



**WSLA**

# The Changing Visual Landscape in Social Media

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NZ Olympic Women's Sport Leadership Academy

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*The New Zealand Olympic Women's Sport Leadership Academy is designed to support NZ's female Olympians make a positive transition from sport performance to sport leadership and connect to an international network of women leaders in sport.*

*The 18 month programme provides a unique learning environment that supports the women to further develop their confidence and leadership competencies. One objective of the programme is to raise awareness of issues in women in sport, and this becomes the basis of the special projects. The WSLA participants work in small groups outside of the formal sessions to further enhance their leadership and learning, undertaking projects that are substantive and of direct relevance to the sector.*

*Find out more about the WSLA Special Projects including presentations of this report from the NZOC [website](http://www.olympic.org.nz)<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.olympic.org.nz/about-the-nzoc/programmes-and-funding/womens-sport-leadership-academy/>



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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sport has the power to shift how women are seen and how they see themselves. Social media can create a platform to transform the portrayal of women in sport. This report explores how females are portrayed, how athletes use social media, investigates whether guidance and education is needed around posting, and identifies opportunities for female athletes to take control of their brand. We researched these topics by creating an online survey and reaching out to prominent high performance athletes to gain further insights.

From the survey results, 78% of respondents said they would like guidance around social media posting. After further research we would advise that:

- High performance athletes should have access to a social media adviser.
- High Performance Sport New Zealand carded athletes discuss their “personal brand awareness” in their annual individual performance plans.
- New Zealand Olympic Committee build a digital media education portal to educate our New Zealand high performance athletes.

These recommendations will provide current and upcoming female athletes a platform with the tools and resources to make informed decisions that will enhance their brand. Let’s empower female athletes to use social media as a platform to take ownership and champion their stories to be told.



## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to investigate the ways in which female athletes are portrayed in social media, and the extent to which they are able to take control of their brand. We researched this topic by creating an online survey to gain insights into current practices and trends as well as interviewing current high performance athletes.

Athletes today have the ability to take charge of their professional image and promote themselves in a way that they want to be portrayed. Historically, traditional media outlets have cherry-picked information, photos and had full control over the visual landscape of female athletes. To explore this topic it was important to understand how social media is being utilised by athletes today. Is there an opportunity for education around social media presence, not only to give them confidence but also to enhance their brand as an athlete?

## METHOD

In order to understand how social media could create a platform to transform the ways in which women in sport are portrayed, we followed the process outlined below to gather and interpret information on the topic. The media landscape is changing fast and social media is at the forefront of this. As part of this investigation we have collated some information about social media and its growing impact on women in sport. Our investigation included:

- Understanding the current climate for social media and sport,
- Identifying what current female athletes competing in high level sport for New Zealand are doing with respect to social media
- The extent to which they are using social media to project their journey and brand.

We designed and peer tested an online survey using SurveyMonkey, to gather information via quantitative and qualitative questions. The final survey was circulated using convenience sampling to one thousand people comprising the athletes who had applied for selection to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games and the Athlete Collective group, made up of current and former Olympians across a range of Olympic sports, and generated 40 respondents. A further 22 respondents were recruited through snowball sampling via the personal networks of the project team members, all former Olympians across four different sports.

Data analysis included qualitative and quantitative approaches and produced both quantifiable and comparative information as well a richer story reflecting respondents' personal experiences.

Five high performance female athletes who attended a Tokyo 2020 Olympic workshop participated in a video interview to gain a personal perspective on their use and experience with social media.

## SPORTS WOMEN AND THE MEDIA

The relationship between sports women and the media is well studied, and the intention of this work is not to repeat this. However, it is useful to highlight some common and long standing themes that have emerged from research over many decades: the image of sports women portrayed in the media and the coverage (or lack of) in traditional media channels.

### Image

We identified two issues within digital and traditional media, that portrays female athletes not purely for their true athletic abilities.

More often than not, female athletes are portrayed alongside an 'other' category. They are for example, mothers and wives as well as sports women. Or they are featured in the media because of an 'event' in their lives, such as their wedding or a photoshoot with their families or pets.

Another issue is the sexualisation of female athletes as the predominant canon of athlete portrayal. Traditional media has focused on what female athletes are wearing (or not). In an effort to draw in an audience and increase viewership they have also influenced archaic rules around what female athletes can wear while competing in an event (e.g. beach volleyballs rules about the brevity of their 'shorts').

Both issues lessen the narrative around women being portrayed for their athletic abilities and limit the type of acceptable exposure women face while competing in sport. These issues do not reflect the true nature of society as a whole nor the diversity of shapes and sizes of competitive sports women.

### Coverage

Another well researched issue (Scheidler, T. & Wagstaff, A. n.d.), (Kessel, 2018) and (Fink, 2013) is the inequality of coverage via traditional media channels. Male sports and in particular rugby and cricket have been dominant in the traditional media. This does not allow women to be seen competing in sport and ultimately can lead to less women participating because they are not visible. The lack of media representation doesn't reflect female athlete's achievements in their sport, with the lack of visibility diminishing their achievements because they are not celebrated by traditional media.



## UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

### The growing impact of social media on sports

Social media has become a pillar of our society. We use Instagram to connect to people with pictures and hashtags, Twitter for live updates and commentary and Facebook for personalised communities and groups. “We’ve seen social media mature from a university message board, to a repository of cat images, to a borderless global hive, with the collective power to change culture with a #hashtag” (Cottrell, 2018). Women are now changing the conversations on social media and creating careers. Social media has given women a voice and a new way of communicating.

Whether via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Instagram, social media provides ready communities for women who have previously felt marginalised and powerless, helping them find a tribe and amplify their voice.

### Women and social media

Digital media and particularly social media has the benefit that women can control how they are seen and control the narrative over traditional media channels. We chose to focus our research on social media primarily because of this benefit that social media has over traditional media. A reporter, current affairs show or news channel will always have their own rational and inherent bias when covering any topic. This includes the way women in sport are portrayed.

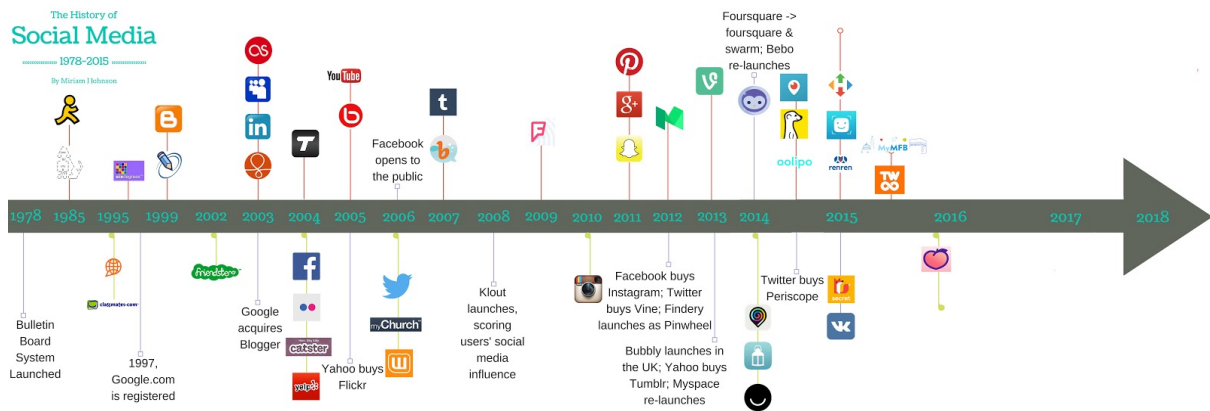
### Sports women and social media

Women are often ignored or invisible in the media with far less content featuring their expertise and views. When women engage online they are more open to being sexualised and harassed and not seen as strong. Higgs, Weiller & Martin (2003) suggest that sports media can influence how people view sports and that certain aspects of female sports are emphasised while other aspects are ignored. This effectively manipulates how spectators view women’s sport and influences public opinion regarding athletes. In particular there is often a focus on women’s sex appeal and femininity rather than their athletic accomplishments (Bissel & Duke 2007). The findings by Prior (n.d.) support the ability of the media to pressure women into looking a certain way by publishing unrealistic images. As a result, self-objectification and psychological issues such as low self- esteem can plague the female audience.

### Evolution of social media

The definition of social media is websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. Social media can be traced back to one website called Six Degrees that was launched in 1997. From this point forward the internet emerged into instant messaging and blogging. As the millennium changed so did people's perception of why and how they used social media. 2002 saw the introduction of LinkedIn and huge change came in 2004 with

the launch of Facebook, 2006 saw Twitter come to the market following that in 2010 was Instagram. As of 2017 there are now thousands of social media sites and today all brands have a presence on social media.



Allen, J. (2017).



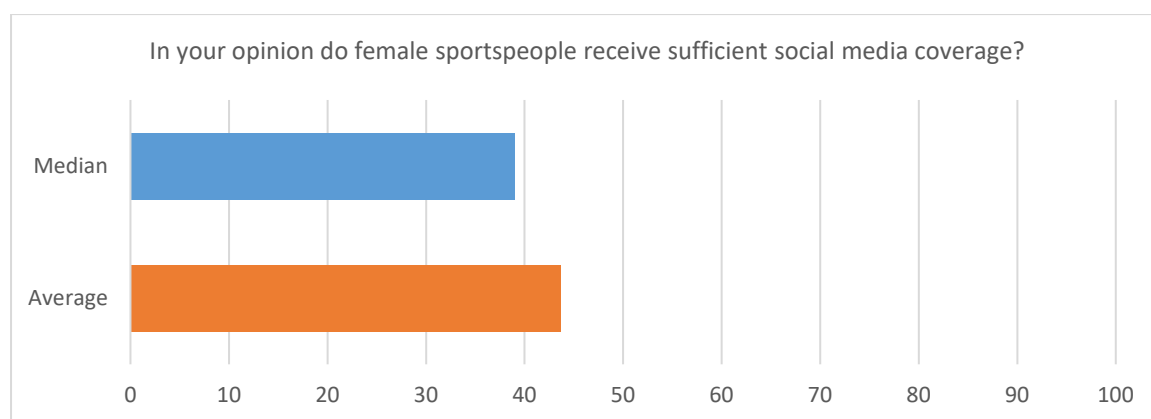
## RESULTS

### Whose voice have we heard?

We targeted high performance athletes through the use of the New Zealand Olympic Committee's database. From the 1000 athletes the survey reached, which included both male and female athletes, we had 62 female respondents, aged from 15 - 40+ years. They represented over 10 different sports, as well as varying levels of experience and ability, helping to provide a sound range of perspectives on how female athletes are portrayed through social media.

### Social media coverage

On a sliding scale, respondents perceive female athletes are LESS LIKELY to receive significant social media coverage, with an average answer of 44 out of 100.



Many of the comments that followed talked about mainstream media in regards to how there is often more coverage towards Men's teams sports such as rugby and cricket, with female results often appearing further down the news feed.

*“Watching the news every night says it all. 80% of the time the stories are only about males and IF females do get a story the male sports stars are always first” (survey respondent)*

This is true through mainstream media outlets where there is no control over what is regarded as newsworthy (e.g. television and newspapers). Social media now provides an opportunity to shift the control traditional media has over when and how stories are published, to the athlete now having control to post content on their terms. The many recurring comments around whether females receive sufficient social media coverage were centered around seeing an increase in womens coverage but still feel males receive more.

*“Compared to men we get a lot less coverage. Social media tends to focus on men before covering women's sport” (survey respondent)*

## The use of social media

The survey showed 75% of respondents use social media to promote their sport/brand of which 93% post their own content. A recurring comment in the survey was that females do a better job at promoting and portraying themselves on their personal social media channels.

*“Female social media influences can receive a large social media following if they invest the time and energy into promoting themselves and what they do. I believe the opportunity to do so does not depend on the gender of the athlete” (Survey respondent)*

*“Some female athletes receive great coverage and some don’t get much. I think it depends on your sport (how common and known it is) and how you portray yourself in social media. The type/quality of content that females post will determine if the media see if it’s beneficial or not to cover that athlete” (survey respondent)*

### Motivation of followers

Majority of respondents (89%) believed their followers followed them to **“follow their sporting journey.”** Just over half believe they were followed because they are a role model. When asked the question regarding increasing their followers and whether this was a motivator, the average answer was 50 out of 100.

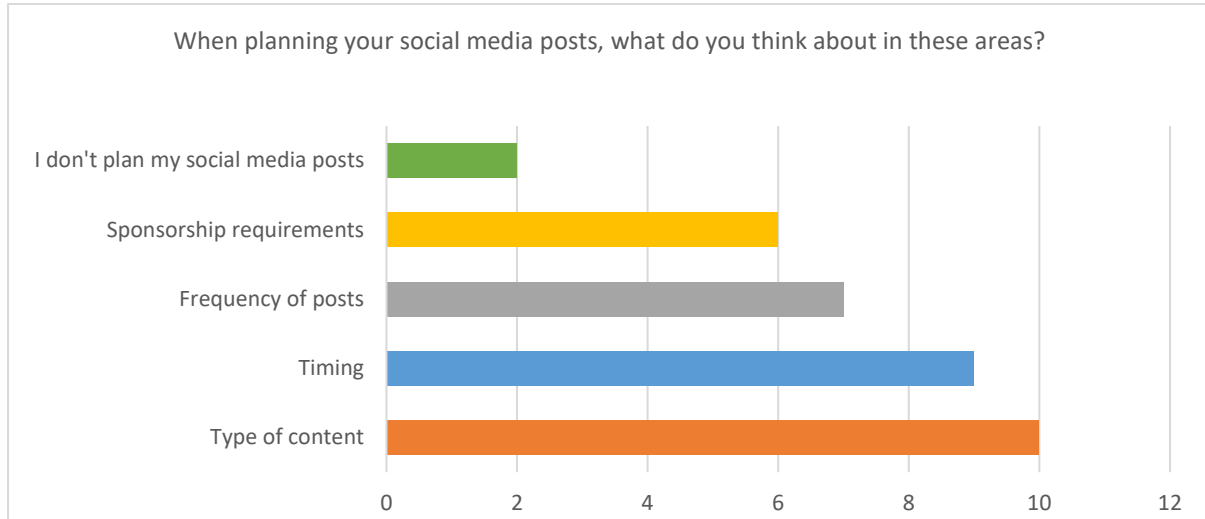
### Popular social media platforms

- Instagram (95%)
- Facebook (66%)
- Twitter (38%)
- LinkedIn (28%)
- Snapchat (21%)

### Timing of content

Posting on social media provides a huge opportunity to tell your own story and control your own content. We wanted to find out if athletes post their own content and secondly what do they think about when posting, specifically, do they take into account any of the following when planning their posts; sponsorship requirements, type of content, frequency of posts and timing.

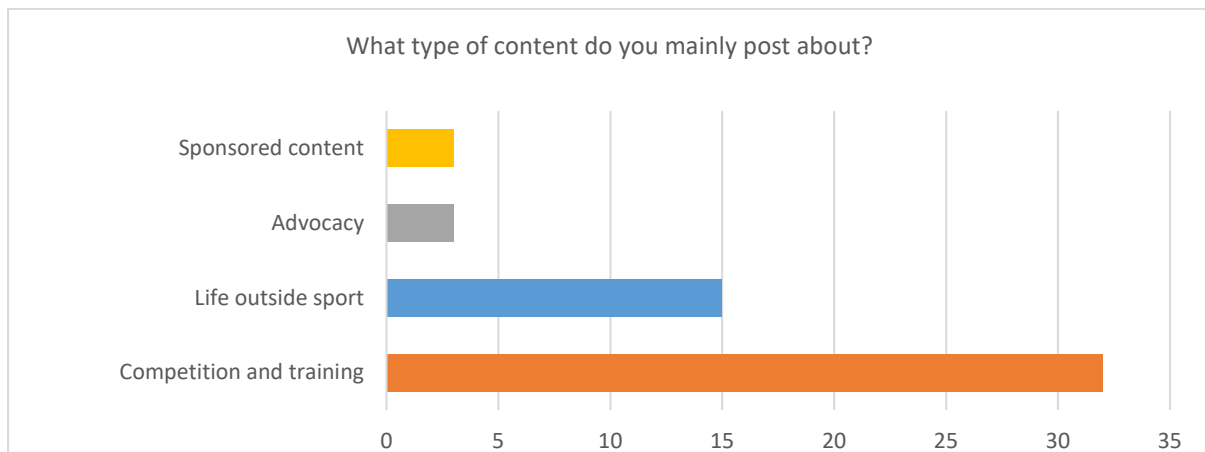
**We found the majority of all respondents (93%) post their own content on social media** with 2% having someone else post on their behalf. When it came down to planning their posts, less than 25% of respondents pre-plan their social media posts. An overwhelming majority do not plan their posts, simply posting on an ad-hoc basis. Of the 25% that do plan their posts, this graph below shows how each post is considered. Type of content is the most important (76%) consideration, followed closely by timing of the post (68%), frequency of posts (53%), and sponsorship requirements being the 4th consideration.



### Type of content

To help us gain an understanding of social media content, we wanted to see the type of content that is posted asking what type of content is mainly posted about from the choice of; competition and training, life outside sport, advocacy, sponsored content or other.

**Almost 60% of respondents focussed their social media posts around competition and training** as they want to share their sporting journey with their followers. There were also recurring comments around why their posts focused on competition and training, as it was the most genuine way of showing athletes and their followers what life is like as a full time athlete. Life outside sport was the second highest type of content posted on social media.



*“I feel it is the most genuine way of showing aspiring athletes what life is like as a full time athlete” (survey respondent)*

*“That is my brand and why people follow me” (survey respondent)*

## Confidence and social media

We asked our respondents if they felt confident talking to their followers through Facebook live, Instagram story, and how they felt using selfie mode. **Confidence when talking to the camera using Facebook live/Instagram story was not high** - on the sliding scale of 1-100, the average number was 45.

Majority of athletes commented on why they didn't feel confident due to the **fear of being judged** specifically by other females. There were also common threads and repeated comments around feeling self-conscious, awkward, people not being interested in what they are talking about and worry around the sound of their voice and outside criticism. These comments all came from a wide range of athlete ages, variety of sports and experience.

*"I don't feel confident speaking to the camera because I don't like seeing videos of myself. I also worry about being judged so I tend not to do many videos of myself. I am trying to do more of them but find it challenging"*

*"The way followers over judge based on appearances"*

*"In general I would say it is not totally my style to talk to the camera on my social media. I don't really think I have much to say to my social media daily that anyone would be interested in"*

Respondents were also worried about lack of viewers if they chose to "go live" on social media and not feeling confident in what they are saying to their followers, and how they will be perceived.

### *Imagery*

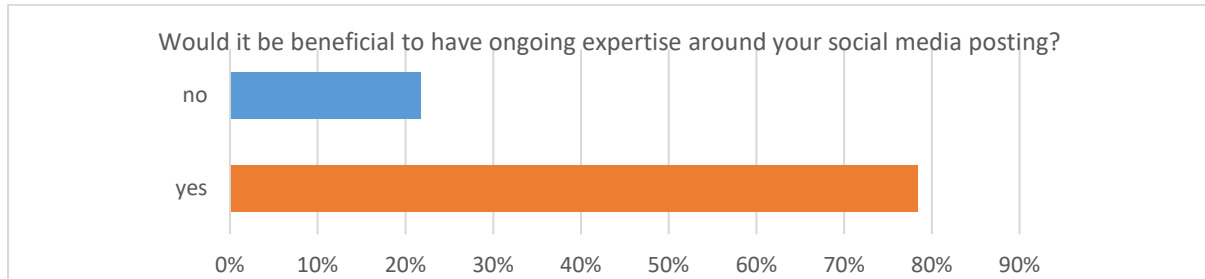
We asked whether raw images are used on social media or whether filters are applied. Nearly all (95%) survey respondents preferred using raw images. **There was an emphasis on using real images** with repeated comments on the importance of looking real and natural and to make the post look as realistic as possible.

*"I think that it is more relatable and avoids trying to have photos that all look perfect in your feed. It also takes a lot more time to use filters etc" (survey respondent)*

Posting pictures showing life outside sport was an important factor for 25% of athletes to show they lead a balanced life.

## Education

### Guidance and advice



78% said yes to receiving guidance and expertise around social media posting

Athletes have said they would benefit from ongoing expert guidance around social media posting so they can learn how to develop their image and brand.

In particular, education around content, what types of content creates the biggest impact, how to keep their followers interested, timing of posting, growing followers, how to increase interaction with their followers were some of the many comments.

*“Someone to help with content. Knowing what people want to see and hear about etc”  
(survey respondent)*

*“I would like to know how to post repetitive content or trying to be someone I’m not, to be more attractive to potential sponsors” (survey respondent)*

## Summary

In summary:

- Social media coverage of female athletes is still perceived to be less
- The most popular social media platforms are Instagram (95%) and Facebook
- Women athletes use social media to promote their brand, posting stories of their sporting journey with competition and training the basis to their content.
- Most manage their own postings, but few pre-plan their posts.
- Type of content and timing of posts were the two most important considerations, followed closely by frequency of posts



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- Women athletes took sponsorship requirements into consideration when posting.
- The majority of athletes suffered lack of confidence when talking to the camera using facebook live/instagram story with their biggest fear of being judged.
- Majority of respondents said they would benefit from guidance and expertise around social media posting.

This quote from one of the respondents demonstrates the potential and opportunity social media provides female athletes today -

*“Female social media influencers can receive a large social media following if they invest the time and energy into promoting themselves and what they do. I believe the opportunity to do so does not depend on the gender of the athlete” (survey respondent)*

## CONCLUSION

Athletes have the power to tell their own story through social media. How they tell the story is completely in their control. From analysing the survey data, there is a huge opportunity to help and guide athletes around posting on social media. From planning their posting schedule, helping build their confidence talking to the camera, and providing ways to keep their content interesting and informative will help each athlete build and enhance their brand.

### **Transforming the way sports women are portrayed**

How can the growth of social media benefit women in sport using it as a platform? One of the biggest opportunities is providing women with the control to shape how they are portrayed to the world.

Our rationale for this research project was to focus on social media because it is the easiest avenue for people to transform the way women in sport are portrayed. Any female athlete can open a facebook, Instagram, tiktok or any other social media account and start gathering followers who are interested in their journey. The athlete can post whatever they like about their sporting journey and therefore can completely control their narrative. The added benefit of social media is that it is fast becoming the way people stay up to date with current affairs. It is starting to reach larger numbers than traditional media can currently hope to achieve.

With the right education from a young level and the rise of social media we are now at a point where women can take control of their own images and voice.

### **Shifting from traditional media to social**

There is now a platform to fit every person and their needs. But what happens when that person is a young female athlete with not enough education around how to use these tools in the correct way?

The integration of sports and social media has opened up a new door for sports teams and individual players and their sponsors. Athletes use social media to establish their name, communicate with their fans, announce their activities and even promote brands and make money.

It is vital for our female high performance athletes to be educated and informed about how to use social media going forward.

Women need to learn to take ownership of their brand to portray how they want to be seen, giving the younger generation a platform, tools and resources to guide and educate where they can make informative decisions around their brand as an athlete within social media.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

From the survey results, 78% of respondents said they would like guidance around social media posting. After further research we would advise that:

### Social Media Advisor

High performance athletes should have access to a social media advisor, to ensure that from the start of their careers they have an understanding of the correct way to use social media, when, who, how and what to post. It will enable them to take ownership of their brand and portray how they want to be seen, make more informative decisions around their brand as an athlete and as they grow showcase a strong positive community for other women to follow. It is important to be organised and plan ahead. To have an opportunity to discuss what measurable objectives can be attained and best use of practise to the strengths of the athlete.

We would recommend there be a list of advisors via the New Zealand Olympic Committee and High Performance Sport New Zealand website that athletes can access free of charge.

Encourage other High Performance athletes to share their knowledge and be advisors for the younger generation in an informal and formal manner.

### Personal Brand Awareness

High Performance Sport New Zealand Carded athletes discuss their “personal brand awareness” in their annual Individual Performance Plans. It is recommended that athletes use this as an opportunity to communicate a unique identity and clear value. It will allow athletes to showcase who they are and what they stand for. It will ensure a level of professionalism is brought to their social media accounts and they are accountable to what, who and when they post?

Challenge athletes to stand out, identify their strengths, show skills, qualifications and expertise. This may be done through NSO catch ups or New Zealand High Performance Sport athlete support programme. The strengths and skill sets can be built into their personal brand which then can be showcased via social media

Encourage the individual to be more than an athlete. It is recommended athletes to tap into the many transferable skills that they have to help them further their career. Working alongside Athlete Life will motivate athletes to realise their potential on and off the field and grow their personal brand awareness as they grow.



## Education Portal

It is recommended that the New Zealand Olympic Committee (NZOC) combined with High Performance Sport New Zealand build a digital media education portal to educate our New Zealand high performance athletes. Creating an online digital media portal will allow New Zealand athletes the starting point they need to be educated in the correct way around social media, such as:

- Managing their social media in the right way
- Separate their personal and sporting accounts
- Minimise risk
- Expanding their network
- Sharing engaging content

We would also encourage High Performance athletes that are seen as role models to provide content to the site.

A recommendation to be made to all High Performance athletes to attend social media training as advised by the NZOC.

## Outcome

These recommendations will provide current and upcoming female athletes a platform with the tools and resources to make informed decisions that will enhance their brand. Let's empower female athletes to use social media as a platform to take ownership and champion their stories to be told.

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## APPENDICES

### Research methodology

In order to understand how social media could create a platform to transform the ways in which women in sport are portrayed, we followed the process outlined below to gather and interpret information on the topic.

- understand the current climate for social media and sport
- identifying what current female athletes competing in high level sport for New Zealand are doing with respect to social media
- the extent to which they are using social media to project their journey and brand.

### Online survey

We designed and peer tested an online survey using SurveyMonkey, to gather information via quantitative and qualitative questions. The survey design was checked for inherent bias and neutrality. The survey was piloted with a small group.

The final survey was circulated using convenience sampling to one thousand people from two New Zealand Olympic Committee marketing and social media team databases. These were the athletes who had applied for selection to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games and the Athlete Collective group, made up of current and former Olympians across a range of Olympic sports.

We had forty respondents to our survey from the two databases as described above.

To gather further data on the topic and to increase the number of respondents we also used snowball sampling via the personal networks of the project team members. As the project team members are all former Olympians across four different sports, we reached out to our networks to further enhance the respondent numbers of our survey. We gathered 22 more respondents for the survey through this method.

### Data analysis

We analysed the qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data was reasonably easy and straightforward to quantify and provided comparable data. The quantitative data provided a richer story to the data and helped to gather respondent's personal experiences in a deeper way.

The project group used thematic analysis to understand this data further. This was done via a framework of individually coding the data into groupings and then coming together as a group to find what we had grouped in a similar way and what was different.

We consulted with a data analyst from Xero, Andrea Key, who advised on the most effective way to interpret the results.



### Video interview

We attended the Tokyo 2020 Olympic workshop in Auckland with the intention to capture video content for our presentation. We chose five high performance female athletes to gain a personal perspective on their use and experience with social media. We asked each athlete the following questions:

1. Do you use social media, if so what type?
2. How do you think female athletes are portrayed on social media?
3. Do you feel confident talking straight to the camera, being interviewed or using Facebook Live or Instagram Live ?
4. Have you ever received any inappropriate comments on social media?
5. Do you have any guidance, advice, or education around posting?
6. Would you like to see more guidance, advice, and education around posting?
7. Do you feel pressure on what you're posting?
8. Do you post all your own content?



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