Performing Athletic Identity in Twitter: Differences in Status and Gender

VERA VARIS

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Athletes are a versatile group of people who all highly value sports in their lives. Some athletes have just started their careers, some do college sports and some do sports professionally. Therefore it is obvious that even though they consider themselves athletes, their level of athletic identity varies from person to person.

Identity can be studied with different methods and from many different perspectives. In this research, which is based on textual analysis, discourse community analysis provides a starting point to study identity. Different discourse communities have different demands for their members. Society, fans, media, and athletic communities expect certain behavior from athletes at every level: be respectful, don't use alcohol or drugs and be competitive, for instance. Expectations shape the athletic identity and therefore the interaction between the discourse and identity needs to be understood.

The way people, specifically athletes, show their identities in media has been studied, but fewer studies reveal the differences between status and gender. This study focuses on the ways athletes perform identities in Twitter, and if there are the other identities overlapping or replacing athletic identity. Using social media channels to reveal the real identities (Back, et al.), while considering the rhetorical situation the athletes are in (Johns and English; File), it is possible to study what kind of identity overlap athletes experience (Fieseler, et al.). The study revealed that female professional athletes performed athletic identity less than other identities, when compared to other athletic groups, which indicates that female professional athletes have other identities overlapping the athletic identity.

Interaction between Identity and Discourse Communities

To be able to study what identity really is, there are some important theoretical frameworks to understand. This study focuses on athletes, so it is crucial to understand the discourse community of athletes. Discourse community can be seen as a "social framework regulating textual production" (Porter 400), which means that in a certain discourse community there are certain (social) expectations about how people should act (Bazerman; Gee). Gee calls these expected ways of how to act, write, and behave "identity kits" (para. 6). These recognizable roles of athletes are not limited only to the practice field: people expect athletes to behave in a proper, respectful manner also outside the athletic events.

The identity kits of athletes will determine the way they behave, and therefore also people's perceptions of athletes. "Social facts" are created based on the perceptions. Bazerman defines these social facts as things "people believe to be true, and therefore bear on how they define a situation"

(368). In the athletic discourse community, professional athletes are often seen as role models, or even as heroes (Lines). Media gives people a perception of athletes on the practice or game field, and people often believe the perceptions to be true in real life. Therefore, they are creating social facts, expectations of how athletes should behave. This interaction between the behavior of athletes, people's perception of their behavior, and social facts created by the perceptions are all crucial to understand when studying identity. The idea of texts creating new social facts is taken even further by Bucholtz and Hall, who argue that linguistic and other semiotic practices result in identity shaping. They see identity as "a social and cultural" phenomenon, instead of a "primarily internal psychological phenomenon" (585). This indicates that by conducting discourse community analysis, it is possible to reveal the real athletic identities.

Construction of identity is a long process and the level people identify with in a discourse community varies (Gee; Porter; Fieseler, et al.; Martin, et al.). James Paul Gee introduces useful terms to help analyze identities within different discourse communities. He elaborates the idea of discourse communities by introducing Discourses, with a capital D. Discourses are much more than literacy practices within a certain community. They are "ways of being in the world," which comprehensively covers values, beliefs, acts, identity kits, and attitudes (para. 5). When entering a discourse community, a newcomer faces gates, or certain criteria that the person must fulfill in order to enter the discourse community. When the person is accepted, the next step is called enculturation, or ways more experienced community members teach newer members to act and write within the community. Even though the enculturation process is intentional, its effects in identity shaping may be unintentional, because identity construction is not a fully conscious process (Bucholtz and Hall).

There are many types of Discourses that explain why some discourse communities shape identity more than the others. According to Gee, primary Discourse is the very first Discourse, such as family, which teaches us how to interact in this world. Primary Discourses work as a foundation for secondary Discourses (para. 9). These secondary Discourses include churches schools, and, in this case, the athletic discourse community. Secondary Discourses may also be dominant or non-dominant, depending on the social goods, such as money and status, that are gained through dominant Discourses. For athletes, the discourse communities they are in and the level they feel they belong to will affect the way they perform athletic identity. Therefore, the other discourses may cause tensions between identities and possibly interfere with the athletic Discourse.

Identity and Athletes

How strongly athletes feel connected to the athletic community is the determining factor that indicates the level of athletic identity, according to two independent studies conducted by sport psychologists (Grove, et al.; Martin, et al.). When starting their career, athletes face expectations from parents, coaches, and teammates. These expectations include characteristics such as competitiveness, certain attitude that reflects right type of motivation and passion towards the sport (Ryska). These expectations, among others, are seen later on in the sports careers when considering the expectations people have for professional athletes (File; Grove, et al.; Martin, et al.). In addition to external pressure to behave in a proper manner, there are also internal pressures from the discourse community, especially when it comes to team sports. File stresses the fact that athletes in team sports need to have a "team identity" so they know which position they are in the team, what kind of expectations they face, and how to write, talk and act (461)—in other words, their expected identity kits.

Bucholtz and Hall state that identities are not constructed independently; there are always overlapping identities that will affect the way people define social situations (598). When talking about athletes as a large group, they all share athletic identity, but it is overlapping other identities constructed by different discourse communities. When retiring from sports, athletes have conflicts

between different identities when the expectations towards them change (Grove, et al.; Martin, et al.). Both studies agree that there is a change in athletic identity that can lead to identity crisis, which can have severe consequences, such as adjustment difficulties and depression. Grove, et al. highlight that these consequences can be avoided if the athletes give up their athletic identity stepwise to the point of retirement (198), which is supported by Martin et al.'s study showing that athletes who consider retirement "displayed significantly lower levels of athletic identity" (105). Therefore, athletic identity is never a permanent state; it varies from person to person, from time to time, and it is affected by different Discourses, which have different expectations for their members. This study aims to find the differences between athletes and how status and gender changes the athletic identity and the way it is performed in Twitter.

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Identity and Social Media

People change the ways they represent themselves in the media, in order to achieve their goals (Fieseler, et al.; File; Johns and English; Schwarz and Halegoua; Tolson). Therefore, the way people write on social media and give interviews differs from their real identity. People tend to have a media identity, which is separate and different from their real identities (File). An opposite view to the theory of media identities is represented by research conducted by a personality psychologist Mitja Back and coauthors. The study shows that even though people would consider the context and therefore write differently in the media compared to their real identity, people tend to reveal their true personalities rather than "non- idealizations." Even though Back, et al. state that people reveal their real personalities in social media, it can't be blindly trusted. It is important to understand the rhetorical situation the writer is in: what are the goals the writer is trying to achieve and what is the intended audience?

When athletes write in social media, they are in a rhetorical situation that can affect their career and their financial status. To gain sponsors and fans, as well as popularity

Within the athletic community, athletes need to represent themselves well in the media (File; Meân and Halone). Representing well does not always mean "being yourself," even though originality and authenticity are keys when trying to build a credible persona in social media (Tolson). It may be hard for athletes to write authentically within the athletic discourse community because of the conflicts between the rhetorical situation and their real identities. In addition, it has been studied that overlapping identities will affect the ways people write in social media (Fieseler, et al.). The blurred boundaries between athletic and private lives will affect the writing, when more tension occurs between the overlapping identities and the media identities.

Therefore, it is known that identities can be studied through social media, as long as the rhetorical situation is known. There are studies that show the level of athletic identity, the interaction between identity and social media, and athletes as part of discourse communities. So far, there are no studies that connect the social media analysis of athletic identity and the identity construction within the athletic discourse community. Therefore, this study answers how athletes represent themselves on Twitter, how they perform different identities, and how status and gender affect this performance. The analysis of twenty-four elite athletes revealed that female professional athletes are most likely to tweet about other Discourses than athletics. Male student-athletes however, are most likely to tweet only about athletic Discourse, suggesting that there are differences between genders.

Methods

This study consists of textual analysis, where athletes' Twitter accounts were studied in order to find out how they perform different identities through social media. A total of twenty-four athletes were chosen in this study based on their status, gender, athletic success, activity on Twitter, and the sport they play. These athletes compete or have competed on national or international level, and they have different statuses. There are current student-athletes (n=8), professional athletes (n=8) and retired elite athletes (n=8) represented, half of them male and half female. Athletes chosen for this study provide a comprehensive variety of sports. There are summer sports (n=17), winter sports (n=7), individual sports (n=12), and team sports (n=12) represented, resulting in total of twenty different sports. Table 1 shows the categories and athletes chosen. A total of six to twelve tweets from every athlete were analyzed, so the total amount of texts is 223.

		Retired Athletes		Current pro athletes		Student- Athletes	
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Team Sports		Denis Savard	Manon Rheaume	Andrew Durutalo	Hope Solo	Shaun Watson	Mariah Jefferson
		Karl Malone	Gabrielle Reece	Richard Sherman	Amy Nixon	Corey Ray	Lexie Elkins
Individual Sports		Greg Lemond	Katharine Merry	John Isner	Ronda Rousey	Vernon Norwood	Sophina DeJesus
		Joey Cheek	Carolyn Dorin-Ballard	Andy Newell	Lindsey Vonn	Maverick McNealy	Hannah Miller

Table 1: Categories and Athletes Chosen to the Study

To take a quantitative approach to the tweets, every tweet got their own labels. Tweets about athletics got a label (A) and the ones about other Discourses were marked as (O). When about athletics, it was studied whether the tweet was about the athlete him- or herself (S) or about other athletes (O), and was the tweet written in a positive or negative way (+/-).

In addition, tweets about athletics performance got a label (P), and tweets directed to fans got a label (F). If the tweet was not about athletics, it was studied if the tweet was about some other discourse community. These included Discourses of home (H), including family and friends, work (W), and worldview or religion (V). Some of the categories such as political or educational Discourses, became less relevant during the research and they were excluded from the study. However, other discourse communities such as charity and community service (C) and discourse communities of gender and gender equality (G) were represented, and they were added to the study. If there was a conflict or tension between athletic and other Discourses, it was labeled as (X) with a tag of the discourse community that resulted in the conflict. As previously mentioned, these Discourses include home, work, charity, and religious worldviews. Quotes athletes borrowed from other authorities are labeled as (Q). When the tweet did not relate to any of these categories, it got a label "random" (R) and was excluded from the study. When the labels were written down, different patterns were observed to reveal differences between athletic groups. To clarify the patterns,

athletic-related posts were colored yellow, while tweets related to other things than athletics were colored red. If there were conflicts between athletic and other communities, it was labeled with both yellow and red. Quotes were colored blue, tweets written directly to fans were colored green, and tweets about athletic performance got a purple tag. These primary results can be seen in Appendix A, where all the categories are represented.

The textual analysis works well when it is used as a directional rather than comprehensive method. It is possible to see differences between groups of athletes with different status and gender, which provides information for further research because the reasons behind the differences remain unclear. However, there are some problems with this kind of method. First, it is hard to tell whether a tweet is written in a positive or in a negative way. The subject might be negative (loss, injury etc.), but it can still be written in a positive way. Therefore the result of the tone should be ignored. In addition to problems with the analysis itself and the amount of athletes and primary texts studied caused problems. There are only eight athletes representing one status (student-athlete, professional- and retired athletes), and when comparing genders within one category, there are only four athletes representing one gender. Therefore the differences may be seen, but they might be results of individual differences. However, the study does show small differences that may indicate bigger problems when a larger sample group is analyzed. Also, the number of tweets restricts the study only to the most recent posts, which might show only a selected part of the media identity.

Results

Student-athletes posted about athletics more than other groups. Table 2 shows that only 6 out of 39—resulting in 15% of the tweets from female student-athletes—mentioned other Discourses, and none of the male student-athletes posted about other discourse communities. Compared to retired athletes, there is a difference, because 38% (n=13) of the tweets from women and 35% (n=12) of the tweets from men mentioned other Discourses. For retired athletes, there are no notable differences between genders (3 percentage points). From all of the groups studied, female professional athletes had the most conflicts between the discourse communities they tweeted about: 53% (n=20) of the tweets they posted mentioned Discourses outside of athletics. Compared to male professional athletes (14%, n=5), the difference is significant.

	Retired Athletes		Professional Athletes		Student-Athletes	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Team Sports	Savard	Rheaume	Durutalo	Solo	Watson	Jefferson
	A - 2 AX - 5 O - 2 R - 0 Q - 0	A - 7 AX - 2 O - 1 R - 0 Q - 0	A - 6 AX - 0 O - 0 R – 2 Q - 0	A - 4 AX - 0 O - 6 R - 0 Q - 0	A - 9 AX - 0 O - 0 R - 1 Q - 1	A - 10 AX - 0 O - 1 R - 0 Q - 0
	Malone	Reece	Sherman	Nixon	Ray	Elkins

	A - 2 AX - 0 O - 4 R - 1 Q - 0	A - 2 AX - 0 O - 5 R - 1 Q - 0	A - 7 AX - 0 O - 3 R - 2 Q - 2	A - 9 AX - 2 O - 1 R - 0 Q - 0	A - 7 AX - 0 O - 0 R – 1 Q - 3	A - 4 AX - 0 O - 3 R - 1 Q - 5
Individual Sports	Lemond	Merry	Isner	Vonn	Norwood	Miller
	A - 10 AX - 0 O - 0 R – 0 Q - 0	A - 5 AX - 3 O - 0 R - 0 Q - 0	A - 3 AX - 0 O - 1 R – 2 Q - 0	A - 1 AX - 0 O - 7 R - 0 Q - 0	A - 5 AX - 0 O - 0 R – 2 Q - 2	A - 8 AX - 0 O - 1 R – 3 Q - 1
	Cheek	Dorin-Ballard	Newell	Rousey	McNealy	DeJesus
	A - 6 AX - 0 O - 1 R – 1 Q - 0	A - 4 AX - 0 O - 2 R – 2 Q - 0	A - 6 AX - 1 O - 0 R – 2 Q - 0	A - 2 AX - 0 O - 4 R - 2 Q - 1	A - 7 AX - 0 O - 0 R – 1 Q - 0	A - 5 AX - 0 O - 1 R - 2 Q - 0

Table 2: Summary of the Primary Research Results

Student-athletes quoted other people in their tweets 12 times out of 72 tweets. It is more compared to professional athletes (3/73) and specifically to retired athletes, who did not quote anyone in the 68 tweets analyzed. Student-athletes directed their tweets to their fans 6 times out of 72, for professional athletes the number is 8 out of 73 and for retired athletes 5 out of 68, so there are only slight differences. Student-athletes posted about their own performances nine times, while professional athletes tweeted two and retired athletes did not post any tweets about their own performances (see Appendix A).

Discussion

Identifying oneself as an athlete varies during an athletic career, as shown with retired athletes (Grove, et al.; Martin, et al.). However, it was not known how gender or other statuses, such as being a student-athlete or being a professional athlete, affect the athletic identity. Table 2 shows how tweeting patterns differ between these statuses and genders. The most significant findings are the tweeting patterns of student-athletes, particularly men, who tweeted about athletics more than any other group. In addition, female professional athletes tweeted equally about athletic- and non-athletic Discourses, which differs significantly from all the other groups analyzed.

Student-Athletes

Surprisingly, student-athletes were tweeting mostly, or only, about athletics, especially males. While it might seem logical that student-athletes would have more conflicts in their identities, the results showed that they had fewer conflicts between identities when compared to the other groups. This result might indicate that these student-athletes are trying to enter the world of professional athletes, and therefore they are exaggerating with the tweets related to athletics. Table 3 shows that thirty-nine tweets out of seventy-two were about athletes themselves (AS), and

nine of them highlighted their good performances (P). There might be a need of using Twitter as a channel for advertising, to gain attention with good athletic performances. Compared to the professional athletes, who posted about athletics twenty-four times, highlighting performances only two times.

If student-athletes try to enter the professional athletic community, they try to gain the ethos on the field by showing their good sides in the social media to gain attention. They also used more quotes (Q) from other athletes or idols, probably because their own ethos is not yet strong enough when comparing to pro- or retired elite athletes, who mostly tweeted posts directly to their fans, with no need to quote anyone with a stronger ethos. This is closely related to enculturation: newcomers of the community try to learn ways how to write within the community, and they purposefully adapt the writing behavior of more experienced community members.

	Professional Athletes	Student-Athletes
Total Number of Tweets	73	72
AS	24	39
AS+P	2	9
Q	3	12

Table 3: Professional Athletes and Student-Athletes, Performance Related Posts

One reason why student-athletes tend to tweet nearly only about athletics, might be the dominance of athletic Discourse in their lives. Gee states that dominant Discourses offer the members social goods such as money and status. For student-athletes that may be the reality: the athletes chosen for this study are elite in national level, and therefore they might gain status in their school environment, and probably they will gain money in forms of scholarship for tuition payments. Also, female student athletes strongly performed athletic identity, because only 15% of their tweets talked about other Discourses than athletics. Even though they tweeted less about athletics compared to male student- athletes, the most significant difference is between female student-athletes and female professional athletes, who tweeted 53% about other Discourses than athletics. What happens to the athletic identity when college age women move on to be professional athletes? This problem remains unsolved, but this research gives a baseline to other fields of study, such as to sport psychologists, to take a closer look at the question.

Female Professional Athletes

Female professional athletes tweeted the most about things outside of athletics (Table 4). When they were not tweeting about athletics, they were tweeting about families, work, gender equality, or lack of respect in women's sports. They seem to have overlapping identities; they may be wives, mothers, and employers yet they still try to fully belong to the athletic discourse community. However, as Gee mentions, it is not possible to "engage in a Discourse in a less than fully fluent manner. You are either in or you're not" (para. 19). This statement explains clearly why the tensions occur: people have learned to live in a certain way, depending on the primary Discourse they have been growing in. When the secondary Discourses, such as athletics, in this case, come into play later on in the life, conflicts are almost inevitable.

	Retired M	Retired W	Pro M	Pro W	S-A M	S-A W
Tweets Total	34	34	35	38	33	39
Other Discourses	12	13	5	20	0	6
%	35%	38%	14%	53%	0%	15%

Table 4: Comparison of Tweets about Other Discourses

Taking a closer look at the tweets female professional athletes posted, some common factors can be observed. Clear conflicts occur in the tweets of Amy Nixon (@wee_nixon), a curler from Alberta. She describes herself on Twitter by saying: "Wife. Mom. Lawyer. Curler." Here, she clearly states her priorities: family and work comes before athletics. This can be confirmed by analyzing the hashtags she uses, "#workandfamily #mypriorities," which support the hypothesis. Surprisingly, Nixon was not the only athlete talking about the struggles of being a female professional athlete. Hope Solo (@hopesolo), a soccer goalkeeper, has been using Twitter as a channel to fight against unequal pay female soccer players receive compared to men. Ronda Rousey (@RondaRousey) tweeted a quote about respecting women, and Lindsey Vonn used the gender-related hashtag "#femaleempowerment" when talking about a panel discussion she took part in with other female athletes.

Therefore, it can be suggested that primary Discourses have been shaping these women to believe in gender equality. It seems like the primary Discourses and their identity kits do not correspond to the identity kits of professional athletes. As professional athletes, the social facts they face are basically the same as the social facts male professionals face. Being a professional athlete people expect and value certain character, regardless of gender. Athletes are expected to fully commit to sports and they should be visibly passionate about it. However, the athletic Discourse does not seem to be as dominant for women as it is for men: men get paid more, they gain more respect and status when they do sports professionally. As mothers, wives, and often also as employers female athlete should live up to many different kinds of expectations, and the social facts they face may not limit only to athletics.

Enculturation to new Discourses should not necessarily mean difficulties to adjust. If athletes learn about the gates and the expectations they need to live up to, before they move on to the next stage of their career, it will become easier to adjust to the new lifestyle.

Conclusion

This study revealed that there are differences between athletic groups, when it comes to performing identity in Twitter. However, the study does not reveal the reasons or consequences of the differences, and further studies are needed to explain the findings. One theory that might interest people in discourse studies field, suggests that the dominance of the Discourse affects the level of performing athletic identity. It makes sense, because male professional athletes gain more social goods from sports than women. When retiring, athletes lose some of the social goods, and they need to give up their athletic identity, as sport psychologists Grove, et al., as well as Martin, et al. have shown. Because the tweeting patterns of female student athletes and professional athletes differ, it could be studied what causes the differences in media identity, and if female professional athletes experience similar identity crises as athletes experience at the point of retirement. The uncovered differences in media identities could provide valuable information for gender studies, because gender was one of the key factors affecting the identity performed in Twitter.

In addition, athletes themselves as well as career advisors and coaches should be aware of the possible changes that may occur when the athletic status changes. Better understanding of how different groups and individuals react to life changes is important when planning an athletic career. Enculturation to new Discourses should not necessarily mean difficulties to adjust. If athletes learn about the gates and the expectations they need to live up to, before they move on to the next stage of their career, it will become easier to adjust to the new lifestyle. Therefore, it is crucial that life

satisfaction and belongingness to the athletic discourse community is studied with all the athletic groups, not only with retired athletes.

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Vera Varis

Vera Varis is a senior majoring in Interdisciplinary Studies. Her major areas of study are Physical Sciences and Life- and Biomedical Sciences with a minor in Environmental Studies. She was born and raised in Finland and she moved to the United States in 2015 to study and to play in goal for the UCF Women's Soccer team. Vera started college at University of Helsinki in 2014 where she is majoring in Molecular Biosciences. Her goal is to receive Bachelor's degrees at both universities by the end of 2017 and pursue a career in medical research.

APPENDIX A: Tweet Coding

	Retired Athletes		Professional Athletes		Student-Athletes	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Team Sports	Savard	Rheaume	Durutalo	Solo	Watson	Jefferson
	AS+ (2) AS+XW (5) O+C (2)	AS+ (1) AS+XW (1) AO+ (6) AO+XG (1) O+ (1)	AS+ (2) AS+F (1) AS+P (2) AO+ (1) R (2)	AS+ (2) AO+ (2) O(+)G (4) O-G (1) O+H (1)	AS+ (6) AS+F (1) AS+P (1) AO- (1) R+Q (1)	AS+ (2) AS+F (2) AO+ (6) O+H (1)
	Malone	Reece	Sherman	Nixon	Ray	Elkins
	AO+ (2) O+ (1) O+H (2) O+C (1) R (1)	AO+ (2) O+W (4) O+H (1) R (1)	AS+F (3) AS+Q (1) AO+ (2) AO- (1) O+H (3) R (1) R-Q (1)	AS+ (2) AS(-) (2) AS-XH (1) AS-XHW (1) AO+ (5) O+H (1)	AS+F (2) AS+P (2) AS+Q (3) R (1)	AS+ (1) AS+Q (1) AO+ (2) O+Q (1) O+V+Q (2) R+Q (1)
Individual Sports	Lemond	Merry	Isner	Vonn	Norwood	Miller
	AS+ (5) AS+F (1) AO+ (4)	AS+ (1) AS+F (1) AS+XW (3) AO+ (3)	AS+F (2) AO+ (1) O+ (1) R (2)	AS+F (1) O+ (1) O+ (1) O+C (2) O+H (1) O+W (2)	AS+Q (1) AO+ (4) R (1) R+Q (1)	AS+ (1) AS+Q (1) AS+P (3) AO+ (3) O+C (1) R (3)
	Cheek	Dorin-Ballard	Newell	Rousey	McNealy	DeJesus
	AS+ (1) AS+F (1) AO+ (1) AO- (3) O+H (1) R (1)	AS+F (2) AO+ (2) O+C (1) O+H (1) R (2)	AS+ (2) AS+F (2) AS+CH (1) AO+ (2) R+ (2)	AS+F (1) AO+ (1) O+ (3) O+G (1) R (1) R+Q (1)	AS+ (3) AS+F (1) AS+P (3) R (1)	AS+ (5) O+ (1) R (2)