2020). I chose to use netnography because researchers called on urgent netnographic research to understand the computer-generated influencers (Patterson & Ashman, 2020). At the same time, netnography has the advantage of not only observing and analyzing through text, but also through pictures and videos, which could provide researchers with a more complete picture of the research phenomenon study (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018).

Following netnography and ethnography recommendations (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Fetterman, 2019; Kozinets, 2015, 2020), and in consideration of the difference between live-streaming and archived videos, I conducted two types of field observations: through live-streaming as a participant, and via video archives as an observer. I performed three stages of observation (i.e., descriptive, focused, and selective). Previous research has suggested scholars follow a certain time-frame for field observations (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). Centeno and Wang (2017) suggested a two-week window is an appropriate time frame to observe live streaming channels. Therefore, following the research design from Centeno and Wang (2017), I set up a two-week time frame of live streaming observations from September 6 to September 19, 2021. During those two weeks, I watched all the live-streaming videos

from the 12 athletes synchronously and took field notes to record observations. Special attention would be paid to the content athletes posted or streamed. I also joined the channel chats, polls, and other interactive activities. In the first observation stage, I watched the live-streaming videos that athletes produced during the two-week window. An electronic field note was developed to assist with recording the personal branding behaviors that athletes presented during those live streams. In the field note, the time slot, a description of the behavior, as well as any background information were collected. I also took screenshots of any interesting athlete personal branding behaviors that are more appropriate for the visual format.

In the second observation stage, I collected all videos that are publicly available from the athletes' Twitch channels. Previous research indicated various ways to observe past videos (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Checchinato et al., 2015; Waters & Jones, 2011). However, digital media studies may need to consider the possible interferences from the pandemic (Su, Baker, Doyle, & Yan, 2020). For example, Chae & Lee (2022) suggested that the negative emotions from Twitch users had significantly increased after the outbreak of the COVID 19. Therefore, in consideration of such an impact from the pandemic, I chose an 18-month frame (from March 1 2020 to September 5, 2021) to observe the past streamed videos of the 12 athletes. This process gathered a total of 311 videos. I watched those archived videos and took field notes whenever athletes performed personal branding behaviors in the videos.

The third observation stage was selective observation. Instead of briefly watching what athletes were doing in the videos, I selected videos from each athlete and focused

on what athletes talked about in those videos. All the videos for athletes who have two or fewer videos were reviewed. The most recent two videos from athletes who produced more than two videos were selected and reviewed. All 24 videos were carefully examined three times to identify potential athlete branding behaviors that were not identified during previous observations. Previous esports video analysis, such as Recktenwald (2017) observed 12 hours of recordings. This study included a larger sample of videos for observation (i.e., a total of 42.22 hours of recordings (average 1.76 hours per video)).

3.1.4 Data analysis

To help reduce the research bias, I followed Fetterman's (2019) triangulation method to analyze the collected qualitative observation data and look for patterns and behaviors among the athletes. The triangulation method compares the information source to test the quality of the information and to understand how a certain actor plays in the entire process (Fetterman, 2019). I followed Konizets' (2020) five analytic operations (i.e., collating, coding, combining, counting, charting) to generate research themes and complete the coding process. I aimed to identify patterns from the observation field notes, scraped data, videos, and chats (Angrosino; 2007; Fetterman, 2019; Konizets, 2020). For the trustworthiness of my observation, I followed recommendations from Angrosino (2007) to conduct three levels of observational research (i.e., descriptive, focused, and selective). An electronic reflective journal also was used to keep field notes during the three-level observations (Angrosino, 2007).

I adopted an iterative method to analyze the netnography data. Previous personal branding literature suggested three common steps of the personal branding process: identity, image, and positioning (Labrecque et al., 2011; Shaker & Hafiz, 2014). In addition to those three themes and primary observations, I developed four initial categories of athlete personal branding behaviors on Twitch (i.e., identity, positioning, image, and relationship) as priori themes. Emerging themes and sub-themes were developed using those four categories and were recursively revised with the findings from data analysis. My data analysis followed Kozinets' (2020) five analytics operations that include collating, coding, combining, counting, and charting. In the primary step of collating, three smaller steps (i.e., filtering, formatting, and filling) were employed to prepare the various formats of data for coding (Kozinets, 2020). I started collating with the filtering step that required a decision regarding what data to include in the study (Kozinets, 2020). For the data collected in the formatting stage, I transformed the original field notes into an Excel spreadsheet. For data that were not in the textual format, I transformed it into a text form that could be coded. The next step was coding, through which data were assigned meaningful labels (Kozinets, 2020). This abstraction process allowed me to detect repeating patterns across the dataset. I conducted two rounds of coding at different times to help establish intercoder reliability. After coding was the combining step, which allowed us to put together conceptual codes into higher-order pattern codes (Kozinets, 2020). The counting and charting steps represented the data visualization procedure (Kozinets, 2020)

To help establish the trustworthiness of the findings, I adopted Fetterman's (2019) triangulation method. I also relied on analytic induction and verisimilitude methods when coding and reporting the findings (Angrosino, 2007). In consideration of the coding credibility, I relied on an internal agreement rate to cross-check the coding accuracy. I also adopted the peer debriefing method (i.e., discussing codes and interpretation with the co-authors) to help establish the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spall, 1998). I divided the materials into various parts and coded each part separately on different dates. After coding one video, I crossed-checked the codes of all parts. I presented the coding categories for athlete personal branding behaviors along with themes and sub-themes in the following section in Table 3.

3.2 Findings

Overall, Twitch had become an important personal branding tool for the observed professional athletes. Compared with other digital media platforms, Twitch has unique features such as the gaming specific content and real-time interactions. This allowed athletes to brand themselves as both sports experts and esports super fans. The various personal branding behaviors athletes exhibited on Twitch supported the previous literature on personal branding process (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Labrecque et al., 2011; Shaker & Hafiz, 2014; Shepherd, 2005). In addition, athletes performed certain behaviors to foster positive fan relationships, which are beneficial for retired athletes like Hunter Pence to maintain existing fandom.

Table III-2 Athlete Personal Branding Behaviors on Twitch

Personal Branding Behavior	Themes	Definition	Sub-themes	Example
Identity	Identity Construction	Build existing identities	*Sports Person*	Blake wrote "Professional Athlete of the San Diego Padres!" in his bio.
			Celebrity	Austin projected an "AE" sign, on the back wall of his camera.
	Identity Extension	Expand brands to a different category	*Gamer*	Sean stated in bio he was a Fortnite Champ pro and a member of Team Complexity.
			Streamer	Blake revealed his streaming environment with trio screens and lighting equipment.
			Average Joe	Hunter commented on his losing streak, "This is my theme of day, to be defeated."
	Identity Transition	Retain and transfer athletic identities	*N/A*	Jens: "Being athletic was my life, you know?… I just was pissed when it was over."
Positioning	Selective Content	Choose what to present in front of audience	*N/A*	Hunter asked fans which game they preferred to watch him play.
	Target Markets	Identify specific groups of fans love to watch stream	*N/A*	Austin: "If you guys want to do more, I would. I would consider doing one on Wednesday as well."
Image	Performance	The quality to present certain behaviors in front of audience	*Athletic Performance*	Blake demonstrated his pitching moments in the starting scene.
			Esports Performance	Austin: "Are you kidding me? What? Bro, how did I miss. That made no sense to me. Oh my god."
			Streaming Performance	Demetrious: "A downfall with my streaming is I stream whenever I have free time, you know, and I don't have a set schedule."
	Appearance	Outfit that athletes present on Twitch	*Physical Appearance*	Sean usually changed his hairstyle and color.
			Virtual Appearance	Austin showcased his Flow Skin.

Table III-2 Continued Athlete Personal Branding Behaviors on Twitch

	Lifestyle	Marketable off-field features of an athlete	*N/A*	Juju played "Straightenin" (by Migos) and "Over the top" (by Smiley & Drake) in stream.
Relationship	**Relationship with Fans**	Build a close connection with fans	*Interaction*	Juju responded to the comments from spectators regularly.
			Appreciation	Austin thanked to a fan after the fan subscribed to his channel.
	Relationship with Teammates	Build relationships with esports teammates and sports colleagues	*Co-stream*	Juju streamed together with Apex gamer Skitz.
			Friendship	Hunter showed himself playing board games with a group of friends.
			Interaction	Austin danced together with teammates in the game.

As shown in Table 3.2, the Identity category was found to consist of Identity Construction (Sportsperson and Celebrity), Identity Extension (Gamer, Streamer, and Average Joe), and Identity Transition. The Positioning category was found to involve Selective Content and Target Markets. The Image category was found to cover Performance (Athletic Performance, Esports Performance, and Streaming Performance), Appearance (Physical Appearance and Virtual Appearance), and Lifestyle. The Relationship category was found to include Relationship with Fans (Interaction and Appreciation) and Relationship with Teammates (Co-stream, Friendship, and Interaction).

3.2.1 Identity

Identity was a unique set of associations that represent what a brand means and what the brand wants to communicate to consumers and stakeholders (Aaker, 2006). From the social identity theory perspective (Tajfel, 1978, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979),

identity was suggested to distinguish the in-group and out-group members. Personal branding researchers suggested identity as a primary step to discovering and building unique characteristics of a personal brand (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Labrecque et al., 2011; Shaker & Hafiz, 2014; Shepherd, 2005). In this netnography, I observed that all 12 professional athletes relied on Twitch to maintain their existing identities and create new identities. For the Identity category of athlete personal branding behaviors, I observed three themes: Identity Construction (Sportsperson and Celebrity), Identity Extension (Gamer, Streamer, and Average Joe), and Identity Transition.

3.2.1.1 Identity Construction

The first theme for the Identity category was Identity Construction. Identity Construction referred to the process that athletes utilized unique features of Twitch to build their identities on the live streaming platform relying on existing identities, such as being a Sportsperson and a Celebrity. As a principal step, Identity Construction connected athletes with the resources that they had already owned, including brand elements (e.g., brand names, logos, and colors) and brand attributes (e.g., sport performance). Like they always do on other digital media, athletes could easily bring their sports fan base to Twitch. However, given the fact that Twitch is a gaming dedicated platform, it might be challenging for some athletes to introduce their sport identities to the passionate gamers. Yet athletes had discovered some new opportunities to showcase expertise or sport performance.

Sportsperson

A primary identity of an athlete was Sportsperson. All 12 athletes that were included in this study had presented their Sportsperson identities on Twitch. Sportsperson stood for the athletic identity that athletes had already established through their professional sports careers, whether the athletes were still active on the court or not. Twitch channel page setup features like bio and social links, profile picture, profile banner, and customized emotes had been commonly adopted by athletes to construct their athletic identity. The bio and social links usually came up in the "About" section of the Twitch channel page and offered athletes a place to communicate their personal brand statements. For instance, Blake Snell suggested himself as a professional athlete of the San Diego Padres in his bio statement. Figure 2 showed the Twitch profile page of Blake Snell. Blake shared links to his social media, which provided viewers with opportunities to spectate who the athletes were on other digital platforms.

Figure 2 Twitch Profile Page of Blake Snell

Some athletes had selected photos from the sports fields as their profile pictures or profile banners on Twitch. Similarly, using pictures and videos that showed their athletic performance, athletes had created customized emotes (i.e., Twitch culture-based emotions that fans can use in the chat), personalized GIFs, channel trailers, and starting scenes. The starting scene Blake added before his official streams showed himself pitching on the baseball field with a 10-minute countdown for the stream start time. Blake had transferred some of his own on-court moments into creative GIFs, which were sent to welcome fans when they follow the channel or to interact with fans at special occasions (such as a birthday).

Notably, athletic performance became part of the conversations between athletes and fans during live streaming. When Demetrious Johnson was questioned about the difference between Muay Thai and Jiu Jitsu, he explained why he would recommend Muay Thai to the audience:

> Muay Thai is good because it keeps you moving and you're a lot on your toes. It makes you athletic because you're staying on your toes and you're bouncing back and forth … I would recommend Muay Thai over Jiu Jitsu. (Johnson, 2021a)

Another way that athletes constructed their Sportsperson identity on Twitch was by creating sports-related content. Although Twitch is exclusively popular for gaming, it has established several categories (e.g., Just Chatting) that allow users to provide non-gaming content. Therefore, some athletes took this opportunity to promote their sports expertise. For example, former UFC fighter Jens Pulver live streamed himself

commentating on other players' performance in fighting matches. In his comments, the UFC legend focused on providing specific fighting strategies and skills. Athletes also relied on their expertise in exercise training to become the "fitness trainers" that accompanied the fans virtually. In the video where Austin Ekeler live streamed him doing a 10-minute abs exercise, he guided fans to work out together by giving detailed instructions and encouragement.

Athletes may also provide updates on their sport match schedules, training, team performance, and other sport-related plans. For instance, MMA player Sean O' Malley created polls and asked which fighter fans would like to watch him play against. At the end of Austin Ekeler's stream, he asked fans if they wanted to participate in a fan-controlled football game tonight. Those behind-the-scenes stories led to interactive conversations between fans and athletes. The dialogue between Juju Smith-Schuster and fans on their expectations about the Steelers' performance in the coming seasons was an appropriate example. Juju asked fans, "You guys tell me what do you think the Steelers record is going to be? We have the hardest schedule in football this year. What do you think work is going to be?" (Schuster, 2021b).

Celebrity

The other theme that I observed during the Identity Construction process was athlete identity as a Celebrity. As public figures, athletes established their celebrity status and have already constructed their brand elements, such as brand names, logos, and colors. All 12 athletes had constructed their Celebrity identities on Twitch. Those existing brand elements acted as great resources to grow the awareness of their brand

names and build their identities as celebrities in a consistent way. For instance, Sean O'

Malley, who was well known as "Sugar", employed a starting scene with a rainbow

color frame that looked like "sugar". Sean also placed his own "Suga" sign behind his

camera window during streaming. Fans widely accepted this nickname of Sean and

called the athlete using variants of the nickname "sugar" "suga" "sug" all the time

during the live broadcasting. Similarly, Austin Ekeler projects an "AE" sign, which

reflected the abbreviation of his name, on the back wall of his camera. Jens Pulver

showed his own brand logo "JP" at the start scene of all his videos. Constantly showing

the same brand symbols to the fans, athletes were able to establish brand awareness

among fans to recognize and recall the identity the athletes previously own, and

ultimately helped athletes build their unique personal brands in a consistent way across

various media.

Athletes also recognized their responsibilities as celebrities. Many athletes

included social links for philanthropy in their profile pages to reveal that they were

socially responsible public figures. For instance, Charles Leclerc included a link on his

profile page to raise funds for the World Health Organization's COVID-19 Solidarity

Response Fund. As notable superstars, athletes attracted tremendous amounts of

endorsement deals, which usually required them to take the promotion responsibility.

Therefore, athletes may demonstrate their sponsors or partners on their profile pages. For

example, Demetrious Johnson displayed a picture of his sponsor "Quantum" (i.e., energy

bar brand) on his profile page. Athletes would also give verbal appreciation to the

sponsors. When Austin Ekeler was about to end his stream with Verizon 5G event, he

said, "Shout out to Verizon and 5G for making my internet faster. That's for sure."

(Ekeler, 2021a).

3.2.1.1 Identity Extension

The second theme that I observed was Identity Extension. Identity Extension means that athletes employed Twitch as a tool to expand their brands to a different category using existing brand elements and attributes. I observed three sub-themes for Identity Extension: Gamer, Streamer, and Average Joe. The exclusive gaming content on Twitch offered athletes an opportunity to live stream esports performances (i.e., Streamer) and brand their expertise as gamers. Some of the athletes were passionate gamers, while some played video games just for fun. Whether the athletes were veterans or rookies in live streaming, they could experience various technical challenges.

Gamer

The first identity that an athlete attempted to expand through Twitch was the identity as a Gamer. 11 out of 12 athletes presented themselves as Gamers on Twitch. The Gamer identity emphasizes that the athletes are willing to show their passion for esports and other video games. With its gaming focus, Twitch has become a unique digital media platform to present their Gamer identities when compared with social media. Some athletes, including Juju Smith-Schuster, mentioned their professional esports status in their bios, and all recognized themselves as competing for pro esports at a certain level. Juju was not the only athlete that played for a professional esports team (i.e., Team Diverge), Sean O'Malley stated in his bio that he was a Fortnite Champ pro and a member of Team Complexity. Unlike those gaming pros, some athletes were just

casual gamers who play esports at a similar level to their fans. Those athletes, including

Hunter Pence, naturally exhibited their "weakness" in esports, because they might lose

the games quite often and had to seek advice from fans. Hunter reached out to the chat

about rules questions of Magic: The Gathering, and fans suggested that he use

gather.wizards.com as a quick resource. When fans repeatedly commented on Hunter's

poor performance in the shooting game Apex, Hunter responded, "I need to learn to be

better…Dave, I hear you. I am trying Apex, it is a brand new thing. I definitely gonna

put in some work…I don't take it serious but just play it." (Pence, 2021a).

Athletes played various kinds of esports and enjoyed distinctive aspects of

gaming. Some athletes (e.g., Charles Leclerc, Josh Hart) were loyal to one or two games.

Some athletes (e.g., Juju Smith-Schuster, Blake Snell) were more willing to engage in

different genres of esports. Athletes like Hunter Pence enjoyed interacting with other

players and played esports because they could hang out with friends virtually. Those

athletes could be categorized as socializers according to Bartle's (1996) Taxonomy of

Player Type. Some athletes might be achievers (Bartle, 1996), who emphasized more on

the outcome of the games. Like other gamers, athletes enjoyed exploring virtual

interactions in the digital world. For example, while Juju Smith-Schuster was waiting for

an event mode game to start, he controlled the in-game character to relax on the chair

and move around.

Streamer

Another identity that athletes developed on Twitch was Streamer. The Streamer

identity explains that athletes perceived themselves as professional content creators, who

relied on streaming skills and strategies to provide media content to followers. Athletes

realized how important it was to broadcast like professional streamers. Like other

streamers, athletes used technical components provided by Twitch, such as badges and

emojis, to create personalized spectating and interacting experiences. Some athletes also

added opening scenes with personalized elements before they start streaming. Juju

created an opening scene with animations and his slogan, "Juju is starting. Get Litty."

(Schuster, 2021a). Similarly, Blake Snell added an opening scene to his stream with a

showcase of his baseball performance.

A successful stream was also typically accompanied by the individual level

hardware setups (such as streaming devices) and the software level digital components

(such as chatbots) (Taylor, 2018). As athletes gained more experience in live streaming,

most of the athletes improved their techniques to set up streaming environments and

interact with the fans. Athletes adopted streaming bots (e.g., streaming element,

nightbots) to interact with fans automatically. Some athletes (e.g., Sean O'Malley,

Hunter Pence) would raid (i.e., bring all current audiences into another channel) their

audience to the channel of one fan. To create a more comfortable streaming

environment, athletes like Blake Snell and Demetrious Johnson invested a lot in

streaming devices, such as screens, cameras, speakers, and even lighting equipment. For

instance, Blake revealed his streaming environment in one video where he streamed with

trio screens and lighting equipment (see Figuer 3). Likewise, Demetrious showed in one

of his videos about his streaming devices as well as his streaming environment.
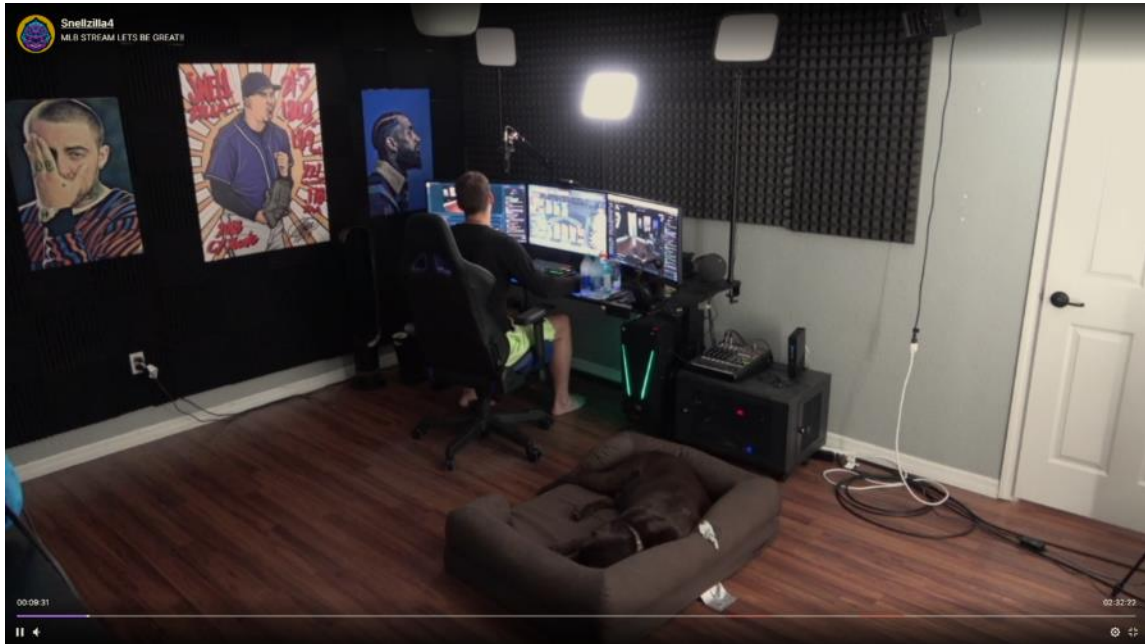
Figure 3 Streaming Environment of Blake Snell
Average Joe

The final identity observed on athlete Twitch channels for identity extension was

Average Joe. Average Joe suggests that athletes behaved like normal people in many

ways. Like a typical gamer, athletes ate snacks and drank soda or alcohol while playing

esports. Juju chewed gum when he was live streaming, "What am I eating? I'm actually

chewing gum. I was eating some food earlier, perhaps soon." (Schuster, 2021b). Athletes

behaved like ordinary individuals when they won or lost a game. George shouted out

loudly when he won a game. Likewise, Hunter Pence commented on his losing streak,

"This is my theme of day, to be defeated" (Pence, 2021b). In addition, George Russell

could not help clapping and waving his hands after winning a virtual F1 game, and

expressed his overwhelming excitement:

Have we won? Have we won? Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! Damn boy. Oh finally! …

I am feeling ecstatic. I'm not used to this winning thing. I've not done it for a

long, long time, so I dearly missed it. (Russell, 2020a)

Athletes not only branded themselves as an average gamer in positive ways, but

they naturally exhibited some negative behaviors that a common gamer may frequently

perform. Trolling and spamming are two common toxic behaviors on Twitch (Obreja,

2021). Intentional repetitions of messages are spamming (Obreja, 2021). Many athletes

unconsciously repeated their commands or instructions when communicating in the

virtual world. When Max Holloway was giving his teammates hints on where the

opponent was in a COD game, he was repeating his commands as an average gamer,

"Guys in a cashier, cashier, a cashier." (Holloway, 2020a) Another obvious pranking

behavior on the internet is trolling (Obreja, 2021). A good example was Juju Smith-

Schuster. Juju commented on some teammates as "dawgs" (i.e., close friends), and some

fans responded to him and trolled Juju as "dog". Then Juju responded to the fans:

If you're now on my chat, you are a dog too. You are now on my chat, you are a

dog too. If you're in my chat room, you are a dog, you are a dog. You are a dog,

regardless. You're dog, you're dog, you're dog, you're dog… (Schuster, 2021b)

3.2.1.3 Identity Transition

Twitch became a platform for retired athletes to retain and transfer their athletic

identities. Retiring from a professional sports career usually leads to uncertainty about

the future and negative emotions that are characterized by a shift in athletic identity

(Brown et al., 2018). Retired athletes utilized Twitch to cope with career transition

challenges. Athletes like Jens Pulver may consecutively built their athletic identities using their expertise in sports to create Twitch content. Jens revealed the hardiness of his identity shift from professional sports, "It was the hardest. I think it was definitely my life. Training was my life. Wrestling and everything. Being athletic was my life, you know?… I just was pissed when it was over." (Pulver, 2021a).

Yet it was even harder for athletes to connect with sports fans when they faded away from the professional stage. Athletes might no longer have the same resources to host fan interaction events like autograph sign sessions or youth camps. Twitch, however, provided athletes with virtual interaction opportunities to maintain their relationships with fans. For instance, fans loved to show their support for the athletes via chats. A fan wrote to Hunter Pence in his live streaming video on September 6th, 2021, "My mom is watching and has your jersey, she's a big fan." Fans could even show their love financially by subscribing to the athlete's channel. Hunter expressed his appreciation to a fan after he gifted several subscriptions, "Thank you, Josh, for that five six-month (subscriptions)." (Pence, 2021b).

Retired athletes also depended upon Twitch to reveal their transition in athletic identity. Jens Pulver discussed his body shape with fans and mentioned he could fit in these skinny clothes again because he had lost enough weight. The live streaming feature on Twitch made it convenient for athletes to reveal their private lives. Jens talked about his personal life after retirement:

I'm kind of living the perfect days. Yeah, I mean, every day I wake up my

babies… So she's laying down watching a TV or iPad or something, just to hear

the voice. The other one's upstairs. I know what game he's playing. (Pulver,

2021b)

3.2.2 Positioning

Positioning refers to the process of adjusting branding strategies and

communications in order to reflect the personal brand identity to a specific group of

audience (Khedher, 2014; Labrecque et al., 2011; Shaker & Hafiz, 2014). The main

purpose of brand positioning was to create a competitive advantage that differentiates

the personal brand from others (Labrecque et al., 2011; Shaker & Hafiz, 2014). Athletes

utilized various positioning approaches to present their brand identities to a specific

audience on Twitch. Two themes were identified for the Positioning category of athlete

personal branding behaviors: Selective Content and Target Markets.

3.2.2.1 Selective Content

Selective Content suggests that athletes deliberately managed and chose what

content they want to present in front of the audience. For instance, six out of 12 athletes

engaged in multiple categories of streaming so that they can deliver various content to

different audiences. A good example was Blake Smith, who was well-known for playing

MLB The Show, started playing Call of Duty and Golf games, as well as casually

involved with fans in the Just Chatting category. Likewise, Hunter Pence switched

between Apex and Magic: The Gathering during his live streaming. Hunter even asked

fans which game they preferred to watch him play. Selectively broadcasting those trendy

games, athletes might find it easier to reach their target markets.

Athletes also selectively chose what kind of content to reveal to maintain a consistent image on Twitch. This has been suggested to be an important strategy for positioning in an online context (Labrecque et al., 2011; Shaker & Hafiz, 2014). A good example was how Blake Snell utilized his nickname, Zilla to construct a consistent image on Twitch and off Twitch. Blake "borrowed" this nickname from his oldest brother and frequently branded himself as a Zilla. His bubble head was named "Cy Zilla". Therefore, when Blake engaged in personal branding on Twitch, he widely used the brand element Zilla to convey a constant message. His brand name on Twitch was "SnellZilla4", while his profile picture was a purple Zilla. He wrote on his bio that he wanted to turn his fans into Zilla Fam. The word Zilla Fam is what Blake describes of his fanbase, and was frequently used in the streaming titles and chats.

3.2.2.2 Target Markets

The second theme identified for the positioning process was Target Markets. This means that athletes were aware of the specific groups of fans that love to watch them playing video games. Since a large portion of the audience came from the athletes' existing fandom, athletes adopted special positioning strategies to market themselves to those audiences. For instance, they might rely on social media platforms to promote their stream via Twitch. Fans commented on Hunter Pence and indicated that they came to watch Hunter's live streaming because they saw the promotion message on Twitter. Athletes would seek suggestions from those existing fans on the live streaming content. At the end of an exercise video, Austin Ekeler asked fans if they would love to see more

similar content, "Catch me if you guys want to do it. If you guys want to do more, I would. I would consider doing one on Wednesday as well." (Ekeler, 2021b).

Athletes had unique positioning strategies to promote themselves to new audiences on Twitch. A common strategy that many athletes used is to promote their sportsperson identity. For instance, on his panel page, Austin Ekeler shared his 2019 season NFL highlights, which introduced his sports performance to the new followers from Twitch. Some athletes would welcome the first-timers interpersonally. When Blake Snell saw quite a few new audiences come to his live streaming, he showed special welcome to the new followers:

> Ethan, how are you doing? Good. On a first-timer there. What up? Welcome to the family … All the new subs, and all the new followers, welcome to the stream. We are going to have fun. And I promise that we definitely do. (Snell, 2021b)

3.2.3 Image

Image refers to fan perceptions of the athlete brand attributes (Arai et al., 2014). In this netnography, I observed three themes of the image category: Performance, Appearance, and Lifestyle. Athletes showcased their sports performances and esports expertise, and exhibited their physical appearance and virtual appearance, as well as marketable lifestyle on this live streaming platform.

3.2.3.1 Performance

Performance refers to how well athletes presented certain behaviors in front of the audience. For the Performance theme, I identified three sub-themes: Athletic Performance, Esports Performance, and Streaming Performance.

Athletic Performance

Athletic Performance includes an athlete's sport-related features on the field, such as playing style, outcome, and expertise (Arai et al., 2014). The athletic performance was an important attribute that athletes adopt to promote their Sportperson identities. It was the athletic performance that made the athletes attractive to a lot of fans. Numberless fans came to Blake Snell's live streaming video and commented in the chats that he was a Goat (i.e., greatest of all time). As introduced earlier, athletes presented their athletic performance on profile pages, starting scenes, and personalized channel emotes. Athletes always talked about their personal athletic performance as well as team performance. When Juju Smith-Schuster was asked to comment on his team's preseason performance, he responded to the fans:

> But I'll come over here, talk about how we lost to the Panthers… We had none of the starters playing this preseason. Talk to them and talk to them and talk to them as just the preseason is the preseason. Am I going on a tour with Danny Duncan? No, I can't. To be honest, I can't… But I know he comes to Pittsburgh and help me out here. (Schuster, 2021a)

Esports Performance

Esports Performance refers to how well the athletes behaved in the games. This was constantly shown during the stream since a core product athletes provided on Twitch was the esports content. For instance, Hunter Pence evaluated his personal confidence after losing one Apex game. Likewise, Max Holloway reflected on his team's performance in a Call of Duty game, "Dubs say going into the day and we trying.

Everybody in double digits, that's a good game that is a good a game, if you ask on me."

(Holloway, 2020b)

Streaming Performance

Streaming Performance specifies the quality of the live streaming service that the athletes provided. The importance of production quality has been recognized by streamers and they usually invest in the hardcore components (Taylor, 2018). For example, Blake Snell upgraded his streaming devices, hoping to secure a well-established streaming environment. Athletes also regularly checked the streaming quality with fans. To help monitor his streaming performance, Josh Hart asked, "Chat, how's the stream look, man? Does it look smooth? Clear? Is it crisp?" (Hart, 2021a)

3.2.3.2 Appearance

Appearance refers to the outfit that athletes presented on Twitch. I observed two subthemes for the Appearance theme: Physical Appearance and Virtual Appearance.

Physical Appearance

Physical appearance is related to an athlete's external appearance (Arai et al., 2014). Athletes used Twitch as a way to present their off-field appearance. The live streaming environment allowed athletes to present their daily outfits. That was what they wear and looked like when they were away from professional sports. The physical outlook of athletes usually received positive impressions from fans. For instance, in Sean O'Malley's live stream video on September 5th, 2021, several fans commented that the athlete looked hot. Athletes cared about their physical appearance in front of the camera. Sean usually changes his hairstyle and color. Some athletes wore accessories to attract

fans' attention or entertain the fans. A good example was Blake Snell, and he wore a

Marshmello mask when he was performing one live streaming (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 Blake Snell wore a Marshmello mask

Virtual Appearance

Twitch also provided a platform for athletes to showcase virtual appearances.

Athletes selected specific avatars (i.e., in-game characters) that represented them in the

virtual space, and decorated the outfit of those heroes using virtual skins and costumes

(i.e., virtual clothes and accessories). Those virtual avatars could help athletes

reconstruct their identities and build self-extensions in the digital world (Meadows,

2007; Wang et al., 2014). The virtual appearance offered unprecedented opportunities

for athletes to present their desired selves in the virtual space. A good example was an

interesting interaction among Austin Ekeler, his teammates, and fans on Austin's Flow

Skin (an outfit from the Fortnite Gleam Team set) while playing the Verizon 5G Fortnite event (see Figure 5):

>Austin: Oh! Look at that skin.

>Teammate A: You are like Potato Shack. How did you get that skin?

>Austin: Oh! I am a pay to win player, you know?

>Teammate A: This skin is like the exact opposite of where you are … just shoots a beam straight up in the sky. And I'm right here.Teammate B: I am just going to ask Austin to have that play to lose.

>Austin: OK, OK, here we go.

>Fan (in the chat): Pay to lose skin. (Ekeler, 2021a)

Figure 5 Austin Ekeler in the Flow Skin

3.2.3.3 Lifestyle

Lifestyle refers to the marketable off-field features of an athlete (Arai et al., 2014). Similar to other digital media, Twitch became a platform where athletes displayed their way of living, especially their preferences for certain products, such as food, drink, and music. One typical lifestyle behavior was that athletes showed what they ate or drank in front of the camera. For instance, Sean O' Malley ate some salad before he streamed himself playing Call of Duty. Other than eating or drinking in front of fans, athletes might present other lifestyle behaviors. Sean played the harmonica after he won a game or had lots of kills in one game. In addition, athletes freely shared their attitudes to certain restaurants or brands when they were streaming. Juju Smith-Schuster had a discussion with fans on his appetite for pizza and his opinions on where to get pizza. Many athletes would listen to their favorite music while streaming. Juju enjoyed sharing the rap songs that he likes to fans when broadcasting on Twitch. For instance, Juju played "Straightenin" (by Migos) and "Over the top" (by Smiley & Drake) in one of his streams. He even sang with the song, and cheered himself with a raised fist by yelling the "Straightenin" lyrics, "Let's go, Juju!" (Schuster, 2021a). Blake Snell played "I don't wanna party" (by Mike) in his starting scenes. When asked his favorite song on Mike's album, Blake responded to the fans, "Boy, 'what's your favorite song on Mike's album?' Ah, I Don't Want to Party is still my favorite. The new album. I only know this. I think there was his Every Little Thing about the new one." (Snell, 2021b)

Relationship emphasizes the athletes' positive attitudes to develop and maintain interactions with fans, teammates, and celebrities (Arai et al., 2014). Twitch offered athletes various digital components to create different forms of interactions with fans and other celebrities. For the Relationship theme, I observed two sub-themes: Relationship with Fans, and Relationship with Teammates.

3.2.4.1 Relationship with Fans

Under the Relationship with Fans theme, I identified two sub-themes: interaction and appreciation. Relationship with Fans explains that athletes built a close connection with fans on Twitch. The community looked like a family, and athletes and fans checked with each other about what had happened recently. Most athletes started their streaming by greeting their fans like old friends. When Blake Snell came back to his channel after three months, he was greeted by many passionate fans who were glad to see him back on Twitch.

Interaction

The first theme identified for the relationship with the fans was interaction. The most common form of interaction between athletes and fans was through the chats. Usually, fans provided questions or comments in the chats, and then athletes would verbally read some messages and respond to the fans. Juju responded to the comments from spectators regularly and followed some fans' suggestions or commands when he faced some choices in-game. Likewise, when asked about his opinion on who was the best golfer for the Padres, Blake said, "Who's the best golfer on the Padres, I think

Myers or Stanley, they talk like that. I don't know. I don't really play any of them in golf." (Snell, 2021a).

A unique form of interaction on Twitch was the automated interaction between athletes and the fans. Software infrastructures like bots allowed athletes to set up specific messages that automatically responded when fans performed a variety of functions (Taylor, 2018). Athletes relied on those bots (e.g., nightbots, streamlabs, streamelements) to interact with fans impulsively. When Trevor Mays connected to his Twitch channel, the channel bot StreamElements would send automated messages into chats, such as announcing his stream's start or sharing links to his latest YouTube videos. Fans could use some automated functions to interact. For instance, when fans typed "!social" into the chat, an automated message saying "Click this link and follow me on my socials for more content! (link)" would be sent to the chat.

Bet was another useful form of interaction that athletes might adopt. Austin Ekeler started a bet on Twitch and asked fans to bet if Austin could get one kill in the last few games:

All right, let's start a bet. Will I get a kill in these last two more rounds? That's the bet … Let's start with the bet. Will I get one kill in these next two rounds? The game got any mods in the chat? … Will I get a kill in the last two rounds? Yes or no bet. (Ekeler, 2021a)

After the moderator of the channel set up the bet with the help of Streamlabs, fans quickly responded by using the "!bet" function of Twitch to gamble channel points on the athlete's performance (see Figure 6).

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1:23:47 ⚔️ ☑️ **Streamlabs**: Betting has opened for "Will Austin get a kill?" use !bet yes | no 10-10000 to register your bet. Use !mybet to confirm that your bet went though.

1:23:48 ⚔️ 🅰️ 👑 **riles2691**: done

1:23:53 🅰️ 👑 **koalvic**: !bet no 50

1:23:54 **PissProblems**: !bet no all

1:23:55 **bar0422222**: !points

1:23:55 ⚔️ ☑️ **Streamlabs**: @bar0422222, you have 3 Points.

1:24:02 🅰️ 👑 **poppacarcar**: !bet no 70

1:24:03 🅰️ 👑 **dimdondim**: !bet yes all

1:24:04 🅰️ **valg2**: !bet no 50

1:24:05 🅰️ 👑 **cody_youngsushi**: !bet no 50

1:24:09 🅰️ **thrashr114**: !bet no all

1:24:14 🅰️ 👑 **ethanfine30**: !bet yes 10

1:24:15 🅰️ 👑 **heather_lynn2**: !bet no 60

1:24:16 🅰️ 👑 **poppacarcar**: wow

1:24:20 **bar0422222**: !Bet 3 no

1:24:23 👑 **yeeboi8364727**: They all saying no 😂 😂😂

1:24:25 👑 **gabergoober123**: !bet no 190

1:24:28 🅰️ 🎁 **atpaulson25**: !bet yes 100

1:24:33 🅰️ 👑 **ethanfine30**: !mybet

1:24:37 🅰️ **valg2**: 🧔

1:24:38 ⚔️ ☑️ **Streamlabs**: @ethanfine30 you bet 10 Points on yes. The splits are 30% | 70%, with a total pot of 889 Points.

Figure 6 Fans Bet on Austin Ekeler's Performance

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Appreciation

The second theme observed in the relationship with the fans was appreciation. Appreciation refers to athletes' gratitude for fans' support. The most common way of appreciation was verbal appreciation. For example, Juju Smith-Schuster expressed his gratitude for the fans who came to his stream, "I appreciate the love… People are eager supporting today." (Schuster, 2021a). Subscribing to the channel or gifting subscriptions usually received athletes' gratitude as well. Austin thanked his fan after the fan subscribed to his channel, "Dr_805 (username), I appreciate that." (Ekeler, 2021a). Automated appreciation was employed by athletes to express their gratitude to fans. When a fan subscribed to the athletes' channel, a welcome and thank you message appeared in the chat, as well as in the streaming video. Athletes also provided giveaways to thank fans for their support. Like Demetrious Johnson said, "We'll be doing giveaways on the stream once they arrive here. Get back to the challenge to get back to you guys who supported keeping the stream going." (Johnson, 2021b).

3.2.4.2 Relationship with Teammates

Athletes used Twitch as a platform to build their relationships with esports teammates and sports colleagues. Three themes have been identified for this category: Co-stream, Friendship, and Interaction.

Co-stream

The first theme observed under this category is co-stream. When Juju Smith-Schuster played Apex for the first time, he co-streamed with Apex gamer Skitz who plays for Team Diverge. Likewise, Austin Ekeler teamed up with NFL players, including

Justin Jefferson (wide receiver for Minnesota Kings) and Trent Sieg (long snapper for

Las Vegas Raiders) to promote the Verizon 5G Fortnite event.

Friendship

Twitch was also adopted as a platform where athletes showed their friendship

with others. Most athletes had particular partners to play esports together. Sean O'

Malley played Call of Duty: Warzone with a subscriber ImJinxt, who was Sean's WZ

duo. Hunter Pence enjoyed showing himself playing board games with a group of

friends. Athletes might have some personal conversations with those partners. Austin

discussed vacation plans with Justin Jefferson:

Austin: Well, Justin, what's been up to, bro?

Justin: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's now just vacation, it's turning out.

Austin: OK, yeah. Where are you? Where are you heading?

Justin: I'm in Miami now in Miami right now.

Austin: Is that vacation that's are you saying it? (Ekeler, 2021a)

Interaction

The majority of athlete interactions with teams and other celebrities were verbal

communications about the game. Usually, they discussed game objectives and strategies.

For instance, Max Holloway provided instructions to his teammates in Call of Duty

when they were facing some enemies, "The one the first, the first shot that you shoot the

guy behind the box, I don't know how, you know, kill him straight in his shoulder."

Another example happened when Austin Ekeler needed to complete a task with

teammates in the game, "How do we turn on the speaker? Turn on the speaker by Illama.

Oh, yeah, it's over here. It's a big boom box over here. I would say crank that. Oh, right here, crank that right." (Ekeler, 2021a).

       Athletes also interacted with teammates and other celebrities in the game. A good example was that Austin had some virtual interactions with teammates. Austin controlled his character in-game to jump around teammates until they all needed to dance the same way to complete a task (see Figure 7).

Figure 7 Austin Ekeler Dance with Teammates

3.3 Discussion

       The purpose of this study was to explore how athletes use Twitch for personal branding. Overall, this netnography provided a candid report of athlete personal branding behaviors on Twitch. The netnography observations suggested that Twitch had already become an important digital medium for athletes to build and manage personal brands. The various behaviors athletes exhibited on Twitch supported findings from

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previous literature about the personal branding process (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Khedher, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2011). Three unique features of Twitch had strongly affected athletes' personal branding behaviors. The first feature is that Twitch is dedicated to providing esports content (Taylor, 2018). Being part of the Twitch ecosystem, athletes broadcasted themselves playing video games on this gaming-exclusive platform. This afforded athletes opportunities to build esports identities, create virtual brand images, and develop relationships with potential esports fans. The second feature is the live streaming component of Twitch (Taylor, 2018). Synchronous communications on Twitch offered athletes the advantage of using automated interaction and real-time interaction in connecting with fans, teammates, and other celebrities. This brought athlete personal branding to the next chapter. The third feature of Twitch is community engagement (Taylor, 2018). Different from other digital media platforms, Twitch is a hyper-connected community. Therefore, fans play a relatively more important role in the co-creation of athlete brands and brand communities on Twitch.

3.3.1 Identity Construction via Twitch

One of the most profound findings of this study was that athletes used Twitch to help with their identity construction process. Twitch allowed athletes to construct their existing identities, such as Sportsperson and Celebrity. Athletes adopted Twitch as a personal branding platform to promote their athletic brand attributes and celebrity status. This aligns with findings from previous literature on athlete social media use that social media provides athletes with the capability to project their athletic success (Doyle et al., 2020; Sanderson, 2013). Yet the digital components of Twitch, such as customized

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channel emotes, could offer users more opportunities to create personalized brand elements (Taylor, 2018). Therefore, the digital features on Twitch become competitive advantages for athletes to deliver a consistent and personalized message when constructing their identities as sportspersons and celebrities outside of sports.

Athletes also took advantage of Twitch to explore who they are away from the sports fields. This finding is consistent with results from previous research that social media provides athletes with opportunities to project preferred identities (Sanderson, 2013). This finding is highly connected with Twitch's unique feature of providing exclusive gaming content. By broadcasting themselves playing video games through Twitch, athletes could build new identities such as Gamer, Streamer, and Average Joe. As a gaming dedicated streaming platform, Twitch has its competitive advantage in helping athletes promote themselves as gamers and streamers. The Average Joe identity corresponds to the observation from Sanderson (2013) that athletes shared followers with a glimpse into everyday lives as "Everyday People". Different from previous social media literature is that athletes not only exhibited their behind-scenes behaviors on Twitch, but they were able to build identities when playing esports. As Xue et al. (2019) suggested, players were able to construct, enact, and rewrite their identities through gaming.

Additionally, Twitch has even helped retired athletes to cope with their career transitions. This echoes the finding from previous research that video games could assist retired athletes with perpetuating their competitive identity (Bowers, 2011). Retiring from professional sports careers usually results in a decrease in the athletic identity of

athletes (Brown et al., 2018). Retired athletes have found Twitch especially useful, as it provides them a channel to connect with their sports fans and gain new fans even after they stepped away from sports. Athletes could smoothly transition between multiple identities on social media (Sanderson, 2013). Twitch, with its live streaming feature, can aid athletes in the transition between various identities on the same platform.

My findings further provided a foundation for understanding the athlete identity construction process in the virtual world. The virtual space offers a platform for identity construction of different facets of the self (Labrecque et al., 2011). The digital components of Twitch (e.g., emotes, bondages, and GIFs) helped athletes construct their personalized virtual space — their Twitch channels. Fans relied on those customized digital elements as well as other Twitch functions to interact with athletes virtually. In addition, athletes could explore other virtual identities by interacting with teammates, co-streamers, and even strangers they met in the video games. For instance, by sharing genuine knowledge about the games with "newbies", players could establish their identification with certain esports and commitment to the esports community (Xue et al., 2019).

3.3.2 Positioning Strategies on Twitch

Another important finding of this study was that athletes adopted distinctive positioning strategies when presenting their various identities on Twitch. One of the effective positioning strategies was that athletes communicated selective content on the live streaming platform. This supports the statement from previous research that individual brand positioning generates the desired brand image to reflect personal brand

identity (Shaker & Hafiz, 2014). Positioning unique identities to the audience has been regarded as one way of impression management, which usually stands for self-presentation (Labresque et al., 2011). Given that positioning is usually embedded in the entire process of personal branding, athletes relied on positioning to connect their identities, image, and impression management. The positioning strategy allows athletes to differentiate their brands from competitors (Lobpries et al., 2018). Research suggests that the brand positioning (i.e., marketing orientation) of athletes on social media has a positive impact on consumer engagement (Doyle et al., 2020).

Another finding of the Positioning theme is that athletes communicated their brand identities to the Target Audience in order to foster a favorable impression. This is in agreement with previous research on athlete social media use that athletes perform various marketing strategies to reach different audiences (Doyle et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021). Unlike general Twitch influencers who target passionate gamers (Taylor, 2018; Woodcock & Johnson, 2021), athletes in this study were aware that their primary audience was their existing sports fans. Therefore, they adopted unique positioning strategies, such as branding their Sportsperson identities, to project the unique aspects of their brands to attract the target audience.

3.3.3 Shape Brand Image through Twitch

In addition, Twitch became a useful platform for athletes to build their brand image, especially their Performance, Appearance, and Lifestyle. This finding is consistent with the Model of Athlete Brand Image (Arai et al., 2014). Athletes still presented their athletic performance as they always did on social media (Doyle et al.,

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2020). One unique observation about performance is that athletes were able to build esports performance and streaming performance on Twitch. Those are special brand attributes that athletes could not easily construct on other digital media.

The virtual appearance in the Appearance theme is another interesting finding. When athletes live streamed on Twitch, they showed the audience their unique avatars and virtual costumes or decorations in video games. The avatars and costumes offer athletes unique ways to recreate their identities in the virtual space (Meadows, 2007; Wang et al., 2014). Such a virtual brand image may contribute to understanding why athletes present their desired selves in the virtual space (Labresque et al., 2011). Moreover, athlete virtual appearance in video games could affect fan behaviors, ultimately creating sponsorship opportunities.

For instance, athletes were open to sharing their daily lives and their brand preferences for products on Twitch. Those behaviors provided them with opportunities to display their activities beyond sports, which could influence certain behaviors of their fans. This supports findings from previous research that the behind-scenes stories are the core product athletes produce for the fans through social media (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Li et al., 2021). Different from social media is Twitch's live streaming feature, which allows athletes to present their daily lives not only in the texts or pictures, but in front of the camera in real-time.

3.3.4 Build Relationships through Twitch

Athletes performed certain behaviors to foster positive fan relationships on Twitch. While building relationships has been a basic purpose for athletes to use social

media (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Li et al., 2021), Twitch has digital components that allow its users to develop unique relationships on the platform. First, the live streaming function of Twitch turns the interaction between the athletes and the audience into real-time. Second, features like "raid" (i.e., bringing the audience from one channel to another channel) offer Twitch users opportunities to expand their social networks tremendously (Taylor, 2018). Third, Twitch encourages streamers and fans to interact in many unique ways, such as subscription, gifting, polls, chats, bets, and automated interactions (Taylor, 2018). Therefore, interaction with the audience is more personal on Twitch than on other digital media (Taylor, 2018; Woodcock & Johnson, 2021).

The personal interaction between fans and the athletes on Twitch leads to more participatory community engagement (Hamilton et al., 2014; Taylor, 2018). I observed that athletes relied on multiple digital features (such as user-type chat badges, and customized emotes) of Twitch to get fans actively involved in the live streaming. The user-type chat badges allow athletes to appoint dedicated viewers as the moderation teams for their channels. Those moderators help monitor the live chat and manage the channel's community (Taylor, 2018). Fan engagement in building the connected community help transform passive viewers into enthusiastic channel members and develop a sense of community in the athletes' Twitch channels (Hamilton et al., 2014; Taylor, 2018).

Athletes also built friendships with esports teammates and other celebrities through Twitch. This supports the argument that Twitch is a network-based live streaming platform (Taylor, 2018). Social media has similar features that athletes rely on

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to build interpersonal relationships with teammates and other celebrities (Li et al., 2021). However, Twitch offers athletes unique functions that allow them to collaborate or co-stream on the platform with other celebrities. At the same time, Twitch acts as a window where athletes may reveal their relationships with other celebrities in front of the audience. On social media, athletes may only present their interactions with friends and other celebrities (i.e., conversationalist) in the back region (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Li et al., 2021). However, athletes could bring those interactions onto the frontstage on Twitch.

CHAPTER IV

STUDY 2: ATHLETE SELF-PRESENTATION VIA TWITCH

4.1 Methodology

Self-presentation, also known as Impression management, is the driving force of

personal branding (Gorbatov et al. 2018; Khedher, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2011).

Athletes rely on self-presentation to tell their personal stories and present their frontstage

and backstage brand attributes (Doyle et al., 2020; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016;

Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010; Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2018). Therefore,

to address RQ2, I adopted self-presentation theory and conducted a thematic analysis

using the scape videos to examine athlete self-presentation on Twitch.

4.1.1 Data Collection

I conducted a thematic analysis using videos from the third observation stage in

Study 1. I watched the two most recent videos from each athlete's Twitch channel to

examine the athlete self-presentation. TwitchDownloader was utilized to download the

videos. I relied on an automated transcribing service called Trint to acquire the scripts

that athletes verbally delivered in those videos. The scripts along with the videos were

utilized to determine the types of self-presentation strategies that athletes present on

Twitch.

I also cleaned and revised the auto-transcribed video scripts to prepare the text

for the thematic analysis. I adopted the three steps recommended by Maguire and

Delahunt (2017) to help with the script preparation. The first step was to identify the

speakers in the video. It is essential to distinguish the various speakers, such as athletes, teammates, and co-streamers in the live streaming videos because sometimes speakers would talk at the same time. In the second step, I revised the scripts based on what the athletes talked about in the videos. The third step included adding additional information that appeared in the videos, such as background music, in-game behaviors, and other visual actions that were related to athlete self-presentation.

4.1.2 Data Analysis

Twenty-four videos from the third observation stage of the netnography were included as the subject for this thematic analysis. Twenty-four is an appropriate sample size to conduct thematic analysis, as suggested by Braun et al. (2016). Furthermore, previous esports studies that adopted thematic analysis also indicated this was a proper sample size (Diwanji, 2020; McLean & Griffiths, 2013; Obreja, 2021). Data analysis involved a priori coding informed by self-presentation theory and the previous literature on athlete social media use. Initial codes were developed by adopting backstage and frontstage frames from Lebel and Danylchuk (2012, 2014) and Li et al. (2021) with modifications (see Table IV-1 in the Findings section).

To carry out the data analysis, I followed the six steps for thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2012) and Maguire and Delahunt (2017). The first step is to become familiar with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Magurine & Delahunt, 2017). During this step, I read the transcribed scripts repeatedly. Interesting observations from step one lead to the second step: generating initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Magurine & Delahunt, 2017). The initial codes were developed into an Excel

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spreadsheet. I then carried out several steps to review and revise the codes, including searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Magurine & Delahunt, 2017). The final step is the writing up of findings (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Magurine & Delahunt, 2017). To help establish the trustworthiness of coding, I followed the internal cross-check procedures in the netnography coding process. To reduce bias in codling, I adopted the peer debriefing method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spall, 1998).

Although most previous studies utilized a content analysis to interpret athlete self-presentation on digital media, I chose not to use this method because a content analysis requires a clear definition of data analysis units. As compared with other qualitative methods, thematic analysis requires more researcher engagement and interpretation (Guest et al., 2012). The advantage of thematic analysis is that it goes beyond counting specific words or phrases, and emphasizes identifying and interpreting the themes (Guest et al., 2012). In addition, researchers have adopted thematic analyses to explore streamer behaviors on Twitch and in esports contexts (Diwanji, 2020; McLean & Griffiths, 2013; Obreja, 2021).

4.2 Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the types of athlete self-presentation on Twitch. Overall, Twitch was utilized by professional athletes as an important self-presentation platform that was different than public media and social media. Athletes performed diverse forms of self-presentation through Twitch. The first profound finding of this thematic analysis was that athlete self-presentation on Twitch could be classified

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into four types of performances: Frontstage, Backstage, Onstage, and Offstage. The

second major finding was the themes and subthemes within each type of performance

(see Table IV-1). The Frontstage performance included Content Creator (Esports Expert,

Sports Master, and Fitness Trainer), Publicist (Brand Promotion, Esports Promotion,

Promotion for Friends, and Self Promotion), Informer, Analyst, and Fan Aficionado

(Greeting, Seeking Help, Interaction, and Appreciation). The Backstage self-presentation

consisted of Live Broadcaster (Streamer and Moderator) and Sports Insider (Sports

Performance, Personal Sports Info, and Team and Teammates). The Onstage

performance comprised Conversationalist (Salute, Communication, and Commendation)

and Behind-the-scenes Reporter (Personal Schedule, Food, Music, Sports). Finally, the

Offstage performance contained Channel Owner and Cameraman.

Table IV-1 Athlete Self-presentation on Twitch

Self-presentation	Themes	Definition	Sub-themes	Example
Frontstage	**Content Creator**	core performances that athletes present in front of the camera	*Esports Expert*	Sean: "Here with the pro Sean O'Malley … It is a beautiful team play right there. I love to see it."
			Sports Master	Jens: "Lewis can land one point for sure. And if he does, then that would be great."
			Fitness Trainer	Austin: "Go straight right here. If you wanna make it harder, lay back as far as you can."
	Publicist	promotion regarding sponsorship, upcoming matches, and autograph sessions	*Brand Promotion*	Josh: "We are back with another episode of Game Cave presented by Simple Mobile."
			Esports Promotion	Austin: "So this is the Horizon 5G stadium, apparently where it is dropping in."
			Promotion for Friends	Austin: "Yo, Justin, what's your Twitch? … Yeah, we'll get that link in the chat for you."
			Self Promotion	Blake: "I'm going to try to stream every single day. For 10 hours a day. We'll see how that works."

Table IV-1 Continued Athlete Self-presentation on Twitch

	Informer	general non-sports-related information sharing	*N/A*	Demetrious: "Fauci warns a more severe COVID variant could emerge as U.S. cases near 100000 daily."
	Analyst	general statement of opinion, life, complaints, and musings	*N/A*	Jens: "GenZ wear hats all the time, but they are not bald."
	Fan Aficionado	direct interaction between the athlete and fans	*Greeting*	Austin: "Chat, what's up, you guys? What's going on?"
			Seek Help	Austin: "Who do you play for again? I forgot, Justin James. Help me out Chat."
			Interaction	Blake: "A riddle that is actually going to be hard… All right, what can travel all around the world without leaving its corner?"
			Appreciation	Juju: "You know that I appreciate the love."
Backstage	**Sports Insider**	a personal look at sports performance, personal sports related info, and general insight into team and teammates	*Sports Performance*	Blake: "It's a new team. Everything's new. I got to get used to everything."
			Personal Sports Info	Demetrious: "Think of my first Muay Thai class on Monday."
			Team and Teammates	Juju: "What do you think the Steelers record is going to be? We have the hardest schedule in football this year."
	Live Broadcaster	supervision of live streaming performance and quality	*Streamer*	Charles: "I moved the camera and I can't put it back into the same position as it was before."
			Moderator	Hunter: "Can you edit the stream information? Make sure we're on magic."
Onstage	**Conversationalist**	with teammates and other celebrities	**Salute**	Juju: "Can you hear me? Hey, how are you? Where are you guys from?"
			Communication	Austin: "Oh, wait, wait, guys, there's an arrow pointing to this … Here we go, right."
			Commendation	Hunter: "You played great Magic. It's fun to watch your games. You do some amazing things."

Table IV-1 Continued Athlete Self-presentation on Twitch

	Behind-the-scenes Reporter	candid reports of the person behind the persona describing favorite food, sports, music, and other brands	**Personal Schedule**	Austin: "I'm headed to Dubai here in a month or two… Probably in March sometime?"
			Food	Blake: "What's your go to food? I like Chick-Fil-A lately."
			Music	Blake: "Ah, I Don't Want to Party is still my favorite."
			Sports	Demetrious: "The only thing that fascinates me most about the Olympics is the sprinter."
Offstage	**Channel Owner**	Administration over Twitch channels	**N/A**	Blake: "My stream room looks like now in Seattle … I got shoe closet and place to put some cool stuff and another shoe closet."
	Cameraman	Involvement in a live streaming without physical presence	**N/A**	Jens: "I'm going to grab some food really quick."

4.2.1 Forms of Self-presentation

In this thematic analysis, Twitch offered athletes opportunities to perform various forms of self-presentation. From my observations, athletes still performed textual or visual forms of self-presentation on Twitch as they did on social media such as Twitter (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012, 2014) and Instagram (Li et al., 2021). The athlete profile page, the signs they posted within the stream, and the chats that athletes sent were all examples of textual self-presentation on Twitch. Visual self-presentation via Twitch could be found in the athlete profile pictures, profile banner, customized GIFs, and emotes, as well as the camera or screen sharing. At the same time, the digital features on Twitch allowed athletes to perform some new forms of self-presentation. For instance, Twitch enabled athletes to perform verbal self-presentation through microphones and speakers. In addition, athletes' behaviors and interactions in the video games were

considered virtual self-presentation. An important finding from this thematic analysis

was that athletes performed multiple forms of self-presentation at the same time on

Twitch. In this study, I focused on the verbal form of athlete self-presentation.

4.2.2 The Stage

Self-presentation theory suggests individuals present frontstage and backstage

performances on the "stage" (Goffman, 1959). Therefore, what is the stage is crucial to

understanding athlete self-presentation on Twitch. Previous research has two

perspectives on interpreting the stage (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012, 2014; Li et al., 2021).

On the one hand, the stage stands for the channel (e.g., sport) through which the

individuals acquire their celebrity status (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012, 2014). On the other

hand, the stage is the platform (such as Twitter, and Instagram) where the individuals

present their performances in front of audiences (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012, 2014; Li et

al., 2021). In addition, the stage may refer to the athlete branding itself (Doyle et al.,

2020). Understanding the different interpretations of the stage is important because it

will impact the structure of frontstage and backstage performances. Athletes had

multiple channels for self-presentation (such as public media, social media, Twitch,

etc.). Therefore, when studying athlete self-presentation on one specific platform, it

might be more appropriate to regard the media as the stage. As a result, I recognized the

platform Twitch as the "stage" in this study.

4.2.3 The Performance

Performance refers to all the activities that an individual acts during a period of

time in front of a specific group of audience (Goffman,1959). Because the individual is

present continuously during the performance, Goffman (1959) further defined the front as the part of the performance when the individual intentionally performs in the presence of the audience. Backstage, or back region was then defined as the place that was closed to the audience and where the individual could relax and prepare for the frontstage performances (Goffman, 1959).

I defined various types of self-presentation performance based on these conceptualizations of performance from Goffman (1959) and the premise that Twitch was the "stage". In this study, Frontstage referred to the athlete performance on Twitch that could be directly seen by the audience. Backstage included those activities that athletes relied on to set up and prepare for the frontstage performances on Twitch, as well as the behaviors that athletes did not perform in the front region. From my preliminary observations, athletes could present frontstage and backstage performances at the same time on Twitch. Such interchangeable performance was named onstage. Doyle et al. (2020) conceptualized the offstage to present a performance that does not center on depicting the athletes. Therefore, I further interpreted offstage as the presentation that athletes displayed when athletes were not in front of Twitch or not at the center of the performance, but they were still connected with the platform. Based on all those definitions, I proposed a Model of Athlete Self Presentation (see Figure 8).
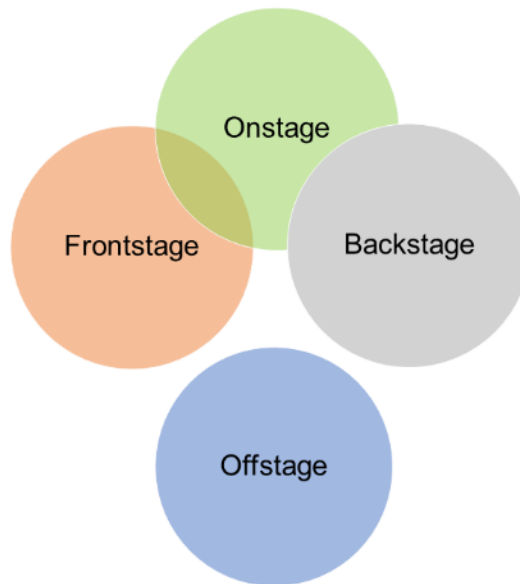
Figure 8 Model of Athlete Self Presentation

4.2.4 Frontstage

The Frontsage performance refers to the activities that athletes presented in front of the camera on Twitch. For the frontstage performance, I observed five themes: Content Creator, Publicist, Informer, Analyst, and Fan Aficionado.

4.2.4.1 Content Creator

The first theme identified for frontstage performance was Content Creator. This self-developed theme represented the core performances that athletes presented in front of the camera as content creators. Three sub-themes were identified for this theme: Esports Expert, Sports Master, and Fitness Trainer. Athletes provided content, including playing esports as esports experts, commentating on sports matches as sports masters, and demonstrating workouts as fitness trainers. As content creators, no matter what

content the athletes decided to produce, they would all bring their performances to the frontstage.

Esports Expert

A majority of athlete self-presentation on Twitch occurred when athletes showed their esports skills or commented on personal esports expertise. 11 out of 12 athletes provided esports related content on Twitch. Athletes appeared to be quite confident when commenting on their own esports performance. When esports teammates asked Austin Ekeler to explain how to pick up a coin in a Fortnite event game, Austin Ekeler said, "Well, if you're a Fortnite expert like I am, you jump up and grab it." (Ekeler, 2021a). Athletes also highly recognized the esports expertise of their teammates and team effort, Like Sean O'Malley commented on his team after a Call of Duty match, "Here with the pro Sean O'Malley … It is a beautiful team play right there. I love to see it." (O'Malley, 2021b). Even for some outstanding opponents, athletes would not hesitate to provide their praises. For example, Demetrious Johnson could not help commending an enemy's shooting skill, "Have you guys ever seen a shotgun that far away? … I had not seen a shotgun in that far away hit that hard. That's unbelievable." (Johnson, 2021b). Self-reflection on esports failure was another common observation of athlete self-presentation on Twitch. After Austin got killed by an opponent in the game, he was upset about himself missing the aim:

> Are you kidding me? What? Bro, how did I miss. That made no sense to me. Oh
> my god … Not again. bro, I can't not shoot. Bro, I swear I can not shoot this

person for whatever reason. Oh my God, I got the potato aim, bro. Oh my God, what is this potato aim? (Ekeler, 2021a)

Sports Master

Only one athlete in this study provided commentary on sports matches. As a UFC legend, Jens Pulver undoubtfully defended his expertise in fighting. He provided very detailed explanations like in this quote:

Lewis can land one point for sure. And if he does, then that would be great…By all rights, he should chop him up. I don't think he kicks enough, but we know for a fact if he gets punched as the thin man Lewis can, he can. (Pulver, 2021a)

This quotation indicated that the sports master employed his sports expertise to analyze the actions that happened between the fighters and provided possible predictions. This created a unique spectating experience for the audience.

Fitness Trainer

Austin Ekeler was the only content creator that produced a demonstration of the exercise. In his 10-minute abs workout video, Austin completed the exercise himself while providing detailed instructions for the fans at the same time. An instruction from Austin was described in this quote, "Go straight right here. If you wanna make it harder, lay back as far as you can. Not all the way on the ground. All right, ten seconds, here we go." (Ekeler, 2021a). Such interactive instructions encouraged fans to follow Austin and worked out together virtually.

4.2.4.2 Publicist

The second theme identified for frontstage performance was Publicist. Publicist refers to promotion regarding sponsorship, upcoming matches, and autograph sessions (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). This theme suggested that athletes were brand ambassadors and promoters for specific products or humans on Twitch (Li et al., 2021). I observed four sub-themes under this theme: Brand Promotion, Esports Promotion, Promotion for Friends, and Self-Promotion.

Brand Promotion

Athletes were publicists for sponsors and other partner brands on Twitch. In addition to promoting those brand logos by placing them in the stream window, athletes verbally appreciated the support of those sponsors. A good example was what Josh Hart expressed at the start and the end of his stream:

> Yo, yo yo, what's up, everybody, this is your host, Josh Hart, and we're back
> with another episode of Game Cave presented by Simple Mobile… Big shout out
> to a Game cave sponsored by Simple Mobile for making these things happen.
> (Hart, 2021b)

Esports Promotion

Other products that athletes promoted through Twitch were gaming-related products. Athletes shared their expertise in video games and provided suggestions for the audience. For example, Demetrious Johnson suggested, "Call of Duty is way more realistic than Valorant and Fortnite and what's happening right now —Apex Legends." (Johnson, 2021a). Some athletes had the opportunity to promote virtual products. Austin

Ekeler joined a group of celebrities to introduce the Fortnite Horizon 5G map. When he completed a series of tasks in the Fortnite game, and was finally entering the stadium (see Figure 9), Austin said:

> So this is the Horizon 5G stadium, apparently where it is dropping in (Austin controlled his character to sky jump) … Oh, wait, there's actually a stadium now. Welcome to SoFi … This actually is SoFi, look at it, it has the same screen and everything. (Ekeler, 2021a)
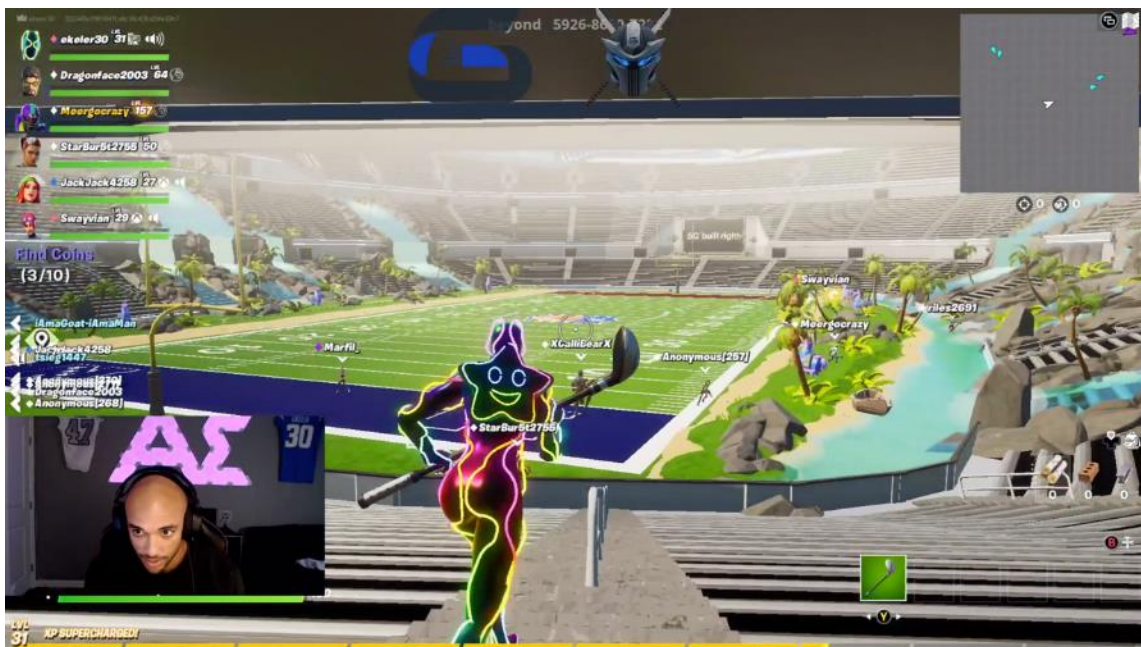
Figure 9 Austin Heads into the Virtual SoFi Stadium

As indicated by the previous quotation and the figure, such promotion of virtual products created a unique experience for the fans. Fans could follow Austin's first-person perspective to visit the virtual SoFi stadium.

Promotion for Friends

Athletes might help promote the brands of their friends. During his live streaming with Justin Jefferson, Austin asked Justin multiple times about Justin's Twitch and YouTube channel information, "Yo, Justin, what's your Twitch? … Yeah, we'll get that link in the chat for you … So you heard it here. Let's see Youtube? You put it here. So you guys can …" (Ekeler, 2021a). Sharing such information with his audience, Austin helped promote the digital media of Justin. Austin also gave a formal introduction to Trent Sieg, "You all know Trent? Trent plays for the Raiders." (Ekeler, 2021a).

Self Promotion

Athletes also promote their personal brands and promote their own live streaming. Austin shared with the fans information about a controlled football game night. Blake talked about his live streaming plans for the offseason:

> I'll be back on as soon. I don't know when. But in the off season I'll have a schedule. We'll be figuring it all out, we'll get it rocking. Yeah. We're going to be streaming literally the whole season. I'm going to try to stream every single day. For 10 hours a day. We'll see how that works. (Snell, 2021b)

4.2.4.3 Informer

The third theme for frontstage performance was Informer. Informer refers to general non-sports-related information sharing (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012, Li et al., 2021).

Athletes enjoyed sharing some general information about esports. For instance, Hunter Pence said, "Call of Duty takes me a billion years. For some reason, it's like the universe saying, Don't play Call of Duty." (Pence, 2021b). Sharing such a "universal" statement, Hunter provided general information that fans needed to know about the COD game. Another example comes from Josh Hart, who asked his co-streamer about the gaming industry:

> Where do you think the biggest gaming industry is? Right here? You know, China? ...Yeah, China. They did $40 billion in revenue last year. So I think … we just need to move to China, bro. We are going into the gaming industry dude. (Hart, 2021a)

The previous quotation indicates that Josh had good knowledge of the gaming industry rather than just casually playing Call of Duty.

Athletes also shared general information on public issues. The following quote from Demetrious Johnson was a great example:

> Fauci warns a more severe COVID variant could emerge as U.S. cases near 100000 daily. Boys, you guys ready for another year of losses? Of course not. Boys, get ready for another lockdown. I think we will have another horrible winter. (Johnson, 2021b)

This quotation suggests that Demetrious cared about the recent situation of the pandemic and wished to share this information immediately with the audience.

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4.2.4.4 Analyst

The fourth theme identified for the frontstage self-presentation was Analyst. Different from the informer's focus on information, athletes as analysts provided general statements of opinions, complaints, and lifemusings (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012).

Athletes might provide their opinions on some social behaviors. When fans asked his opinion on drugs and alcohol, Blake Snell responded, "Well, drugs is not for me, man. Drinking alcohol is not for me, bro. Like I care way too much about baseball to do all that. So that's just the truth." (Snell, 2021a). Another example is Jens Pulver's comment on Generation Z people. Jens was surprised that GenZ wore hats all the time, but they were not bald.

Some in-game behaviors may lead to athletes' lifemusings. While Austin Ekeler was completing his in-game task in Fortnite, he had to grab a can of soda from the bar. Austin then provided his opinion on the underage drinking problem, "Yeah, all those under age, you can't go into the bar." (Ekeler, 2021a)

4.2.4.5 Fan aficionado

The fifth theme was Fan Aficionado, which represented the interaction with fans. Athletes presented various forms of fan interactions, including Greeting, Seeking help, Interaction, and Appreciation.

Greeting

At the start of the stream, athletes usually greeted their fans. Like Austin Ekeler said, "Chat, what's up, you guys? What's going on?" (Ekeler, 2021a). The majority of

the audience would respond with a greeting back to the athletes, or would send the athletes messages that indicated their love for athletes.

Seek help

Athletes might ask fans for help if they faced any problems during the live streaming, Austin Ekeler reached out to fans for help in the chats because he forgot which team Justin Jefferson played for, "We're playing with Justin Jefferson. Who do you play for again? I forgot, Justin James. Help me out Chat." (Ekeler, 2021a). Fans then not only offered help to the athlete, but also they laughed at the athlete for the bad memory.

Interaction

The most common presentation that athletes performed within the fan aficionado theme s interaction. Except for interactions like bets and polls that were discussed earlier, athletes utilized some other forms of interaction. For example, Juju Smith Schuster invited fans to predict the score between the Eagles and the Patriots. Athletes further created some community games to play with fans. For example, Blake Snell played the riddle game with his audience, "A riddle that is actually going to be hard… All right, what can travel all around the world without leaving its corner? No Google, you little cheaters. None of that. All right, here we go." (Snell, 2021b). Such group activities helped facilitate the two-way interaction between athletes and fans.

Appreciation

Athletes always appreciated the audience for their spectatorship. Many athletes would thank their audience for supporting them and staying in the stream. Athletes also

appreciated the financial support from fans. At the end of his stream, Sean O'Malley

verbally expressed his gratitude to leaders who gifted subscriptions to other audiences,

"Thank you to the TCA (fan id), but you're not here. But thank you for your large about

80 gifted today, this week. Whateversavedthis (fan id), 39 this week. You guys are

legends. I appreciate you guys. GG!" (O'Malley, 2021a).

<p align="center">*4.2.5 Backstage*</p>

Backstage self-presentation refers to the activities that athletes performed when

they were away from the audience to prepare for the frontstage performances on Twitch.

Some behaviors that athletes discussed verbally but did not perform in the front region

were also included in the backstage performance. Two themes were identified as

backstage self-presentation: Live Broadcaster and Sports Insider.

4.2.5.1 Live Broadcaster

The first theme for backstage performance was Live Broadcaster. This was a

self-developed theme. As live broadcasters, athletes needed to supervise their live

streaming performance and quality. I observed two sub-themes for the Live Broadcaster

theme: Streamer and Moderator.

Streamer

As streamers, athletes took the responsibility of setting up the live streaming

environment properly. This included checking devices like a camera, microphone,

speaker, and lighting. For instance, when Blake started his stream, he asked the

audience, "How's the mic. The mic good? I hope that mic's good." (Snell, 2021a). Blake

then asked fans if his camera looked fuzzy. Some athletes may accidentally break their

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stream setup when they were not familiar with the streaming techniques. Charles Leclerc was live streaming with the camera on, but fans could not see his face. Charles explained, "I moved the camera and I can't put it back into the same position as it was before. (Laughters). Oh my god!" (Leclerc, 2020b).

Athletes also care about their streaming performance. As previously noted, Blake Snell asked multiple times about this. For example, Demetrious Johnson was experiencing a downfall in the audience. He doubted it could because he did not have a set schedule, and he only streamed whenever he had free time. Successful live broadcasters like Juju Smith-Schuster actually benefit from live streaming financially. The wide receiver said, "I'm making a lot of money playing Fortnite, doing streams, doing events. Playing video. I make money playing video games. Yes, it is. It is true and it is possible." (Schuster, 2021a).

Athletes even discussed streaming with friends and fans. When Blake was questioned by some fans about streaming, he indicated streaming was not easy, but he enjoyed streaming. Another example was the conversation between Austin Ekeler and co-streamer Justin Jefferson, "This is your first time streaming? … OK. Are you usually on a PC or what?" (Ekeler, 2021a). The above quotation suggested that those athletes were aware of the different experiences to live stream using various devices.

Moderator

As live broadcasters who ran the stream, athletes usually hired moderators to assist them with the live streaming. Athletes' communications with the moderators were commonly observed during the stream.

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Some athletes might experience technical issues and might need assistance from their moderators. For example, as a rookie live broadcaster, Hunter Pence forgot to change the tile of his stream. Fans noticed this issue and informed him in the chats. Therefore, he asked his moderator for help, "Oh, I didn't even edit my stream. I need to change my stream name. Rick, it's not allowing me to do that for some reason. Can you edit the stream information? Make sure we're on magic." (Pence, 2021b).

Another scene was that athletes would need the moderators' help to monitor and regulate the live streaming environment. Blake Snell got angry when a fan commented on his sports performance negatively. Therefore, he asked the moderator to block the fan from using the chat, "Oh, you could, you could ban him because he does not know what he is talking about." (Snell, 2021a).

4.2.5.2 Sports Insider

The second theme that was identified for the backstage self-presentation was sports insider. Sports insider includes a personal look at the Sports Performance, Personal Sports Info, and general insight into the Team and Teammates (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012).

Sports Performance

Sports Performance was widely discussed by the audience. Therefore, the athletes might join the discussion sometimes. While most of the time, the discussions about athletes' sports performance were positive, sometimes athletes had to deal with trollers. Blake Snell had an unpleasant example for sports performance:

Fan: Ur finally pitching good.

'You finally pitching good?' I won't say I am finally pitching good. I am finally

consistently pitching better … it's a new team. Everything's new. I got to get

used to everything … y'all have never been through what I've been through. So

that for y'all to say what I should be is bull … So stop telling me how to pitch.

(Snell, 2021b)

The above quote indicates that Blake was mad at fans who tried to give a general

comment on his athletic performance.

Personal Sports Info

Athletes shared different kinds of Personal Sports Info on Twitch. For example,

Demetrious Johnson revealed that he would go to his first Muay Thai class the next

Monday. Likewise, Blake Snell suggested he and his team had come back to San Diego.

This sub-theme not only included schedules, locations, or travel, but could also involve

some interesting behind-the-scenes stories. For example, Demetrious Johnson shared an

interesting story in martial arts about how athletes took advantage of their injuries:

If I were to tear my LCL in the gym right now, I would have to pay for that out

of my own pocket. Right. But if I fight with a torn LCL and then I say I try to

fight. Their insurance covers it. So that was the big thing that all of us athletes

used to do. (Johnson, 2021b)

Team and Teammates

Athletes frequently provided insights into their Teams and Teammates. Juju

Smith Schuster was questioned about who the funniest player on the Pittsburgh Steelers

was. Juju nominated Eric Ebron because he was a pretty funny player. Athletes might

have also received questions about other sports celebrities. For example, Juju was questioned about his opinion of NFL player Tom Brady:

> Tom Brady, number one? … But Tom Brady has to be number one. Tom Brady has to be number one just because the bro like he went from one whole team to a different whole team and won a Super Ball, bro, he has to be number one. (Schuster, 2021b)

4.2.6 Onstage

Onstage performance was unique for Twitch because only the synchronous communication on a live streaming platform offered users opportunities to present various forms at the same time. I identified two themes for the onstage self-presentation: Conversationalist and Behind-the-scenes Reporter.

4.2.6.1 Conversationalist

The first theme that was identified for onstage performance was Conversationalist. Conversationalist represents the Interaction with teammates and other celebrities (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012, Li et al., 2021). Three sub-themes were recognized for this theme: Salute, Communication, and Commendation.

Salute

Salute referred to a general interaction between athletes and teammates that happened when the athletes and teammates met for the first time. For instance, Juju Smith Schuster joined a new squad on Fortnite, and he asked where his teammates came from. His teammates quickly responded with their home cities or countries.

Communication

Communication referred to a significant amount of interaction between athletes and their teammates or other celebrities happened in the game. For example, athletes might provide detailed instructions to guide teammates to complete certain tasks. Athletes further negotiated with their teammates about in-game decisions or tasks. Austin Ekeler said, "Oh, wait, wait, guys, there's an arrow pointing to this … Here we go, right … Get ready for the Super Bowl by completing the activities below. Turn on the speaker by the llama." (Ekeler, 2021a)

Those communications might occur on a backstage channel other than Twitch. For example, when Austin was about to finish his steam, he invited his teammates to join an extended conversation on Discord, "Hey bro after this game, I'm going to have you guys jump in Discord and it's going to just the name that comes. And can you all jump in Discord?" (Ekeler, 2021a)

The above quotation indicated that fans could not view the communications between athletes and teammates on Discord, while fans could still observe other types of interaction on the frontstage.

Commendation

Another form of interaction between athletes and teammates or celebrities was Commendation. This usually happened when some teammates had remarkable achievements or performances in the game. For instance, when his teammate's performance was out of Hunter's expectation, Hunter commented:

Yeah, you played great. You played great Magic. It's fun to watch your games. You do some amazing things. Every time we thought you were on one thing, you had like something else because I was watching without seeing your cards. (Pence, 2021a)

4.2.6.2 Behind-the-scenes reporter

The second theme of the onstage self-presentation was the Behind-the-scenes Reporter. The behind-the-scenes reporter refers to the candid reports of the person behind the persona describing favorite food, sports, music, and other brands (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012, Li et al., 2021). As lifestyle influencers, athletes presented their favorite brands on Twitch, which might impact the brand choices of fans. Four sub-themes were observed under this theme: Personal Schedule, Food, Music, and Sports.

Personal Schedule

Athletes could reveal their personal plans for their vacations, routines, and flights. For example, Jens Pulver discussed with fans in his stream that his flight was canceled for the next Monday. Likewise, Austin Ekeler shared his vacation location with fans during his live streaming, "I'm headed to Dubai here in a month or two … Probably in March sometime? … It's not a very easy flight .., It's like 15 hours?" (Ekeler, 2021a).

Food

Food preferences became a relatively popular topic among fans. Therefore, athletes were willing to share their favorite food. Blake Snell mentioned he preferred Chick-Fil-A and Panda Express in his quick Q&As with fans. Demetrious Johnson moved a step closer to sharing his five-course breakfast, "Every morning, I had the exact

same breakfast. I have three eggs, sunny side up and then I have three chicken sausage

and I have a bowl of gluten-free oatmeal with a half banana and one strawberry and

cinnamon." (Johnson, 2021b).

Music

Many athletes loved to listen to some music when playing video games, so they

often discussed their favorite music. As discussed earlier, Blake Snell was a dead fan for

"I Don't Wanna Party" by Mike. Some athletes even presented their musical talents via

Twitch. For instance, Sean O'Malley played some music from his harmonica after

winning a game and commented, "Harmonica gives me good luck. Harmonica champ."

(O'Malley, 2021a).

Sports

Athletes naturally revealed their interests in other sports. Blake Snell played the

golf game quite often because he loved to play golf in real life. Another example was

Demetrious Johnson, who talked about his favorite sport in the Olympics, "The only

thing that fascinates me most about the Olympics is the sprinter. Like, I love watching

experience because how fast they move is absolutely credible." (Johnson, 2021b).

4.2.7 Offstage

Offstage performance refers to the athlete self-presentation when the athlete was

not at the center of the portrayal (i.e., not appear/not perform) on the stage (Doyle et al.,

2020)). Athletes could switch offstage performances when they co-streamed with

celebrities or participated in partnership events with sponsors. In the Verizon 5G Fortnite

event, Austin Ekeler had to wait for some teammates to join his squad in Fortnite before

starting his stream. Another offstage scene happened when athletes took breaks during their games or broadcasting. Sean O'Malley took a water break and left the camera. I identified two sub-themes for the offstage performance: Channel Owner and Cameraman.

4.2.7.1 Channel Owner

The first theme of the offstage performance was Channel Owner. Channel Owner indicated that athletes administrate their Twitch channels when athletes were physically presented in the live streaming.

As channel owners, athletes set up starting scenes, which gave reminders to channel subscribers and showcased various brand attributes without the physical presence of the athletes. For instance, Blake Snell's opening scene included a countdown timer and his baseball pitching performance. Likewise, Demetrious Johnson displayed his logo and played unique background music in his starting scene (such as "Youth" by the Midnight).

Athletes had to set up the physical environment for live streaming. Blake revealed his plan to make renovations to his stream room:

> My stream room looks like now in Seattle … I got shoe closet and place to put some cool stuff and another shoe closet … But I think we're sketching out … LED lights under where my chair will be. And then there'll be the desk. Three monitors behind me will be the classically famous logo that you saw on my Instagram story. (Snell, 2021b)

4.2.7.2 Cameraman

The second theme that was identified for offstage performance was Cameraman. Cameraman refers to athletes' involvement in a live streaming without their physical presence, as well as performances where athletes are not portrayed as the center (Doyle et al., 2020).

Some athletes would broadcast without using the camera. For example, Demetrious did not show himself on camera but only his character in Grand Theft Auto. Performing the virtual avatar without the presence of the athlete indicated that the athlete believed the virtual character could fully represent himself in the virtual space. In addition, Charles Leclerc only presented himself playing esports, but without the presence of his voice and himself in front of the camera. The following figure (see Figure 10) showed Charles was driving the F1 car in the racing game, but he was not performing in the camera window.

Figure 10 Charles Leclerc at the Offstage

There were other offstage scenarios when the athletes chose to take a break during the live streaming. For instance, Jens Pulver had to grab something to eat, and he left his camera while the audience was watching a fight that he showed on the Twitch channel, "I'm going to grab some food really quick. I'm interested in four … I'm going to jump in, watch this fight, but I'll be right back." (Pulver, 2021b).

4.3 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how athletes perform self-presentation on Twitch. The thematic analysis suggested that athletes shared various types of self-presentation via Twitch. Findings from the thematic analysis supported that athletes could engage more actively in the impression management process if they could have greater control over self-presentation on Twitch (Mitchell et al. 2021; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Many features of Twitch supported athletes to customize the content they wanted to portray in front of the audience. Therefore, Twitch became a digital media that allowed athletes to perform their desired self-presentation. In addition, the digital components of Twitch allowed athletes to share new types of self-presentation as compared with social media. For instance, athletes were able to perform two new types of self-presentation (i.e., Onstage, Offstage) because Twitch is a gaming dedicated platform. The real-time interactions athlete self-presentation on the live streaming platform are unique. Some backstage performances (e.g., Informer, Analyst) on social media become frontstage on Twitch (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Li et al., 2021). While some other backstage performances (e.g., Conversationalist, Behind-the-scenes reporter) become onstage on Twitch (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Li et al., 2021).

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4.3.1 Desired Impression Management

One of the most profound findings of this study was that Twitch advanced as an important platform that offers athletes control over the impression that they want to portray to the public. The primary goal of self-presentation is impression management. Similar to social media (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Li et al., 2021; Smith & Sanderson, 2015), Twitch helped athletes portray the desired impression that is usually not available on public media. The unique digital features of Twitch offered athletes competitive advantages in performing their self-presentation on this digital media when compared with social media. Twitch provided customized features such as emotes, Gifs, and badges, while at the same time athletes could personalize their channel pages, and choose to deliver the content they wish to (Taylor, 2018). Therefore, athletes could perform a desired and consistent self-presentation on Twitch. The live streaming platform also provided athletes with opportunities to perform authentic self-presentation. The content on Twitch was delivered in real-time and the athletes could select whether to store the live stream as recordings or not. As a result, the athletes could have fewer concerns presenting their true selves via Twitch. Such authenticity on digital media is crucial for athlete personal branding (Li et al., 2021).

4.3.2 Self-presentation Performances

Another essential finding of this study was the proposed Model of Athlete Self Presentation and the various themes of self-presentation performances. This model is an extension of Goffman's (1959) Self-presentation Theory to the digital context. The development of this model is needed because self-presentation literature has shifted from

the physical world to the online community (Mitchell et al., 2021). In this model, I set up the "stage" as the Twitch platform, and discussed different types of self-presentation. Similar to the findings from social media studies (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Li et al., 2021), athletes still performed frontstage and backstage performances on Twitch. In the proposed model, I also introduced two new types of self-presentation: onstage and offstage. The onstage performance is a unique type of self-presentation that refers to the interchangeable self-presentation on the live streaming platform. Offstage, the self-presentation where athletes were not the center of the performance, was a construct developed by Doyle et al. (2020). I further adjusted the offstage self-presentation to include performances when athletes "stepped" off the stage.

4.3.2.1 Frontstage Performance

One unique finding of the frontstage performance is the Content Creator theme. As a newly developed theme of frontstage performance, this refers to the core component of the service those streamers provide. In the interpersonal interaction context or on social media, the individual performance is only a metaphor that is based on the dramatical perspective of Self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959). However, athletes became real performers on Twitch and display their desired user-generated content to the audience.

Another interesting finding of the frontstage performance was the Informer and Analyst themes. This finding is different from the existing research that classifies those two themes as backstage (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). Because of the synchronous interaction on Twitch, athletes were able to perform those two types of performances on

the frontstage. Results from Li et al. (2021) further supported that live features of digital media could shift the Informer and Analyst performances from the backstage to the frontstage.

4.3.2.2 Backstage Performance

The unique finding of backstage is the Live Broadcaster theme. The Live Broadcaster theme refers to athletes' engagement in-stream setup and management. According to the Self-presentation Theory (Goffman, 1959), backstage refers to the region where an individual can relax and make preparations for the frontstage performances. Therefore, the Live Broadcaster theme actually fits well with the conceptualization of backstage performance. Because as Live Broadcasters on Twitch, athletes are responsible to monitor the streaming performance, content quality, and community engagement.

Consistent with previous research (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012), the Sports Insider theme still belongs to the backstage performance. Although I classified the Sports Insider as the backstage, athletes were attempting to find alternative ways to present this performance. As discussed in Study 1, athletes created customized Gifs and emotes, as well as the starting scene using their athletic performance. Therefore, the Sports Insider theme may have the potential to become an onstage performance.

4.3.2.3 Onstage Performance

The Onstage performance is a newly developed category of self-presentation. Based on my netnography and thematic analysis observations, some traditionally defined frontstage and backstage performances became interchangeable on Twitch, thanks to its

synchronous way of communication. The thematic analysis indicated that athletes performed various forms of self-presentation on Twitch. In the previous studies, Conversationalist and Behind-the-scenes reporters were backstage themes (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Li et al., 2021). But the multiple layers of interaction have made Twitch a unique platform (Taylor, 2018). For the Conversationalist theme, athletes not only interact on the frontstage (i.e., Twitch) with teammates or celebrities, but also they could simultaneously interact with teammates the backstage (i.e., esports, other social media). Likewise, for the Behind-the-scenes reporter, athletes could present their favorite brands in front of the camera, while at the same time they could consume those brands backstage. Such onstage performance is unique on live streaming platforms, and thereby making Twitch a special platform for athlete self-presentation.

4.3.2.4 Offstage Performance

The Offstage performance is a theme recently developed in the personal branding context (Doyle et al., 2020). Findings from this study supported this relatively new category of self-presentation. The examples I observed from the thematic analysis contributed to understanding the concept in a more comprehensible way. For instance, when athletes need to take a break from the stream, they get off the "stage", but they usually still play some performances (e.g., video games, music). I believe such observations may help future researchers interpret what is offstage, so as to further develop self-presentation theory.

4.3.2 Other Forms of Self-presentation

Another important observation from this thematic analysis was that athletes could perform various forms of self-presentation at the same time. Although I focused on the verbal self-presentation in the thematic analysis, findings from Study 1 indicated that athletes also performed their self-presentation in textual, visual, and virtual forms. Because the athlete self-presentation was delivered synchronously via Twitch, the audience could receive different forms of self-presentation simultaneously. For example, when athletes were verbally talking about their esports performance, the audience could view the athletes playing in the video games (virtual), while interacting with the athletes in the chats (textual), and watching athletes behave in the camera window (visual). The opportunity to perform multiple forms of self-presentation is only available on live streaming platforms.

CHAPTER V

STUDY 3: FAN PERCEPTIONS OF ATHLETE SELF-PRESENTATION

5.1 Methodology

One significant purpose of athlete branding on social media is to foster a positive

attitude and relationship among fans (Arai et al., 2013, 2014; Doyle et al., 2020). In

addition, athlete self-presentation aims to project the desired impression to the audience

(Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Li et al., 2021; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Previous self-

presentation literature has suggested that self-presentation has an impact on group

emotions or audience impression (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987, Leary, 1995). The

audience's impression in a digital media context could be assessed by the group-based

sentiment scores (Boyd et al., 2022; Gong et al., 2021; Kobs et al., 2020). Accordingly,

to address RQ3, I carried out a text analysis via Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count

(Boyd et al., 2022) and a sentiment analysis via Python 3.8 (Sarkar, 2016) to understand

how fans perceive athlete personal branding via Twitch, using the scraped videos from

studies 1 and 2.

5.1.1 Data Collection

Because athletes performed distinctive self-presentation in different videos.

Therefore, I selected the most recent video from each athlete to conduct the sentiment

analysis. I utilized TwitchDownloader to download the chats from the 12 videos. I

collected information like message body, commenter name, and commenter ID. The

chats were transformed from the Json format to Excel for convenience and consideration

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of data preparation. For data preparation, since some athletes (e.g., Juju) used automated promotion tools (e.g., Twitchelement) to interact with fans (for example, when a fan enters the channel, it sends an automatic welcome message), all chats from the promotion tools were deleted. Athletes also relied on chatbots, including nightbot, Streamelement, moobot, and ZeldaZachBot, to create random comments automatically. For instance, Juju utilized Nightbot to send promotion messages "Pick up the Team JuJu NMD_R1 Shoes at Champs Sports: https://pks.gg/jujushoes". Comments from the recognizable chatbots were also eliminated.

5.1.2 Data Analysis

Previous research has suggested the importance of using text analysis, especially quantitative text analysis understand existing consumer attitudes toward brands in the digital media (Boyd et al., 2022; Mehl, 2006; Gong et al., 2021; Kobs et al., 2020; Wakefield & Bennett, 2018). In this investigation, I adopted a text analysis using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) to examine the frequency of words used in chats from those Twitch videos (Boyd et al., 2022). I then conducted a sentiment analysis using TextBlob packages on Python 3.8 to assess the sentiment scores of those messages. Word frequency of the chats was analyzed using a visualization tool called Word Cloud to show the pattern of the chats.

Because the 12 videos were all centered on different subjects, I purposively selected comments from the video of one athlete (i.e., Austin Ekeler) to make a comparison among different types of athlete self-presentation. Because H1 focuses on the differences among self-presentation types, I labeled the comments using the self-

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presentation themes (i.e., frontstage, backstage, onstage, and offstage) that were observed from the thematic analysis. I chose to code the comments using themes instead of the sub-categories in consideration of the large variance among the numbers of comments in each category. The labeled dataset was utilized to conduct a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to test the sentiment score difference among athlete self-presentation types.

5.2 Results

I followed recommendations from Kobs et al. (2020) to conduct the text analysis with the unlabeled dataset and then perform the sentiment analysis of the labeled dataset.

5.2.1 Unlabeled Data Analysis

Comment length

A text analysis was conducted via LIWC. A total of 10744 comments were collected from the most recent video on 12 athletes' channels. Max Holloway had the least comments ($n = 50$), while Blake Snell had the most reviews ($n = 2830$). All the comments contributed 363240 characters. Therefore, the mean comment length of the unlabeled dataset was 33.8 characters. The text analysis results were presented in Table V-1.

Table V-1 Text Analysis Results

Athletes	Number of comments	Total word	Short comments (words <3)	Min	Max
Juju	629	3237	216	0	49
Blake	2830	16193	774	0	56
Demetrious	958	7484	220	0	70
Trevor	1309	10937	296	0	53
Hunter	663	383	190	0	53

Table V-1 Continued Text Analysis Results

Josh	686	3176	273	0	32
Max	50	162	24	0	12
Jens	1363	8754	381	0	62
Charles	145	578	66	1	19
George	179	397	132	0	13
Austin	739	3809	273	1	68
Sean	1193	7141	310	0	42

As shown in Table V-1, The comments from athletes' Twitch channels were fairly short, which is consistent with results from previous research that fan interaction in the online community has a fast pace (Kobs et al., 2020). I used comments from Austin Ekeler's channel as an example to understand the comment length. The total words of Austin's comments were 3809, suggesting an average comment length of 5.2 words. Approximately 36.94 % ($n = 273$) of Austin's comments were short messages that consist of only one or two words.

Word Frequency Analysis

A word frequency analysis was carried out to calculate the most frequent words fans used when commenting on Twitch. Word clouds for each athlete's comments were presented in Figures 11 – 22 and Table V-2.

Figure 11 Wordcloud for Comments on Austin Ekeler

Figure 12 Wordcloud for Comments on Blake Snell

Figure 13 Wordcloud for Comments on Charles Leclerc

Figure 14 Wordcloud for Comments on Demetrious Johnson

Figure 15 Wordcloud for Comments on George Russell

Figure 16 Wordcloud for Comments on Hunter Pence

Figure 17 Wordcloud for Comments on Jens Pulver

Figure 18 Wordcloud for Comments on Josh Hart

Figure 19 Wordcloud for Comments on Juju Smith Schuster

Figure 20 Wordcloud for Comments on Max Holloway

Figure 21 Wordcloud for Comments on Sean O'Malley

Figure 22 Wordcloud for Comments on Trevor Mays

Table V-2 Word Frequency Analysis

Athletes	Word #1 (n)	Word #2 (n)	Word #3 (n)	Word #4 (n)	Word #5 (n)
Juju	juju (128)	yo (27)	play (22)	bro (18)	tier (17)
Blake	blake (347)	snell (99)	subscribed (85)	lol (76)	game (36)
Demetrious	dj (36)	joshefc1990 (34)	lul (29)	mm1gg (27)	spartior28(27)
Trevor	trevor (114)	mets (56)	game (54)	lol (53)	morning (46)
Hunter	hunter (25)	game (24)	bracket (22)	giants (20)	tier (18)
Josh	josh (61)	yo (20)	hart (16)	play (13)	bro (13)
Max	mbhletsgo (11)	mbhgg (7)	merch (5)	yt (3)	wins (3)
Jens	jens (60)	lol (51)	jenspulver (50)	subscribed (36)	fight (34)

Table V-2 Continued Word Frequency Analysis

Charles	charles (32)	charles16haha (7)	xd (7)	omg (5)	stream (5)
George	lul (97)	fuel (25)	landogrdog (20)	landoalboncruz (9)	landof (7)
Austin	justin (56)	austin95hype (43)	twitch (38)	justinjefferson (35)	ek (31)
Sean	tier (116)	gifted (108)	sugars4letsgo (85)	simm1224 (69)	sugars4hype (58)

As presented in the word clouds and Table V-2, athletes' names or nicknames were usually the most frequently used word. Among the 12 athletes, 66.7% had their names as the top used words in fans' comments. Internet slang such as "lol" and "lul", as well as customized emotes (e.g., mbhletsgo) were also frequently used by the fans. Other high-frequent words varied by the content of the stream. The top 20 most used words for Austin Ekeler's channel were: justin, austin95hype, streaming, twitch, justinjefferson, herbert, plays, austin, subscribed, lol, good, get, lul, points, bet, jefferson, tomorrow, moths, think, fans. For Austin's comments, the names or the nicknames of the athlete were among the most frequently used words in the comments. Some of the top words were highly related to the live streaming content. For instance, in this video, Austin partnered with Justin Jefferson to co-stream for the Verizon 5G Fortnite event. Therefore, the co-streamer's name was one of the top words that fans mentioned in the chats (e.g., jefferson).

5.2.2 Labeled Data Analysis

A sentiment analysis was then performed using Textblob packages from Python 3.8 to assess the positive or negative emotions of the comments (Sarkar, 2016). I relied

on the Polarity scores as the automated sentiment scores. Sentiment analysis results for

each athlete were presented in the following table.

Table V-3 Sentiment Analysis Results

Athlete	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Juju Smith-Schuster	131	31	467	629
Blake Snell	671	232	1927	2830
Demetrious Johnson	289	114	555	958
Trevor Mays	483	123	703	1309
Hunter Pence	215	65	383	663
Josh Hart	127	64	495	686
Max Holloway	5	5	40	50
Jens Pulver	365	153	845	1363
Charles Leclerc	25	14	106	145
George Russell	11	2	166	179
Austin Ekeler	137	23	579	739
Sean O'Malley	357	103	733	1193

Only one athlete, Max Holloway, had a balanced number of negative and

positive comments. All other athletes had significantly higher numbers of positive

comments than negative comments, suggesting that fans' general perceptions about

athlete self-presentation were positive.

Using Austin Ekeler's video as an example. This video had 579 neutral comments (78.35%), 18.54 % positive comments ($n = 137$), and 3.11 % negative comments ($n = 23$). The following figure (see Figure 23) presents how the sentiment scores changed based on time. As shown in this figure, the sentiment scores of comments were constantly changing during the live stream.
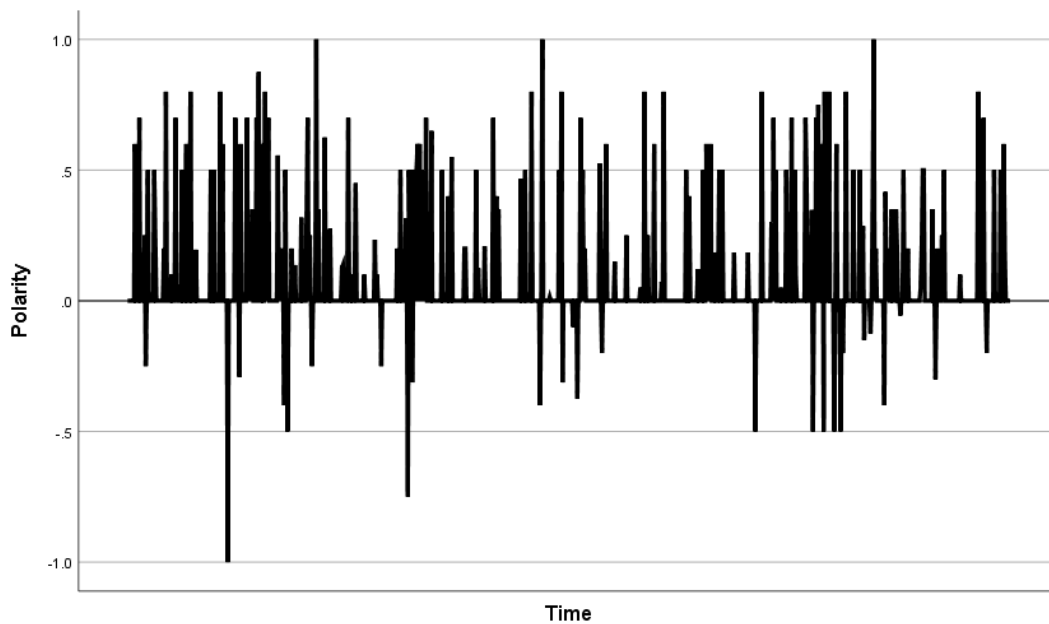
Figure 23 Polarity Scores for Austin Ekeler over Time

A total of 278 comments (37.62%) were manually labeled by the athlete self-presentation types (i.e., frontstage, backstage, onstage, and offstage). Frontstage ($n = 130$) had 26.15 % of positive comments, and 3.86% of negative reviews. The mean sentiment score of frontstage equaled 0.10. Backstage ($n = 49$) included 40.82% positive comments, and 8.16% negative comments, with an average sentiment score of 0.16. Onstage ($n = 23$) represented 39.13 % positive reviews with no negative comments. The average sentiment score of onstage comments was 0.13. Offstage ($n = 76$) included

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17.11 % positive comments and 3.95 % negative comments, with a mean sentiment score of 0.03. I further conducted a one-way ANOVA to test the mean difference in sentiment scores. The ANOVA results and posthoc test (Tukey) indicated a significant difference between backstage and offstage in sentiment scores (F (3, 275) = 3.10, p = .027). The estimated marginal means for the sentiment scores of each type of self-presentation were shown in Figure 24.
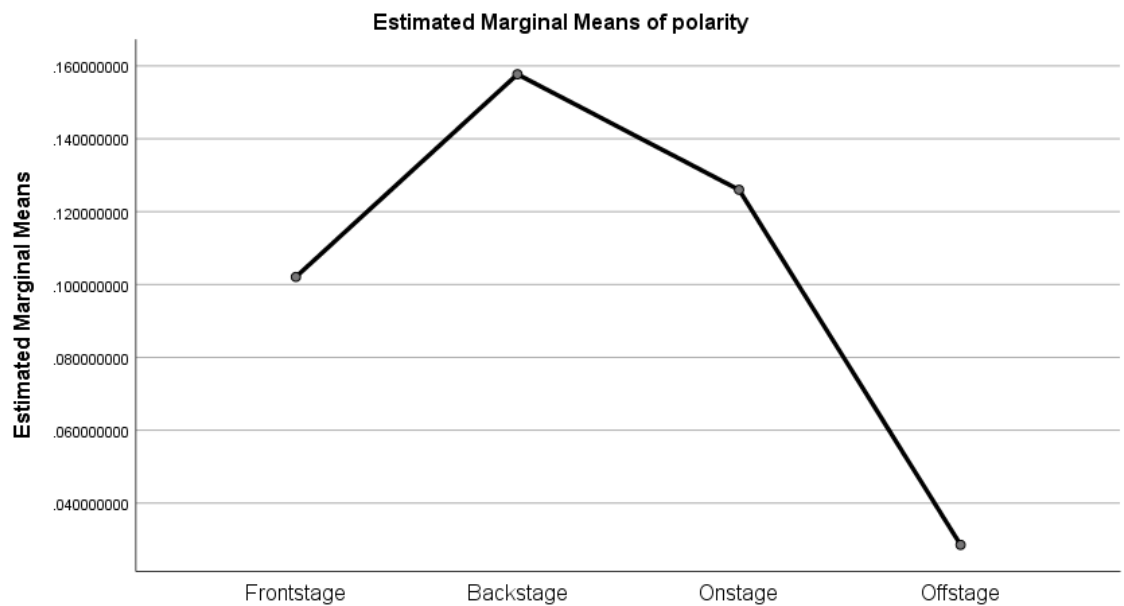
Figure 24 Mean Scores for Comments on Types of Self-presentation

<div align="center">

5.3 Discussion

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The purpose of this study was to assess fans' attitudes towards athlete self-presentation on Twitch. By conducting a text analysis and a sentiment analysis, this study provided exploratory results to understand how fans perceive the athlete self-presentation.

The text analysis results were consistent with previous literature on Twitch comments (Kobs et al., 2020) that fans produced relatively short comments on the live streaming platform because of the fast interaction pace in the online community. Yet, fans repeatedly utilized the names or nicknames of the athletes, as well as customized emotes in the chats to interact with the athletes and show their love and support for the athletes. This indicates how fans engage in the athlete branding process on Twitch. In line with previous research (Kobs et al., 2020), fans frequently adopted internet slang. Other top-used words were highly connected with live streaming content. When compared with other streamers, athletes had more portions of chats that were discussing their athletic performance or other sports-related information.

The sentiment analysis results supported our assumption that the majority of the fans hold either a neutral or a positive attitude towards athlete self-presentation on Twitch. A possible explanation for this finding is that the audience of the athletes' Twitch channels was mostly their existing sports fans. For instance, they might come to watch the athletes live streaming on Twitch because they had already developed an attachment with the athletes.

The ANOVA results supported H1 and showed that backstage self-presentation had the highest mean scores of sentiments when compared with offstage self-presentation. This again could be because most fans have attached to the athletes' backstage performance, such as the Sports Insider. Because sports expertise provided a source of credibility for athletes as influencers. This supported the findings from the literature that source credibility and trustworthiness of personal brands could positively

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influence consumer behaviors (Breves et al., 2019; Jin et al., 2019). In addition, the other backstage performance Live Streamer could receive positive reactions from the audience because such backstage activities help athletes set up the performance in the front region. Yet the difference between the backstage and offstage sentiments might also be because offstage self-presentation does not portray athletes in the center of the performance (Doyle et al., 2020).

I also observed that fan reactions towards self-presentation may vary with time. For instance, at the start and end of the live streaming, the chats would be filled with greetings. However, the current analysis was not able to elaborate on this phenomenon. In addition, negative behaviors of fans in the online community, especially group-based trolling or spamming behaviors (Obreja, 2021), were also very common in the observed comments. This could be an interesting topic to understand how the negative behaviors of fans impact the athletes' mental welling.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

The overall purpose of this research was to explore athlete personal branding behaviors, athlete self-presentation, as well as fan perceptions of athlete self-presentation on Twitch. As athletes become more actively engaged in the branding process, recent studies have begun to explore the athlete personal branding phenomenon (Na et al., 2020, Doyle et al., 2020, Su et al., 2020). However, previous studies have only examined athlete personal branding behaviors and impression management on social media (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Li et al., 2021; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). In addition, limited research has considered the uniqueness of Twitch, such as live streaming and gaming features, and its impact on athlete personal branding and impression management. Therefore, this study conducted a netnography, a thematic analysis, and a sentiment analysis to explore those issues in the context of Twitch.

5.1 Summary of Findings

To explore RQ1, I conducted a netnography where I observed 12 Twitch channels of professional athletes to identify athlete personal branding behaviors on this live streaming platform. The core finding of this netnography was that athletes utilized Twitch as a personal branding tool. Athletes performed four categories of personal branding behaviors on Twitch: identity, positioning, image, and relationship. Athletes relied on Twitch to construct existing identities (Identity Construction: Sportsperson and Celebrity), expand identities to other categories (Identity Extension: Gamer, Streamer,

and Average Joe), and transfer their athletic identity (Identity Transition). Athletes

selected various positioning strategies (Selective Content and Target Markets) to present

those identities to the audience. In addition, athletes adopted Twitch to create a positive

brand image (Image) that involves Performance (Athletic Performance, Esports

Performance, and Streaming Performance), Appearance (Physical Appearance and

Virtual Appearance), and Lifestyle. Finally, Twitch provided athletes with opportunities

to build Relationship, including Relationship with Fans (Interaction and Appreciation)

and Relationship with Teammates and Other Celebrities (Co-stream, Friendship, and

Interaction).

To understand RQ2, I performed a thematic analysis where I watched the two

most recent videos from each athlete's Twitch channel to examine the athlete self-

presentation. The first major finding was that athletes adopted Twitch as a platform to

present their desired self-presentation. The second major finding of this thematic

analysis was that I proposed the Model of Athlete Self Presentation. In this model,

athlete self-presentation on Twitch was classified into four types of performances:

Frontstage, Backstage, Onstage, and Offstage. At the frontstage, athletes presented self-

presentation of Content Creator (Esports Expert, Sports Master, and Fitness Trainer),

Publicist (Brand Promotion, Esports Promotion, Promotion for Friends, and Self

Promotion), Informer, Analyst, and Fan Aficionado (Greeting, Seeking Help,

Interaction, and Appreciation). The Backstage self-presentation included Live

Broadcaster (Streamer and Moderator) and Sports Insider (Sports Performance, Personal

Sports Info, and Team and Teammates). Conversationalist (Salute, Communication, and

Commendation) and Behind-the-scenes Reporter (Personal Schedule, Food, Music, Sports) were categorized as onstage self-presentation. Finally, Channel Owner and Cameraman were recognized for the offstage self-presentation.

To address RQ3, I conducted a text analysis and a sentiment analysis to investigate fan perceptions of athlete self-presentation. The text analysis results indicated that the most frequently used words among fans' comments were highly related to the live streaming content. The sentiment analysis results suggested that the majority of the commenters had either a neutral or a positive attitude toward athlete self-presentation. The ANOVA results showed that backstage had higher sentiment scores when compared with other types of self-presentation.

5.2 Summary of Discussions

Findings of the netnography provided a positive response to RQ1 and suggested that Twitch was utilized by athletes as an important platform for personal branding. The four categories I identified supported findings from the personal branding literature that identity, image, and positioning were essential components of the personal branding process (Khedher, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2011). The themes and sub-themes I identified for the athlete personal branding behaviors on Twitch had similar observations (such as Sportsperson, Average Joe) as previous research (Doyle et al., 2020; Sanderson, 2013; Taylor, 2018). Yet Twitch provided athletes with unique features to construct distinctive brand attributes (such as Gamer, Virtual Appearance) on the digital platform. One interesting finding was that some retired athletes adopted Twitch as a platform to retain and transfer their athletic identities. Athletes usually experience a shift or even decline in

their athletic identity after retiring from professional sports (Brown et al., 2018). Digital could help retired athletes transit smoothly between multiple identities (Sanderson, 2013). Further, video games could help retired athletes to present their athletic identity (Bowers, 2011). Therefore, with its live streaming feature and its dedication to gaming, Twitch may support retired athletes with their identity transition process.

Findings from the thematic analysis suggested some interesting points associated with RQ2. Twitch emerged as an effective impression management tool since it provided athletes with personalized features and freedom of self-presentation. Therefore, athletes could present the desired impression in front of the audience (Leary, 1995; Mitchell et al., 2021). Different from their self-presentation on social media and in interpersonal relationship contexts, athletes were able to perform new types of self-presentation on Twitch, such as onstage and offstage performances. This finding supported the argument from Mitchell et al. (2021) that self-presentation has shifted from occurring in the physical world to the online community. Finally, as a live streaming platform, Twitch allowed athletes to perform various forms (such as verbal, textual, visual, and virtual) of self-presentation at the same time.

Findings from all three studies suggested a connection between athlete personal branding, self-presentation, and fan perceptions. I observed athletes in this study using Twitch as a personal branding tool, while an important strategy for personal branding on Twitch was through the impression management process. Literature suggested self-presentation was the alternative name for impression management (Leary, 1995). One significant purpose of self-presentation on Twitch was to project a positive impression in

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front of the audience, so as to influence the fan perceptions positively. Therefore, findings from this paper suggested that future research should explore the relationships between personal branding, self-presentation, and their impacts on fan perceptions.

5.3 Theoretical Implications

This paper is believed to be the first of its kind to examine professional athletes' adoption of Twitch and esports as personal branding tools. Findings from this paper suggest that Twitch has three unique features (gaming content, personalized channel, and live interaction) that are related to personal branding. Therefore, findings could help build the theoretical foundations to understand this unique phenomenon of athlete personal branding on Twitch. Findings from this study might be helpful to explore athlete branding behaviors on other digital media that have similar functions of live streaming and gaming content, such as YouTube. Especially, this study could contribute to understanding the competitive advantage of Twitch when compared with YouTube for personal branding and impression management. For example, Twitch could be less sensitive than YouTube in weekday and weekend patterns and could have magnitude more concurrent channels (Pires, & Simon, 2015). The consistency in providing live streaming services may attract researchers' attention to exploring the uniqueness of Twitch for personal branding.

The netnography findings could have an impact on the theory development in understanding the athlete personal branding process on digital media. The four themes from Study 1 — Identity, Positioning, Image, and Relationship, might be applied to describe the procedures of athlete personal branding on Twitch. In line with existing

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research on personal branding in online communities, the Identity theme indicates that

brand identity construction and management could be a primary process of personal

branding (Khedher, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2011). Several sub-themes under the Identity

theme may be adopted to build theoretical frameworks of new identity construction in

the virtual world. For instance, findings from Study 1 suggest that athletes adopt digital

media like Twitch to present their sports success, preferred non-sports identities, as well

as their identities as everyday people (Doyle et al., 2020; Sanderson, 2013). This

supports that athletes could create differentiation among their personal brands using

digital media when their sports-related brand attributes are similar (Green, 2016). Such

athletes' behaviors of developing new identities outside of sports could be interpreted by

the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Because athletes seek positive

distinctiveness of their personal brands through comparing in-group and out-group

identity dimensions that help establish social creativity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Additionally, when one facet of the self is explored, athletes are frequently inspired to

use digital media to display their other selves (Schau & Gilly, 2003).

Yet, the netnography findings could contribute to the theoretical foundations of

virtual identity construction in the digital context. Study 1 indicates that athletes could

build identities as Gamers through avatars, virtual skins, and in-game characteristics.

Those virtual elements help athletes explore their virtual selves and connect their online

presence with their offline personas. This is in line with previous research that an online

avatar could help an individual explore the virtual self, thereby creating consistency

between the online and offline personas (Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009; Solomon & Wood,

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2009). Such a virtual identity construction process has become a more important phenomenon with the recent shift in digital media from text-based online communication to animated virtual worlds (Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009).

Study 1 also provides theoretical contributions to understanding athlete brand positioning strategies on digital media. The netnography findings suggest athletes provide selective content on Twitch to satisfy various consumer needs. This supports previous literature that differentiation could become a useful branding strategy that helps athletes establish a sense of individuality among other competitors (Hodge & Walker, 2015; Lobpries et al., 2018). The Target Markets theme further suggests that athletes may identify special consumer groups as their target segments on Twitch. Existing literature that measures the spectators' motivation to watch esports could be adopted as the theoretical basis to explore various target markets for athletes (Qian et al., 2020, Yu et. al., 2022).

In addition, findings from the netnography might contribute to the development of the Model of Athlete Brand Image in the digital context (Arai et al., 2013; 2014). Consistent with previous research (Arai et al., 2013; 2014), study 1 indicates that athletes build brand attributes, such as their performance, appearance, and lifestyle in the online community. However, the unique features of Twitch have produced new brand attribute dimensions that athletes may construct through this live streaming platform. For example, athletes could develop esports performances and present virtual appearances through Twitch. Therefore, it might be important to incorporate those new attribute

dimensions into the Model of Athlete Brand Image to understand how athletes build off-field brand attributes through digital media.

Findings from study 1 also provide theoretical contributions to fan engagement with athletes in the digital context. Swaminathan et al. (2020) suggested that consumers may advance to become the new stakeholders of brands in the hyper-connected world. Twitch, a network-based broadcasting platform, has provided the audience opportunities to engage with streamers intensely (Taylor, 2018). For instance, study 1 suggests that athletes may adopt some high committed fans as moderators for their Twitch channels who help monitor the chats during the live streaming. Such involvement from the fans in the athlete branding process suggests that consumers may advance as new stakeholders in the human brand co-creation process (Centeno & Wang, 2017). The co-creation value of the consumers on Twitch could contribute to the development of the Theory of Co-creation (Saarijärvi et al., 2013) and the Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1999) in the digital media context, with a focus on how consumer behaviors may affect the human brands' meanings.

Findings from the netnorgaphy further suggest that the interaction between fans and athletes helps the audience develop a sense of community. This contributes to understanding the relationship between athletes and fans in a hyper-connected context. This supported some components of the sense of community from the theoretical framework of McMillan and Chavis (1986). For example, according to McMillan and Chavis (1986), members of one community would be more attracted to the community when they feel could themselves have influence over the community. This might explain

why some fans in study 1 would be willing to devote effort to help manage the athletes'

Twitch channels voluntarily. Members of one community also process shared emotional

connections (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Consequently, the appreciation from athletes to

the fans may have a significant impact on the attractiveness of the athletes' Twitch

community.

The thematic analysis in this paper suggests that the digital components of

Twitch allow athletes to present their desired impression. This is consistent with athlete

self-presentation literature that digital media plays an important role in the athlete

impression management process (Doyle et al., 2020, Sharifzadeh et al., 2021). This

supports that one purpose of self-presentation is the self-construction of an individual's

own ideal self (Baumeister, 1982, Baumeister & Hutton, 1987). More importantly,

Twitch offers athletes control over the impression that they want to portray to the public.

Some special Twitch features, such as automated interactions, personalized content, and

customized emotes, provide athletes with competitive advantages to manage impressions

on Twitch. For example, the automated interactions that are conducted via chatbots offer

athletes chances to engage with fans promptly whenever the fans come up with

questions. Therefore, findings that are related to those features may provide theoretical

contributions to understanding how athlete self-presentation leads to positive fan

impressions.

Besides, Twitch supports athletes to perform various forms (i.e., textual, visual,

verbal, and virtual) of self-presentation at the same time thanks to its live streaming

feature. Previous research suggests that Twitter and Instagram only allow athletes to

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present one form (i.e., textual, visual) of self-presentation in real-time (Lebel &

Danylchuk, 2012, 2014; Li et al., 2021). Accordingly, this might be a distinctive

function for self-presentation on Twitch when compared with other digital media,

suggesting a possibility to further examine the role of live streaming in athlete

impression management. Furthermore, findings from Study 2 provide a theoretical basis

to explore if the different forms of self-presentation could portray the same brand

communication messages.

More importantly, findings from the thematic analysis contribute to the

theoretical development of self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959) in the digital

context where frontstage and backstage performances may shift. Taking Twitch as the

stage, Study 2 suggests that the athlete self-presentation on Twitch could be in line with

previous literature that frontstage performance would be directly observed by the

audience while backstage performance would set up or prepare for the performance at

the front region (Goffman, 1959). Findings from Study 2 could be applied to further

develop theoretical frameworks for athlete self-presentation. For example, the live

streaming feature of Twitch allows athletes to perform similar frontstage and backstage

performances (such as Publicist, Sports Insider) as on social media (Lebel & Danylchuk,

2012, 2014; Li et al., 2021). However, in contrast to previous literature (Lebel &

Danylchuk, 2012, 2014), some backstage performances (i.e., Informer, Analyst) become

frontstage self-presentation, while some other backstage performances could be brought

to the onstage (i.e., Behind-the-scenes reporter, Conversationalist). These findings

suggest that athletes might perform new patterns of self-presentation on live streaming

platforms, providing fundamental knowledge to research the difference between frontstage and backstage performances.

By introducing two new categories of self-presentation — onstage and offstage, this study has reconstructed the self-presentation framework in a synchronous digital context as the Model of Athlete Self Presentation. In line with previous research (Doyle et al., 2020), offstage self-presentation includes the performance when athletes are not at the center of the stage. Findings from the thematic analysis provide some interpretations to understand the offstage performance. Athletes could actually get "off" from the stage on Twitch, therefore athletes would perform some salient offstage performances on this platform when compared with other digital media. One new category of self-presentation is the onstage performance, which refers to the interchangeable performance between backstage and frontstage. This type of self-presentation may be only available on Twitch because of the live streaming feature and its multi-layer graphics. Hence, the onstage performance on Twitch may provide theoretical foundations to understand the exclusive athlete self-presentation on live streaming platforms which incorporate multi-level scenes. In addition, the onstage self-presentation may contribute to establishing the brand authenticity of athletes. Because athletes may not have enough time to refine their performances onstage, thus they have to behave according to their true selves. Those behaviors that reveal the inner emotions and true selves of the athletes are known as celebrity authenticity (Ilicic & Webster, 2016).

Findings from the thematic analysis may also contribute to theory development in the literature on parasocial relationship and parasocial interaction. The term parasocial

relationship refers to the seeming face-to-face interaction between a viewer and a media performer (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956). While previous literature suggests that parasocial relationship is a one-sided interpersonal interaction between viewers and media performers (Dibble et al., 2016), findings from Study 2 have challenged such a one-sided relationship because the interactive features of Twitch (such as bet and poll) could create two-way interactions between athletes and the audience. Therefore, this paper suggests the need to consider how the two-way interaction may change the parasocial relationship between athletes and viewers.

Results from Study 3 indicate that fans might participate in the co-creation process of athlete brands on Twitch through the chats. The word frequency analysis suggests that fans have preferences in using the brand elements of athletes, such as brand names and customized emotes, when commenting on athlete self-presentation via Twitch. Those personalized brand elements help fans get involved in the athlete branding process, such as brand recall and recognition on Twitch. Fan engagement in providing sports-related comments on Twitch also helps co-create the athletic identities. Such co-creation value of fans on Twitch provides theoretical foundations for exploring consumers as stakeholders for the human brands (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Saarijärvi et al., 2013).

Another observation from the text analysis of Study 3 is that fans have intentionally repeated their comments in the chats, which is known as spamming (Obreja, 2021). Fans have also purposely mocked the athletes by trolling the athletes with pranking behaviors and chats (Obreja, 2021). Such two common toxic behaviors

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indicate the need to understand how the toxic culture in esports may affect the athlete's mental well-being. Therefore, research suggests that examining the association between gamification and toxic social behaviors might be necessary (Qian et al., 2022). Associating the toxic behaviors of fans and the athlete self-presentation may provide some fundamental knowledge to explore what types of athlete self-presentation may provoke fans' spamming or trolling behaviors.

Results from the sentiment analysis provide exploratory knowledge to understand how fans perceive the athlete self-presentation via Twitch. This supports that one motivation for self-presentation is pleasing the audience's expectations and preferences (Baumeister, 1982, Baumeister & Hutton, 1987). Study 3 indicates that the majority of the fans provide either neutral or positive comments. This provides foundations to build up theoretical frameworks to understand the athlete impression management process on Twitch, that is what types of self-presentation may stimulate more positive impressions among the fans.

The ANOVA test connects athlete self-presentation with fan perceptions. Consequently, this provides theoretical foundations to explore which self-presentation performance could produce more positive fan reactions. This further supports the assumption that fans perceive various types of self-presentation differently. Backstage performance, including themes of Sports Insider and Live Broadcaster, seems to have more positive sentiment scores than other types of self-presentation. This provides fundamental knowledge to explore the source credibility and trustworthiness of athletes as influencers on digital media (Na et al., 2020).

5.4 Practical Implications

This study provides several managerial implications. First of all, this study brought attention to Twitch and esports as personal branding and impression management tools for professional athletes. Athletes, as well as brand managers, could consider using esports and Twitch to help branding athletes to passionate gamers on the live streaming platform, who may not be traditional sports consumers. Twitch and esports also provide athletes opportunities to explore and display who the athletes are outside of professional sports.

Athletes may adopt the four themes from the netnography as a comprehensive process to build and manage athlete personal brands on Twitch. The first theme Identity suggests that athletes and agents may consider Twitch and esports' roles in the construction of athlete identities. Athletes and agents could adopt some unique features from Twitch to support their personal branding process. For instance, athletes could adapt their existing brand elements (such as brand name, logo, and color) to create customized emotes and Gifs, which could help them present their Sportsperson identity, create positive fan interactions, as well as communicate consistent messages. In addition, Twitch has become one of the few platforms where athletes might promote their identities as Gamers and Streamers. For example, athletes may add starting scenes to their live stream and adopt automated chatbots to present their identities as Streamers. In particular, retired athletes usually witness a decrease in their athletic identity (Brown et al., 2018). Twitch may help retired athletes maintain their identity as professional

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athletes. They can present their sports performance from the past matches. Or they could host some virtual events to connect with their existing sports fans via Twitch.

The second theme Positioning tells athletes and agents to portray various identities over different target groups. Athletes and their brand managers may assess where the athletes need to invest more personal branding effort and decide their positioning strategies. Because Twitch allows athletes to display various categories of content, athletes may purposely select what they want to present. For instance, if athletes aim to increase their brand awareness as professional players, they could produce sports-related content on Twitch, such as commenting on sports matches or live streaming themselves doing exercises. Athletes may choose to focus on other identities if they have already established well-known sports identities and wish to promote their brands to the new target groups. For example, athletes could produce content for a popular video game if they plan to attract fans of this game.

The third theme Image suggests athletes may adopt Twitch as a digital platform to build their brand image. Other than sports-related brand attributes, athletes may adopt Twitch to present their esports or streaming performance. For instance, athletes could participate in competitive esports tournaments to show the audience their expertise in video games. Virtual appearance might be another unique brand attribute that athletes could build via Twitch. Athletes could collaborate with esports publishers and create personalized avatars and costumes, so as to recreate their identities in the video games (Meadows, 2007; Wang et al., 2014). In addition, Twitch offers athletes a platform to display their off-field way of living. For example, athletes could present their

preferences for certain brands using multiple ways of communication. They could verbally appreciate the support from sponsors or they may place sponsor logos under their camera windows.

The fourth theme Relationship indicates that athletes could adopt Twitch to foster positive relationships with fans. Twitch offers many unique interaction opportunities. For instance, athletes could start a poll during the live streaming to ask fans about the content they prefer to watch for future broadcasting. Athletes may get some fans involved to help manage the stream quality and athlete brand community. They could assign some fans as chat moderators who may regulate the audience's behaviors. Such fans may have more sense of community with the athlete brand community on Twitch as they have more influence over the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Yet athletes could consider the networking opportunities from Twitch. They may participate in a co-stream with other celebrities for co-branding purposes.

Additionally, Twitch may be adopted by athletes for their impression management. On the one hand, self-presentation aims to perform the desired self (Baumeister, 1982, Baumeister & Hutton, 1987). Twitch encourages athletes to choose what content they want to portray in front of the audience. For example, athletes could incorporate different categories of content into one stream. On the other hand, self-presentation aims to satisfy the audience's expectations and needs (Baumeister, 1982, Baumeister & Hutton, 1987). Athletes could seek real-time feedback from the audience about the stream quality and adjust their stream content accordingly.

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Athletes may consider taking advantage of Twitch's live streaming feature in the impression management process. Because Twitch allows athletes to present various forms of self-presentation, athletes could adopt nonverbal behaviors, such as expressions, appearance, and gestures to express information (Leary, 1995). For instance, when athletes want to verbally present their preferences for some music, they could reveal their positive attitudes through expressions, while they may share information about the Albums within the chat and play the songs at the same time.

Furthermore, athletes could present various types of self-presentation on Twitch. Athletes could focus on the special category of self-presentation, that is the onstage performance. Because onstage self-presentation may be exclusive for live streaming platforms when compared with other digital media. In particular, athletes could share more content about their personal lives as Behind-the-scenes Reporters or display their interactions with teammates and other celebrities as Conversationalists. For the frontstage self-presentation, athletes may want to focus on those performances that they could not present in the front region on other digital media. Examples include athletes sharing public statements or lifemusings as the Analysts or non-sports-related information sharing as the Informers. For the backstage performance, athletes as Live Broadcasters could present to the audience the activities that help they set up and prepare for their performance on the frontstage. Athletes may also want to present sports-related information as the Sports Insiders, which might result in positive impressions among the fans who are passionate about the sports success of the athletes. Since athletes may not be portrayed as the center in the offstage performance, athletes could consider creative

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ways (e.g., adding starting scenes) to keep their connections with the audience when they might be away from the stage.

Although athletes could have more control over their self-presentation on Twitch because it allows athletes to display personalized content, the live streaming feature still could bring some threats to athletes. Unlike social media where individuals do not need to present in real-time (Mitchell et al., 2021), Twitch may not provide enough opportunities for athletes to refine their frontstage performances. Athletes should be aware of potential threats from live streaming on Twitch when they could not practice ahead or have agents check their content, such as using a racial slur (Amenabar, 2022; Deb & Draper, 2021).

Last but not least, this investigation also provides empirical suggestions on what type of self-presentation content could be utilized for athletes to create positive impressions among the audience. In order to foster a positive reaction from the fans to the athlete self-presentation, athletes could produce more types of self-presentation that may foster more positive sentiments among fans, such as the backstage self-presentation. As an illustration, athletes could produce more content about their personal sports performance or release sports-related behind-the-scenes stories about themselves, teammates, teams, and the sport. In contrast, athletes may be cautious to perform the offstage self-presentation, in which athletes could not be the center of the performance. For example, athletes may want to avoid empty scenes and always have themselves in front of the camera. They may also find ways (e.g., using brand elements) to keep their presence in the stream windows when they have to get away from the cameras.

5.5 Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study created a detailed data collection and analysis plan based on netnography literature, this research has a few limitations. First, the live streaming observation window is relatively short. A long-term observation as a participant might be appropriate to understand athlete personal branding behaviors in the community context. Future studies may employ a longer observation window to examine more athletes in the live streaming setting. Because each brand community based on the athlete's Twitch channel has its own rituals and traditions. Future research may find it valuable to have a relatively deeper understanding of those unique cultural elements, to better understand athletes' personal branding efforts in the virtual community.

Second, although this paper suggests an important purpose of athlete self-presentation on Twitch could be pleasing the audience, it has not considered other motivations for athlete self-presentation on this platform. For instance, baseball player Blake Snell raised his voice for the MLB's proposed 50-50 revenue split during the pandemic (Armstrong, 2020). Future research may consider how athletes use live streaming channels for social activism and other purposes.

Third, while the present study utilized various forms of data from different observation stages, it is necessary for future research to adopt the triangulation method from Kozinets (2020) and collect data from multiple sources due to trustworthiness considerations. For example, news articles and YouTube interviews about the athletes' personal experiences with video games and Twitch could be appropriate materials to support the research findings and discussions.

Fourth, future researchers may also find it beneficial to explore other live streaming platforms that support gaming content. For example, Bilibili.com is a Chinese video-sharing website that allows large amounts of esports fans to co-view and discuss live streaming content (Qian et al., 2022). YouTube is also a widely adopted video-sharing platform that has live streaming functions and gaming content (Chen, 2013). Future studies may adopt the Model of Athlete Self-presentation proposed in this study to explore athlete presentation on YouTube and Bilibili.com.

Fifth, the research subjects within this paper are all male athletes. Future studies may want to explore the unique phenomenon of female athletes' personal branding and self-presentation via Twitch. Because of the socially assigned sex roles and gender discrimination against women in gaming communities (Hussain et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2022), future research could observe some different findings when researching women athletes on Twitch.

Lastly, the current project relies on the existing text analysis package Textblob on Python. However, the database of Textblob was developed based on a movie review context. It may not accurately reflect the sentiment scores within the context of esports and Twitch in this study. Therefore, researchers may find it beneficial to use machine learning methods to develop a Twitch specialized sentiment database, which will benefit future scholars who are interested in assessing sentiment scores in a similar context.

5.6 Conclusion

This research adopted netnography, thematic analysis, and sentiment analysis to explore athlete personal branding behaviors and athlete self-presentation. My findings

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suggest that athletes adopt Twitch as a useful platform for personal branding and

impression management. In addition, by reconstructing the self-presentation theory

(Goffman, 1959), this research examined how three unique features of Twitch – gaming

dedicated content, personalized channel, and live interaction help the athletes build their

personal brands.

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