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Self-Presentation of Iranian Football Players on Instagram during the 2018 World Cup

Abstract

Members of social network sites are able to decide how to present themselves to other members. An earlier study has suggested that athletes may put up posts to describe themselves in their various roles. The aim of this study is to gain further insight by extending from the earlier conceptual framework. The posts of 14 Iranian footballer who played in the Russia 2018 World Cup from April to August were analysed. Content analysis found that the posts could be classified into four different categories namely Athlete, Family, Personal and Publicity. In addition, it was found that over time, there were changes in the proportion of posts in each category. Athletes were more likely to post on their lives as an athlete before and after a major sports event. This suggests that athletes are managing their personal brand on social media.

Keywords: Social Network Sites, Soccer, Content Analysis, Sports Events

Self-Presentation of Iranian Football Players on Instagram during the 2018 World Cup

Social network sites have become part of everyday life. In 2015, about two-thirds of North American adults used at least one social network site.¹ Particularly among young adults, many members of social network sites also log on at least once a day.² They use the platform to share and articulate their interests with other members whom they have a connection.³

In recent years, social network sites have evolved to become more visual-centric. One of these visual social network sites, Instagram, was founded in 2010 for the specific purpose to allow members to share photos and images.⁴ In 2017, Instagram reported 700 million registered users.⁵ Members use the platform to document their life, demonstrate their creativity and share their interests with other users via images.⁶ As visual network sites are comparatively new to the scene, there is a smaller number of studies conducted on this platform. In general, these studies have found that there are differences in how members use visual social network sites when compared to other social network sites.⁷

Celebrities, including athletes, are also on social networks sites. They use social network sites to interact and share photos of their daily activities with their fans to maintain a connection with them.⁸ It is common in sports for organisations to share stories with their fans on social media.⁹ A small number of studies have also found that athletes share their lives with their fans on social network sites.¹⁰

However, recent studies have suggested that there is a chronological element to communications on social network sites.¹¹ To date, there has been few studies examining this temporal aspect.¹² Hence, there is a need to examine the use of how athletes use a visual social network site like Instagram to communicate with their fans and followers.

In this study, the Instagram accounts of the Iranian soccer team from the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia will be examined for the period before and after the World Cup competition. The study will examine what athletes post and whether there is a change over time. This will contribute to a deeper understanding on how athletes present themselves on a visual social network site from a chronological perspective.

Literature review

Football in Iran

Football originated in England but became a global sport. Iran, like many other countries, picked up the sport when the British travelled to the country and promoted the sport. The British often played football during their leisure. Young Iranians had many opportunities to watch and learn this new sport especially in the southern oil fields and in Tehran, where there was a large number of British citizens.¹³

Today, like many other countries, football in Iran has become a social, cultural, economic and political phenomenon with a special status in society. Football not only reflects social norms but can also create or catalyse the creation of acceptable forms of social behaviour. For example, in the 1990s, the post-match celebrations of the victory of the Iranian team over the Australian and United States teams saw the intermingling of fans from both sexes. This broke sexual taboos in the country and was a first step in achieving sexual equality.¹⁴ In addition, football can reflect the political sentiments of the country. While Iranians celebrated their team's victory, neighbouring countries in the Middle East celebrated the defeat of the United States, especially in the Shi'ite areas of Lebanon and in the West Bank.¹⁵

The sport that has been introduced to Iran more than a century ago is now one of the most attractive and popular sports in the country. One of the reasons that football is popular in

the Middle East is due to the lack of other alternative entertainment for young men in the region. In Tripoli, the capital of Libya, a game between two of the biggest football clubs can attract more than 100,000 spectators to the stadium. This is more than anywhere in Europe, except for top teams like Barcelona and Real Madrid.¹⁶ Specific to Iran, the two teams Esteghlal and Persepolis, had for decades attracted thousands of spectators into stadiums from Tehran and other cities.¹⁷

From an anthropological point of view, football has become a part of life for Iranians. Football is not only seen at the stadiums but is also broadcasted to the Iranian population through the mass media with one television channel in Iran dedicated to sports in general and football in particular.¹⁸ Soccer is part of the culture among Iranian youths. They form a group identity with their football team and are socialised into the accepted norms and values of football players.¹⁹ Unlike many countries, soccer fans have not become a social problem in Iran. Although Iranians are passionate about football, there is comparatively less violence observed at football matches.²⁰

The Iranian national football team had qualified for the FIFA World Cup five times including Argentina 1978, France 1998, Germany 2006, Brazil 2014 and Russia 2018. Iran's first victory occurred in 1998 against the United States with a score of 2-1 with goals from Mahdavia and Hamid Stilly. Iran's second victory was in 2018 against Morocco. In this game, Aziz Bouhaddouz scored an own goal in the 94th minute to give Iran a 1-0 win.²¹ In November 2018, FIFA ranked Iran's national team 29th in the world and first in Asia. Of the 14 Iranian footballers who played in the Russia 2018 World Cup, 12 footballers are now playing for foreign professional teams including 10 players in the European league.

Football has elevated many athletes into celebrities even for those who are playing at the amateur level. It is thus not surprising that many athletes are also on social network sites to

engage with their fans. They pass on information, make personal announcements and create personal branding using social media.²²

Athletes and Social Network Sites

Social networking sites are defined as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections²³. Goffman argued that “people generally would like to create an image, which would appeal to the people they are in interaction with”²⁴. Consequently, self- presentation motives include the achievement of personal goals; a presentation of a consistent and positive view of self to the world and; conforming to social norms.²⁵ With social network sites, it can be conceived that they are merely offering a technological platform for members to present themselves to others.²⁶

Athletes have also leveraged on social network sites to create positive exposure, engage fans and increase their visibility.²⁷ While athletes can decide how to present themselves to their fans, the majority have focused on the social function by displaying their personal likes, interests and families. There are also attempts by athletes to help promote their sponsors and share their training and competitive pursuits, however, these are relatively smaller in number.²⁸

Many of these studies have focused on analysing texts.²⁹ However, due to the nature of visual social networking sites, users of Instagram may be more likely to have stronger social interaction motives in using the social network site.³⁰

To understand how athletes manage their personal brand, it is necessary to first identify a conceptual framework in categorise and thematising posts.³¹ In a recent study examining athletes’ self-presentation on visual social network site Instagram, it was suggested that posts of athletes could be classified into six different categories. These are socialite, humanitarian,

family-driven, personality traits and interests, dedicated athlete and endorser.³² One of the aim of this study is to examine whether these categories can be generalised to other athletes in how they use Instagram in building their own personal brand and communicating visually with fans and other stakeholders.

Many studies on social network sites have focused on cross-sectional data. There has been only a small number of studies examining the temporal aspect.³³ Recent studies have suggested that there is a chronological element to communications on social network sites. For example, some studies have shown that the number of posts and interaction on social network sites tend to be the highest during the event.³⁴ Consequently, it suggests that the nature of communications on social network sites can change over time.

The research questions for this study are thus as follows.

RQ1: What type of photos do athletes post on Instagram?

RQ2: How do the types of photos change over time, particularly from pre-World Cup to post-World Cup?

Methodology

To answer the research questions, this study adopted content analysis. Content analysis is a systematic method used to analyse both written and visual content. Rules are developed to categorise the content. By analysing the data within and across categories, important relationships or patterns can be identified to provide insights of the phenomenon under study.³⁵ In this study, the focus is on the nature of the photo posted by the athletes. This means that coders are only analysing the appropriate category based on the content of the photos. Captions or videos are not included in the analysis.

Photos posted on the Instagram accounts of the 16 Iranian football players who participated in the 2018 Russia Football World Cup representing Iran were analysed using content analysis. All 16 athletes have Instagram accounts which were open to the public. Of the 16 athletes, 2 athletes namely Omid Ebrahimi and Vahid Amiri, had less than 10 posts on their Instagram accounts during the period. As such, they were removed from the study, leaving only 14 Instagram accounts for analysis. This is detailed in Table 1 below.

Insert Table 1 here

The 2018 FIFA World Cup was held in Russia from 14 June to 15 July. In total, there were 251 Instagram posts by the 14 Iranian football players for the period two months before and after the event. Prior to the event, there were 106 photos for the period from April to June. Iran did not qualify for the later stages in the competition and left the event on 30 June. During the period when the Iranian team was involved in the FIFA World Cup competition from 10 to 30 June, there were 46 photos. In the two months after Iran has left the competition, there were 99 photos from July to August.

Two human coders, both experts in the field of sport management, categorised the photos independently based on earlier theories of self-presentation.³⁶ The first coder developed six categories while the second coder came up with seven categories. After further discussion with a third expert in the same field, due to similarities between some of the categories and the small number of posts in a couple of categories, the team finally decided on four categories. This process ensures that there is inter-coder reliability.³⁷

The four categories are respectively Athlete; Family; Personal and; Publicity. The categories of Athlete, Family and Personal are similar to the categories found in the work of Smith and Sanderson.³⁸ However, this study developed one other categories i.e. Publicity. The categories are detailed in the next section.

Findings and Discussion

Types of Posts

In total, 121 (48%) of the posts were classified into the Athlete category. These include photos that depicted football training sessions or competitions. They illustrated the lifestyle and passion of the athlete in the sport. Similar to the coding adopted by Smith and Sanderson³⁹, photos showing leisure activities during training and competition were also included in this category as they represented the life of an athlete. An example of photos in this category was Mehdi Taroni's photo depicting leisure time with the coach and teammates in the Iranian national team training camp.

The Family category include photos that offer glimpses into the family life of athletes. 14 photos (6%) depict important moments in the family including birthday celebrations and relationships of players with other members of the family. Athletes shared their family photos on social media to demonstrate the importance of familial relationships.⁴⁰ As an example, Ashkan Dezhagah posted a photo of his daughters. It was interesting to note that many posts in this category were made by married athletes. The posts centred on their wives and children, especially when the athletes were not in training camps and spending time with their family.

Photos showing the personal and social life of athletes outside of football are generally popular among members of social network sites.⁴¹ They show the athletes as having other personal interests and may include other sporting activities of athletes. In this study, there were

78 photos (31%) in the Personal category. An example of a photo in this category is of Ramin Rezaeyan standing beside a billiards table. Perhaps due to the relative success and affluence of the respondents in this study, some of the photos showed the athletes enjoying an expensive and luxurious lifestyle. This include unique hobbies, expensive fashion and clothing accessories, good food and luxurious travels. For example, Mehdi Taremi posted a photo in this category of himself in a luxurious restaurant wearing expensive jewellery.

In earlier studies, it was found that athletes sometimes take on the role of an endorser and raise publicity for their sponsors or promote commercial entities on their social network sites. Perhaps due to their celebrity status, athletes may also take part in high profile event and promote various humanitarian causes.⁴² In these studies, the role of endorser, socialite and humanitarian are usually distinct categories as the intents were different. In this study, however, the number of posts in these categories were small. Consequently, it was decided to collapse the different activities that raise publicity for various reasons into a new category Publicity. Hence, this new category will include posts that reflect the athlete's desire to create an awareness about issues and raise public awareness. It will include an athlete participating in public events and charitable causes, and posts that are associated with raising the publicity of commercial entities and sponsors.

In this Publicity category, there were 38 posts (15%) in total. Some of these photos feature the signing of contracts between the athletes and their professional football clubs. This is because the majority of Iranian football players play for foreign clubs and such events allow the athletes to promote themselves and their future clubs. For example, Saeed Ezatollahi posted a photo of himself signing a new football club contract with Reading FC. The logo of the team was featured prominently in the photo. Others show athletes raising awareness for social issues. An

example of this is Alireza Jahanbakhsh's post of a young boy from a poor family wearing his football jersey.

In sum, the athletes posted 251 photos from April to August 2018. Based on the four categories described above, the Athlete category depicting the life of an athlete has the largest number of posts with 48% of total posts. This was followed by Personal (31%), Publicity (15%), Family (6%). This concurs with earlier studies which showed that athletes are using social media to present themselves as serious athletes and create a personal brand .

Changes in Types of Post over Time

Further analysis showed that there were changes across time. The number of followers for the athletes increased over the data collection period. This suggests that there was an increase in interest in the athletes while they were playing for the Iranian national team during the FIFA World Cup. As a proxy to measuring the level of interaction between athletes and fans, the average number of "like" votes was measured across time. The average number of "like" votes increased from 125,095.97 votes before the event to 240,831.11 votes during the event. However, after the Iranian team left the competition, the average number of "like" votes dropped to 168,308.63 votes.

The proportion of posts in each category also changed across the three time periods. Before the FIFA World Cup event, there were 106 posts. Of these, there were 60 posts (57%) in Athlete, 3 posts (3%) in Family, 26 posts (25%) in Personal and 17 posts in Publicity (16%). During the 20 days when the Iranian team was playing in the FIFA World Cup, there were 46 posts. Of these, there were 37 posts (80%) in Athlete, 2 posts (4%) in Family, 4 posts (9%) in Personal and 3 posts (7%) in Publicity. After the event from July to August 2018, there were 99

posts. Of these, 24 posts (24%) were in Athlete, 9 posts (9%) in Family, 48 posts (49%) in Personal and finally, 18 posts (18%) in Publicity. This is detailed in Table 2 below.

Insert Table 2 here

While the Athlete category had the largest proportion of posts before and during the event, it was the Personal category that had the largest proportion of posts after the event. A Chi-square test for independence indicated significant association between the proportion of posts and time period with a medium effect size ($\chi^2(6, N=251)=48.46, p<.01$, Cramer's $V=.31$).

This suggests that athletes may be posting different types of posts depending on whether it is before, during or after the competitive event. Cochran's Q Tests were conducted to examine the proportion of athletes who have posted in each of the four categories over the three time periods. The proportion of athletes posting in the Athlete ($\chi^2(2, N=14)=8.00, p<.05$), Personal ($\chi^2(2, N=14)=10.50, p<.01$) and Publicity ($\chi^2(2, N=14)=8.17, p<0.05$) categories were statistically different across the time periods. The proportion of athletes posting in the Family category was not statistically different across time ($\chi^2(2, N=14)=4.75, p>0.05$).

The above suggests that there is a chronological element when athletes are presenting themselves on social network sites. Before and during the competition, there is a conscious effort to present themselves as athletes with posts on training and competing in the event. However, when the event is over, the presentation shifts to Personal and Publicity posts to engage with their fans through the sharing of their social life outside of their sport. It is also an opportunity for the athletes to build up their personal brand.

Conclusion

Previous research on social media and self-presentation have focused on text-based platforms.⁴³ This study examined how athletes present themselves on a visual social network site like Instagram based on an earlier framework that was used to categorise athletes' self-presentation posts on Instagram.⁴⁴ Concurring with earlier studies, it was found that posts of athletes could be grouped into several categories. These include categories that reflect their life as an athlete, their personal and social life outside their sport, their family life and publicity for various causes.

Athletes present themselves visually through social media and through this manage their personal brand. They demonstrate their commitment to their sport and engage with their fans through posts in the Athlete category. In addition, they also engage with their fans by sharing with them their personal and family life. Finally, as celebrities with a large following of fans, athletes use social media as a platform to raise publicity for issues that they care about or raise the profile of brands that they are endorsing.

However, this study also suggested that the number of categories could be refined to four categories by collapsing the humanitarian, socialite and endorser into a single category of Publicity. This is because the current study showed only a small number of humanitarian and socialite posts. In part, this may have to do with the sample in this study. As the sample were successful national athletes from Iran, the type of posts may be different due to demographic and cultural factors. This should be examined further in future studies.

The study demonstrated that there is a chronological element to posts made on social network sites. The number of "like" votes peaked during the FIFA World Cup. This was similar to earlier studies which showed an increase in activity during the event.⁴⁵ This suggests that the population was interested in the event and had logged on to obtain and share information with

each other. The number of followers in this study suggest that the platform has considerable reach. It is therefore not surprising that sponsors, marketers and advertising companies have been interested to leverage on social media platform like Instagram as a marketing communication tool.

There are several limitations in this study. Firstly, the sample size of 14 athletes is relatively small. As noted above, due to the relative success of these athletes, the findings may not be generalised to other athletes. Secondly, this study did not analyse the captions or videos on Instagram. Analysing these could provide additional insights on how athletes present themselves on social network sites. These should be addressed in future studies.

Note

¹. Perrin, 'Social media usage'.

². Duffett, 'Facebook advertising's influence'; Gangadharbatla, 'Facebook me'.

³. Boyd and Ellison, 'Social network sites'.

⁴. Lunden, fastest-growing social site; Ting et al., the Use of Instagram.

⁵. Dogtiev, 'Instagram Revenue and Usage'.

⁶. Kim et al., Do you prefer, Pinterest or Instagram? ; Sheldon and Bryant, 'Instagram'.

⁷ Blight et al., 'Sense of community on Twitter and Instagram'; Sheldon and Bryant, 'Instagram'; Teo et al., 'Marketing on Instagram'; Ting et al., 'The Use of Instagram'.

⁸. Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 'Communicating via photographs'; Hutchins, 'acceleration of media sport culture'; Pegoraro, 'Athletes on Twitter'.

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9. Laurell and Söderman, 'Sports, storytelling and social media'; Ojo, 'Changing the game in Nigeria'.
 10. Smith and Sanderson, I'm going to Instagram it.
 11. Lee and Leng, 'Marketing of the 2014 Formula One'; Leng and Chiu, 'The SEA Games Myanmar 2013'.
 12. Brandtzaeg and Lüders, 'Time collapse in social media'.
 13. Chehabi, 'politics of football in Iran'; Jalili Farahani, '*Football Information*'.
 14. Chehabi, 'politics of football in Iran'; Fozooni, 'Religion, politics and class', 367.
 15. Chehabi, 'politics of football in Iran', 250.
 16. Cooper, *Football Against the Enemy*, 408.
 17. Ghadimi and Bagheri, 'cultural and social effects of sport development in Iran', 12-13
 18. Abdolalian, 'Football and Discovering the Signs of Cultural Change', 94.
 19. Ghadimi and Bagheri, cultural and social effects of sport development in Iran, 119
 20. Ibid, 114.
 21. Paul and Coles, World Cup 2018.
 22. Hutchins, 'The acceleration of media sport culture'.
 23. Boyd and Ellison, 'Social network sites'.
 24. Goffman, *The presentation of self in everyday life*.
 25. Ibid.
 26. DeAndrea and Walther, 'online and offline self-presentations'; Laurell and Söderman, 'Sports, storytelling and social media'.
 27. DeAndrea and Walther, 'online and offline self-presentation'; Pegoraro, 'Athletes on Twitter'.
 28. Smith and Sanderson, I'm going to Instagram it, 352.

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- ²⁹. Lebel and Danylchuk, 'How tweet it is'; Sanderson, 'blog is serving its purpose'; Weathers et al., 'tweet life of Erin and Kirk'.
- ³⁰. Blight et al., 'Sense of community on Twitter and Instagram'; Sheldon and Bryant, 'Instagram'; Ting et al., The Use of Instagram.
- ³¹. Laurell and Söderman, 'Sports, storytelling and social media'.
- ³². Smith and Sanderson, 'I'm going to Instagram it', 351.
- ³³. Brandtzaeg and Lüders, 'Time collapse in social media'.
- ³⁴. Lee and Leng, 'Marketing of the 2014 Formula One'; Leng and Chiu, 'SEA Games Myanmar 2013'.
- ³⁵. Riff et Al., '*Analyzing media messages*'.
- ³⁶. Goffman, '*The presentation of self in everyday life*'; Smith and Sanderson, 'I'm going to Instagram it'.
- ³⁷. Lacy et al., 'Issues and best practices in content analysis'.
- ³⁸. Smith and Sanderson, 'I'm going to Instagram it'.
- ³⁹. Ibid.
- ⁴⁰. Ibid.
- ⁴¹. Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 'Communicating via photographs'; Smith and Sanderson, 'I'm going to Instagram it'.
- ⁴². Babiak et al., 'investigation into professional athlete philanthropy'; Smith and Sanderson, 'I'm going to Instagram it'.
- ⁴³. Lebel and Danylchuk, 'How tweet it is'; Pegoraro, 'Athletes on Twitter'; Sanderson, 'blog is serving its purpose'.
- ⁴⁴. Smith and Sanderson, 'I'm going to Instagram it'.

⁴⁵. Lee and Leng, 'Marketing of the 2014 Formula One'; Leng and Chiu, 'Th SEA Games Myanmar 2013'.

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Table 1

Iranian Football Players in the 2018 FIFA World Cup and their activity on Instagram

Name	Age	Professional team	Number of Followers (in millions)	Number of Posts
Sardar Azmoun	23	Russia- Robinkazan	2.7	25
Alireza Beyranvand	26	Iran- Persepolis	1.5	12
Morteza Pouraligangi	26	Belgium- Open	0.7	19
Alireza Jahanbakhsh	25	England- Brighton	1.1	19
Ehsan Hajsafi	28	Iran- Tractorsazi	0.2	20
Ashkan Dejagah	32	England-Notingham forest	0.9	20
Ramin Rezaeian	27	Belgium- Oostende	1.5	21
Masoud Shojaei	34	Greece- A.a.k	0.4	12
Mehdi Taremi	26	Qatar- Al- Gharafah	1.9	21
Saeed Ezatolahi	21	England- Reading FC	1.0	15
Saman Ghoddos	25	France- Amiens	0.3	28
Reza Ghoochannejhad	32	Cyprus- Apoel	1.3	11
Milad Mohammadi	24	Russia- Akhmet Grozny	0.2	13
Karim Ansarifard	28	England- Nottingham Forest	0.4	15

Table 2

Number of posts in various categories across time periods

	Athlete	Publicity	Family	Personal	Total
Pre-Event	60 (57%)	17 (16%)	3 (3%)	26 (25%)	106
During Event	37 (80%)	3 (7%)	2 (4%)	4 (9%)	46
Post-Event	24 (24%)	18 (18%)	9 (9%)	48 (49%)	99