Show and Tell: How Athletes Control Their Image Through Social Media

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Sports fans often find themselves asking the question, “I wonder what my favorite player is up to or thinking about when they’re not playing?” Social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram allow the everyday fan to take a glimpse into the private lives of their favorite athletes. Twitter and Instagram allow professional athletes to exert more control over their self-presentation and reveal the private side of their lives. In the absence of the player’s self-revelation through social media, the public is often left with the traditional media’s one-sided, one-dimensional image of players. Without control of self-presentation, NFL fans are unable to see a more authentic, multidimensional athlete role model. These platforms provide different features that allow athletes to show NFL teams and fans their lives off the field. The athlete’s use of these different social media platform features can be viewed through the lens of the self-presentation theory.

Self-presentation theory refers to a “behavior that attempts to convey some information about oneself or some image of oneself to other people” (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987). Both Twitter and Instagram are built on sharing experiences within individual’s networks. Instagram’s mission is to “allow you to experience moments in your friend’s lives through pictures as they happen. We imagine a world more connected through photos” (Instagram, 2018). Instagram’s mission is to form a tightknit community that brings its users together. By doing this, they are creating networking facilities that allow the professional athletes who use the platform to become closer to sports fans alike in a more intimate way.

The same notion resides with Twitter. Twitter “is what’s happening in the world and what people are talking about right now” and believes in free expression and think[s] every voice has the power to impact the world” (Twitter, 2018). Twitter is emphasizing that their purpose is to facilitate the creations and ideas of everyone who wants their voice heard without constraint. Professional athletes can use this platform to “embolden identification and attachment with followers and introduce competing media narratives surrounding their identity” (Hambrick et al., 2013). In the sports arena, this is imperative to both players and fans, because athletes want to show who they really are to their fans.

To understand how Twitter and Instagram enable users to control their self-perception, we are going to examine the Twitter and Instagram activity of two football players: Johnny Manziel and Martellus Bennett. Manziel attended Texas A&M where he won the Heisman Trophy as a freshman, and was drafted by the Cleveland Browns in 2013 (Heisman.com, 2013). Our other athlete is Martellus Bennett, who is currently a tight end on the New England Patriots. These two athletes share very few similarities (both attended Texas A&M) and have different reputations in the NFL (National Football League).

When Manziel was drafted in 2014, he was presented in the media as the next NFL star. However, when Manziel entered the NFL, the public came to see a player living a frat-boy lifestyle. Manziel was known to have some risk when he was drafted by the Cleveland Browns, and “team officials had bought into [his] pre-draft promises to tone down the partying and leave his frat-boy lifestyle back in College Station, Texas” (Breech, 2014). However, what came to be seen as Manziel’s reckless lifestyle resulted in him being released by the Browns and ultimately labeled as a “hazard” for NFL teams.

But can Manziel be fully to blame for the creation of party boy lifestyle? I decided to speak to Sarah Spain, a Cornell University graduate who is now a columnist, radio host, and reporter for ESPN. According to Spain, social media allows athletes to be more comfortable about disclosing information, which allows the rest of the world to see who they really are. However, this connectedness can lead to professional athletes tainting their public images and ultimately derailing their careers. I asked Spain what she thinks the root causes are of these social media blunders that ruin careers and she said, “A lot of the athletes aren’t thoughtful in the moment. These poor posts are mostly sent out late at night when they’re with their buddies who don’t look out for the athlete’s best interest. But on the other hand, some athletes like to walk the fine line of being a little crazy to grow their brand. When they try and gain more publicity for being crazy, they usually take it too far. This is where the PR team needs to step in, but most of the time it is hard for them to help the athlete self-regulate their social media. In Manziel’s case before his comeback, he wasn’t using his platforms effectively; he was just using them to show his partying. By doing this, he was just showing everyone a dangerous image. But now, I don’t know if he going to change that dramatically and I think he has no shot at coming back to the NFL” (S. Spain, personal communication, February 27, 2018).

In contrast to Manziel’s frat-boy image, Bennett entered the NFL in 2008 with the image of an idiosyncratic, outspoken player lacking team spirit. Bennett’s former coach, John Fox, describes Bennett on NFL.com as having “an interesting personality, [that’s] not malicious or bad. He’s a great kid” (Orr, 2016). Bennett’s “interesting personality” is often obscured by the media’s presentation of him being “malicious or bad” (Orr, 2016). What makes Bennett an “interesting personality,” is his more private side, which is often hidden by traditional media, but Bennett wants to be authentic and show people who he really is as a person.

Both Manziel and Bennett utilize Twitter and Instagram to “take a more active part in their public presentation and share more aspects of their identity than is typically portrayed in mainstream media coverage” (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Currently, both players are in completely different scenarios; Bennett is coming off of his first Super Bowl win, and Manziel is attempting to redeem himself by cleaning up his act in order to have another shot to play in the NFL. Therefore, their self-presentation will differ considerably due to self-presentation being “goal driven” (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). To show how these platforms aid each athlete, we will examine an Instagram post from both Manziel and Bennett. On January 24th, 2017, Manziel posted a photo showing him in a weight room working out alongside Alex Fine, who is an NFL Combine speed trainer. The caption under the photo reads, “Adversity introduces a man to himself” (@jmanziel2, 2018). By posting this picture, Manziel is showing and telling his fans, and NFL teams that he has an immense drive to succeed, and that he’s working with the best to achieve his goal. Instagram is unique in its own way, because it allows users to provide an indexical image that has “the ability to engage in impression management, virtually” (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Manziel is showing the world what he wants and what he believes is important, which is sometimes skewed by the media. Through the lens of self-presentation theory, “group settings by definition raise self-presentational motivations” (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987). In this case, Manziel’s followers serve as the “group settings” that motivate him to show he’s working to improve to the best of his ability.

Martellus Bennett’s self-presentation on Instagram differs tremendously from Manziel’s. On February 7th, 2017, Bennett posted a picture with his brother after the Super Bowl. Bennett and his brother have their arms around each other and are smiling while red and blue confetti is falling from the sky. Underneath the picture, the caption reads, “Love you bro!! Thanks for always believing in me and always loving me no matter what #BestBigBro” (@martellusb, 2017). Bennett could have posted any picture from the game that night, but he decided to post the one with his brother, which shows that he places a priceless value on his relationship with his brother. This message allows Bennett’s fans and employers to “foster a particular judgment” (Smith & Sanderson, 2015) about his internal values that are often private. Observing this post from the perspective of self-presentation theory, “self-presentational motivations are activated by the evaluative presence of other people and by others” (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987). Since the New England Patriots won the Super Bowl, Bennett’s Instagram page was being viewed by millions of followers, and because of this, Bennett felt the need to post a picture that displayed his authentic side.

As the cases of Manziel and Bennett show, Instagram allows athletes to display their values and private sides of life that are often skewed, and not seen while they are on the field. Through Instagram’s services, both Johnny Manziel and Martellus Bennett create networking facilities that enable the fans and NFL employers to become closer with these players and understand their uniqueness that makes them who they are. Without athletes personally managing their public image, NFL fans and employers are susceptible to being influenced by traditional media. By managing their image directly, athletes will be able to broadcast how they want to be viewed by the public.

Twitter is also another social media platform that allows Manziel and Bennett to distribute messages that provide exposure to their personality. Through Twitter, “athletes are given a platform to illuminate their personality characteristics, interact with fans, and have their own interactive space” (Blaszka, 2014). This space for creativity allows fans and employers to understand who these players are that they watch perform on the field. When a fan is watching their favorite player on television or in real-time on the field, the only known association is that the specific player is a good football player, other than that there is very little understanding about their personality and interests. Through the use of Twitter, this is no longer a problem, because fans are able to form “attitude[s] toward athletes according to the social media messages” (Knapp & Mastasio, 2015). Through their self-produced content, athletes provide information that reveals opinions, emotions, and expressions that allow fans to form attitudes based off of the athlete’s authentic self.

To understand how Twitter provides an inside look into the private lives of athletes, we will again look at the profiles of Johnny Manziel and Martellus Bennett. On January 19th, 2017, Johnny Manziel posted a tweet that said, “Haven’t been this happy in a long time man. Appreciate all the people in my life who reached out during the truly rough patches in ‘17” (@JManziel2, 2018). Manziel is broadcasting out his love and appreciation to those who stuck by his side through his struggles in 2017. Manziel’s message can receive feedback due to the “like” and “retweet” features, because they allow Manziel’s followers to show support and solidarity through those features, as well as the response feature that enables followers to respond. In this instance, Twitter allows for more of a connection between Manziel and his fans. Self-presentation claims that “the strength of the self-construction motive [serves] as a function of the desire to claim a certain trait” (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987). Manzeil’s tweet is serving as the function that displays his gratitude to those who have supported him through the tough times, which signifies that there are people who are supporting his cause.

Martellus Bennett also takes advantage of Twitter, but for different reasons. On February 12th, 2017, Bennett posted a tweet that said, “We must defeat Social Oppression. No longer can they cage our spirits. Minimize our potential. Or Force us to forfeit our individuality” (@MartysaurusRex, 2017). Here Bennett is providing his viewpoint on social oppression that shows a private side of his life off of the field, which allows him to “display a multi-faceted self that extend[s] well beyond the playing surface” (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). This understanding goes beyond the football field and allows NFL fans to understand what Bennett is like off of the playing surface. Fans are aware of his characteristics on the field, but Twitter enables Bennett to present his authentic opinion that cannot be skewed. This presentation is aided by the uniqueness of Twitter, because Bennett is made aware of this network’s opinion by the responses he receives, as well as the “likes” and “retweets” his tweet receives. Thus, Twitter has a slightly more interactive approach than Instagram due to the ability of Twitter users to promote a tweet through “liking” and “retweeting” a tweet, and the feature of users to engage in recorded conversations with each other.

The content of Bennett’s tweet is a personal opinion, which is providing insight to how Bennett feels about social oppression. Self-presentation theory claims, “people present themselves so as to create a particular and useful impression on the audience” (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987). By revealing his opinion, Bennett is allowing his followers to observe his private thoughts that are not expressed while he is on the football field.

Spain also weighed in Bennett’s social media presence. Spain said, “Martellus is one of my favorite athletes to follow because he’s super creative. I also really like how he pushes to inform people that he’s not only a football player because he also creates cartoons and books for children. I love seeing that side of him. Overall, I think he’s really entertaining and I love that he pushes athletes past being just athletes” (S. Spain, personal communication, February 27, 2018).

Understanding what your favorite NFL player is like off the field can be difficult, but Instagram and Twitter allow professional athletes to have more control over their self-presentation that allows fans to take a glimpse into their private lives. By utilizing Twitter and Instagram, Manziel and Bennett are able to broadcast their thoughts, emotions, and opinions that show their self-authenticity that cannot be skewed by traditional media. The understanding of both Manziel and Bennett’s social media activity is understood through the self-presentation theory lens where their followers serve as the driving force behind impression management.

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