For Young Drivers or For the Team: Motorsports Development Team Instagram Accounts

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Abstract

Motorsports development teams work with young pre-teen and teen drivers to help them improve their skills as they move toward professional racing careers. Given the proliferation of Instagram as a promotional tool for young athletes, this research turned to motorsports development team accounts to discern how teams were navigating branding their drivers and themselves as organizations. A content analysis demonstrated a strong preference for development teams to use their accounts to share information about themselves first, then support their individual drivers. Teams overwhelmingly avoided personalizing drivers beyond their roles as drivers or offering insights into coaching or driver development. Results suggested that teams wanted to be seen as all-business and attractive options for new signees, but less as avenues for assisting with sponsorships.

Keywords
Social media, Instagram, development teams, youth branding

Introduction

Despite self-reported teen mental health struggles swirling around social media and particularly Instagram use, teen Instagram use lives on (Nix & Lima-Strong, 2024). Instagram's parent company, Meta, announced new regulations in 2024 including making the default of an account's settings private and upping artificial intelligence filters on a personal account for a user under age 18 (Nix & Lima-Strong, 2024). Instagram business accounts, however, remain untouched. Any account can be switched from a personal account to a business account, according to Instagram's Help Center (Instagram, n.d.). While it is too early to know if this is a work-around to avoid teen account censorship or privacy settings that adolescents might want to avoid, for the purposes of this research it means that 13-year-olds are able to self-brand on the platform without restriction, including young athletes.

Many adolescent and child athletes have branded themselves using Instagram. Secondary school athletes cash in long before signing with universities, as sponsorship deals begin before enrollment (Heubeck, 2024). As student-athletes know, social media are easy and cost-efficient avenues for self-branding, leading to financial deals when account followings grow (Johnson, 2017). University recruiters admit to viewing teen athlete social media before recruiting; direct

messages are a main tool for outreach (NCSA Sports, 2024). The National Collegiate Scouting Association (NCSA) includes an in-depth guide for secondary school students to show personality on Instagram to help them attract followers (NCSA Sports, 2024). While Meta does its best to avoid United States government regulation, social media sites like Instagram want to remain a key vehicle for teen brand development, as teens tend to spend a lot of time on the app (Renke, 2023). Research is still emerging about how 13-18 year-old athletes self-brand in the crowded field of athletic recruiting. This research acknowledges this emerging space and the call for better understanding.

This set-up is key for a related phenomenon and the purpose of this research – sports organization promotion of youth athletes. Professional sports groups are business or non-profit entities. They are not bound by youth protection regulations on Instagram in the same way individual accounts are. This invites critique into how professional sports organizations promote their youth athletes. While Instagram policies are being debated for teen accounts, Instagram accounts using teens as subject matter are regulated loosely. Sports organizations have a vested interest in their youth athletes excelling – athletes moving into upper levels of a sport means the organization must be successful. Secondary school teams and competitive club leagues are ubiquitous on Instagram; as the NCSA notes on its website, high school coaches can assist with branding their athletes (NCSA, 2024). Sports organizations benefit when posting successful youth athletes, as coaches and team managers get bragging rights for signed stars, the perception that the athletes were given good training and subsequent better career prospects.

This research turns to motorsports – specifically a series youth motorsports feeder circuit – to analyze posting behaviors by youth league teams. Through a study of the teams involved in the 2024 United States Formula (USF) Juniors racing series, this study explores how motorsports teams are presenting their youth racers and what themes emerge. Teams have dual interests of both promoting their drivers but also ensuring that as adolescents, they are presumably presented in careful ways. However, current research does not show conclusive evidence of how young racers or other youth athletes tend to be portrayed. Since motorsports are not affiliated with school sports, additional self-promotion would be required to be seen in a crowded media space. Youth racing teams are studied via team Instagram posts to learn how they promote their teen (14-18) drivers as brands.

Literature Review

Young Athlete Branding, Sponsorships and Motorsport Development Teams

Thirty-year motorsport media veteran Rob Howden explained the financial pressures of motorsports series drivers in this way: “Racing is expensive. The first step on the ladder in one series is $300,000 per season. Two years later, the season costs are $1.5 million. Most racers, as they progress, run out of money. Sponsors are everything” (R. Howden, personal communication, December 1, 2024). For sports with a high cost of entry, auto racing is among the highest. Travel expenses, coaching, simulator time, custom fire suits, helmets, and other incidental expenses come after entry fees and race car maintenance costs (Mourão, 2017). As Howden noted, most young racers come from wealthier families when starting out – the cost of entry is high in the sport to begin with (R. Howden, personal communication, December 1, 2024). Even then, many developing racers inevitably hit a financial wall when moving up racing series’ development ladders. Sponsorships are the main currency of a motorsport career.

Corporate sponsorships have been infused into motorsports from the earliest days of racing (Finn, 2021). Therefore, the infrastructure

already exists to encourage branding. Sponsoring individual drivers or teams is advantageous for motorsports sponsorship partners in part due to the mechanics of video footage – an advertisement on a driver's fire suit or car is visually easier to capture rather than the imperfect promise of a logo visible on the side of a racetrack while cars zoom at over 100 miles per hour (Mourão, 2017). As Cornwell et al. (2001) noted, brands sponsoring Indianapolis 500 winners showed an uptick in profitability, suggesting that supporting a winning driver would, literally, pay off. In a related study, National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) fans with higher fan identity toward the sport and the driver exhibited deeper brand loyalty (Levin et al., 2004). Driver likeability was tied to participation in the NASCAR circuit, implying support for the series as well, but based on the driver (Levin et al., 2004). The relationship between series fandom and driver fandom is symbiotic but tilted toward the individual driver – better drivers and well-liked drivers get more sponsorships, and teams aligned with those drivers reap sponsorship benefits, too.

Youth athlete branding research is still emerging but is seeing increasing attention due to legislation such as the Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) opportunities for university athletes in the United States, pushing athlete branding development further toward younger adolescent athletes (Dao, 2024). Cocco et al. (2023) noted that student-athletes overall struggle to brand themselves on Instagram and suggest that teams and athletic institutions such as athletic departments assist with Instagram branding. They noted that athletes with more direct institutional ties to their personal brand experienced more positive brand identification (Cocco et al., 2023). This suggests that institutions themselves wield power in uplifting young athlete personal brands – this is both due to the higher Instagram followers of institution accounts and the level of credibility granted by the institution towards the athletes when supporting them (reposting their posts, for example). It is more likely, then, that a motorsports team's credibility would help propel an athlete's personal brand in Instagram. This incentivizes teams to promote their drivers on their accounts, as it builds brand loyalty for both team and drivers. In a development team, team identity would theoretically always come first, because, young drivers eventually move on from development teams in one or two years. A question emerges as to how teams promote their young drivers, promoting them while keeping team branding consistent from season to season.

As Mourão (2017) noted, motorsport teams receive most of their revenue from commercial sponsorships, but this model is more complicated for development teams in feeder circuits, such as open-wheel development series USF (United States Formula) and Indy NXT. Development teams seek sponsorships but would seem to generally lack the driver star power for big sponsorship deals. The drivers are too young – they are unknown entities and so would likely have small social media followings and negligible media attention. There are rare cases of children of known professional racers, such as Sebastian and Oliver Weldon, sons of IndyCar driver Dan Weldon, Brexton Busch, son of NASCAR driver Kyle Busch, or Lia Block, daughter of rally driver Ken Block, who "inherit" sponsorship credibility and have less of a climb toward sponsorship deals. Most other young drivers rely on prize money from race wins or familial wealth to pay for their seats, if sponsorship financial support is low (Mourão, 2017). This is another reason that development teams might help support young racers – if a lesser-known driver gets needed online visibility, they might then be able to leverage that visibility into sponsorships. Development teams with better talent and better funding perpetuate a cycle – winning drivers attract money, and money

means better support infrastructure, which attracts better developing racers.

Young Racers

As Syarizal et al. (2021) note, young racers often start their careers quite young, as early as primary school. There is a typical progression of racer development. Most young racers start with kart racing at nearby tracks. They then graduate to any number of development series based on type of car – open-wheel race cars, stock cars, brand cars such as Mazdas or Porsches, touring cars, or rally cars, among others. Kart tracks are often plentiful in towns large and small throughout the United States and Europe, allowing both developing professional drivers and hobbyists to compete on weekends somewhat affordably (although still expensive). Paved racetracks or larger competitive tracks that can accommodate development teams are usually smaller in number. The culling process begins, when young racers are hindered by the costs associated with travel and hauling cars and supplies to tracks that are far away. As drivers get better and decide to keep going in the sport, they spend more time with coaches and start making choices about time investment, just like other athletes. Role conflict becomes more challenging as racers progress, with many social and psychological developments occurring concurrently with talent in the sport (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Such developments can include choosing to no longer participate in other sports or missing social events for sporting events. As young racers move into the development team ladder, the roles of parents and non-racing peers change as the development team's coaches become a more important influence (Syarizal, et al., 2021).

Team influence is important to note, as this research points to team Instagram promotion as a key element of young racer brand development. With some control over the off-the-track activities of young drivers, teams have to make choices about how to brand their drivers without parent input and based on some sort of team criteria for what prospective fans and sponsors would want to see. As drivers can be in primary school but are rarely older than secondary school age, the ability to draw upon a brand persona is nebulous as drivers have not fully developed their own narratives. The team has a role in co-creation of the young driver's brand.

Self-Presentation Theory and Organizational Identity Theory

Athlete branding on social media has primarily tied to self-presentation theory. Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory offers insights into the ways people "perform" their identities to be perceived in certain ways. It has been useful in explaining athlete Instagram posting behaviors, such as the ways athletes pose and the way they touch others in photos, such as through hugs or hand-holding (Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Emmons & Mocarski, 2014). Athletes have external and internal pressures to portray a certain persona – they self-report wanting to be perceived as likeable, talented and holding non-controversial opinions (Park et al., 2020). A study about women athletes added gender pressures such as being thought of as attractive and feminine yet strong through their Instagram posts (Geurin, 2017). In motorsport, IndyCar drivers reported using Twitter (X) to help with personal branding, fan interaction and extending their social circle (Clavio et al., 2013).

When studying a racing development team's use of Instagram, the personal branding tie must be accounted for, as a team is simultaneously promoting itself yet also the team's drivers. Managing a team brand and individual athlete brands is standard practice in professional and university teams (Wood & Burkhalter, 2023). Liberty Media's successful approach to reigniting interest in Formula 1 through the docuseries Drive to Survive and related social media

amplification used both driver and team promotion (Wood & Burkhalter, 2023).

On development teams, racers often compete in various circuits such as karting, open wheel and stock cars, and thus do not have the same restrictions over brand management that a team affiliated with a singular entity would have. In other words, the Red Bull and McLaren teams in Formula 1 have to abide by Formula 1 social media standards, which are authorized by Liberty Media, in order to maintain the terms of complicated sponsorship deals. Development teams have more freedom to post with fewer guardrails from circuit owners. Indy NXT, for example, has a rule book that simply states that "IndyCar social media policy rules apply" without additional parameters for posting (Indy NXT, n.d.). Further, feeder series such as Indy NXT and USF have social media policies worded to protect the reputation of the series, not the reputations of specifics teams nor individual drivers.

An organizational-based identity theory that alludes to self-presentation in organizational settings is a more fitting theoretical explanation of team posting behaviors. Teams are presenting a representation of the drivers but also a representation of what the team wants viewers to see. This is key as teams have the added benefit of not worrying about age restrictions that Instagram imposes on account holders younger than 13, the minimum age for starting an Instagram account. Additionally, athletes under 13 often have parent-run accounts, and teams can circumvent parent-run accounts and post young drivers as a proxy to a parent-run account. In other words, a racing team does not have to get permission from Instagram to post an 11-year-old driver and does not have to filter through a parent's desire for how their child is branded as a parent-run account might. Organizational self-presentation explains the concept of reputation management through Instagram posting by a group and its parts – in the case of a racing team, its drivers.

Organizational identity theory is rooted in Goffman's concept of self-presentation but is applied to an organizational persona to manage corporate impressions (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Albert (1985) posited that organizations define themselves by their own extended claims of what was distinctive or enduring about them – a type of self-branding at the organizational level. The theory was used to help demonstrate how public relations agencies used Instagram to portray themselves as appealing to potential employees and clients (Watkins & Smith, 2022). Hatch and Schultz (2002) explained that organizational identity builds upon how stakeholders perceive an organization based on how it explains itself within the cultural and social contexts of its existence. On Instagram, this would mean identifying an organization based on visual cues offered – cues might include happy employees or modern amenities at offices to appear as a desirable (Watkins & Smith, 2022). Motorsports development teams craft a perception via their posts, which include their drivers as individual parts to the team brand.

A positive organizational identity is key for a motorsport development team because the organization is defined by its new and mostly young talent. Prior research shows that employees feel more identified with organizations that have a positive organizational identity and are therefore more likely to have pride in their affiliation with it (Wiesenfeld et al., 2001). He and Brown (2013) note that there are several social constructivist, psychodynamic, and functional reasons behind why organizations craft their identities for interpretation. In the case of a motorsport development team, the realities of the team's existence would seem most salient – that it needs to define itself as a winning team, that its drivers are supported and happy, that it works hard and that it is relevant in its institutional space – all attributes meaningful to

sponsors as well as current drivers and potential drivers but also the team's relevance.

It is important to note here that Instagram, and social media in general, have become primary ways for information seeking, particularly for younger demographics. Instagram in particular, with its dual appeal of visual and text content creation, make it a dynamic medium for organizational information seeking (Watkins & Smith, 2022). This study of Instagram therefore acknowledges it as a likely primary choice for stakeholders to learn about a team's organizational identity, and particularly aspiring racers and their families. The visual element of Instagram would likewise appeal to sponsors wanting to see what they would potentially be spending money on – a modern and comfortable yet successful team would seem the goal.

Ethics and Child Social Media Presentation

Geurin (2023) studied youth sport sanctioning bodies in their policies and education toward youth athlete social media use. The researcher's conclusion was that it was still an under-researched area and that sanctioning bodies offering proactive education on social media use and its positive effects on self-branding were helpful. Organizations promoting youth sports tend to employ social media posting policies concerned with protecting youth, such as the YMCA (YMCA, n.d.), but even the YMCA's policy is more to protect youth from adult outreach, not youth self-involvement in social media or posting behaviors. To date, there is no official posting policy for teams about youth racers in any age range in USF, Indy NXT, Mazda MX-5 or Formula 4 and related Formula series as expressed on their websites. Posting decisions on youth mainly lie with the teams when posting from their accounts. Most motorsport development teams enter into legal agreements with youth racers that allow for name, image and likeness use to promote the team as well as the driver. Given the desire for youth drivers to obtain sponsorships, this is not a perceived hindrance.

Instagram as Branding Tool

Motorsports are more uniquely suited to visual media consumption and media relationships than other sports, Finn (2021) argues, because fandom is less participatory and more passive. In other words, fans will spend a majority of their time in the mediated representation of the sport rather than participating in or attending races themselves. The mediatization of motorsports using all available media channels for presentation and promotion creates a more holistic and engaged fan (Finn, 2021). Since sponsorships are the currency of motorsports financing, such mediatization is beneficial. Media offer the opportunity for large audiences, which can be a smart financial investment for sponsorship so brand logos and products are visible on racing broadcasts.

A majority of athlete personal revenue comes from sponsored content on social media posts, given the quick, targeted and cost-effective outreach that social media offers from athlete directly to stakeholders (Cocco et al., 2023). A study of Instagram posts by Formula 1 drivers versus Formula 1 sim racers (esports racers) concluded that the Instagram accounts of the car drivers were more diverse in posts than the esports racers, which was a factor in the higher popularity of those drivers' accounts (Malinen, 2024). Further, the diversity of personal and professional posts gave more reasons for followers to follow, rather than the more singular focus on esports of the Formula 1 esports drivers (Malinen, 2024). However, how driver accounts functioned in alliance with their team accounts has not been studied. Motorsport development teams to date have not been studied either, so it is unknown how diverse their driver-related posts would be.

Online sharing of activities outside of game play has been popular with some athletes as it adds relatable aspects of their lives (Hull, 2014; Geurin, 2017; Thompson et al., 2018). Personal posts also tend to enjoy more engagement on social media than strictly brand-related posts (Brison & Geurin, 2021), incentivizing athletes to share more. Teams would likely feel similar pressures with organizational identity compelling broad storytelling. Professionalizing social media presences have been largely informal processes for athletes, both professional and student (Park et al., 2020). As Rob Howden stated during his interview, professional content creation teams have started to sprout up to help brand young drivers and development teams, but this is still an area of uncertain expenditure – young athletes (and their families) would be ceding some control to the vision of their emerging brand to content creators looking for profit, not protection (R. Howden, personal communication, December 1, 2024).

Athletes have self-reported pressure to keep up their brands on social media (Geurin, 2017; Hayes et al, 2020). Simultaneously, research shows that long-term and sustained relationships with fans on social media build athlete branding (Thompson et al., 2018). Youth athletes choosing to professionalize their social media presences would not necessarily have peers as a primary audience but rather influencers with financial resources – sponsors and brands, namely. Youth athlete brand deals are ripe for growth (Tindall, 2023) even though school administrators have expressed concern that young people are not mature enough to know what brands with which to align themselves with (Heubeck, 2024). Student-athletes said they planned social media posting more around avoiding negative backlash than taking advantage of the positives from personal brand posts (Park et al., 2020). Athletes also self-report worry that posting will get them in trouble, particularly student-athletes (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Park et al., 2020). This demonstrates that concern about negative posting response or feedback are priorities for athletes. It is unknown if motorsports development teams would have youth mental and emotional developmental health top of mind while trying to establish organizational identity.

Some policies exist at the sports organizational level, such as group social media training for youth athletes (Geurin, 2023; Sanderson et al, 2015), but individual oversight and advising is dependent on the athlete and again ignores team posting behaviors of the same athletes. Organizational presentation and individual presentation may not distinctly align. At the professional level, it is more common for an athlete to give at least partial responsibility of social media upkeep to a public relations or sports marketing manager. Collegiate athletes largely monitor their own social media (Park et al., 2020), though with NIL legislation in the U.S. this could be shifting. Professionalization of student-athlete accounts could include money for account managers – but before such deals take place, the financial sunk cost is unknown. A further consideration is that child labor laws in some states have been passed to formalize monetization of social media influencer accounts – this has been to prevent parents and organizations from profiting from children's labor. While that would not apply for a motorsport development team as contracts include promotion clauses, the use of a young athlete's image and likeness for a team account is not without some benefit to the team on behalf of the athlete.

As prior research is extremely limited on how young athletes are presented on team or organizational Instagram accounts, the following research questions emerge:

RQ1: How do motorsport development teams portray their youth drivers on Instagram?

RQ2: What is the organizational identity portrayed by motorsport development teams on Instagram?

Method

Instagram research, due to its visual nature, has primarily relied on content analysis employing the use of visual theme analysis and caption analysis. Viewing Instagram visual post content along with accompanying captions requires a two-part theme analysis. Smith and Sanderson (2015) used content analysis to discern athlete use of Instagram and relied on self-presentation principles to ascertain the salient theme of photos. They then used the caption accompanying each photo to capture the composite of self-presentation intent. Krippendorff 's (2019) content analysis method is an appropriate technique for studying Instagram content. As Krippendorff (2019) noted, contemporary content analysis must rely on a complete unit of analysis including visual, text and any other discourse within the frame of a singular act of communication. A unit comprises varying elements depending on what is being studied – the context of the medium of communication helps drive the content unit for analysis (Krippendorff, 2019). For example, a radio show would not include a visual component for study as a visual component is not necessary for understanding the message; an Instagram post would require both a visual and textual aspect to the unit of analysis. The researcher must therefore distinguish what the unit of analysis will be in each study for clarity and replication purposes. For the purposes of this study, each Instagram post counted as one unit of analysis, inclusive of visual presentation (either photo or video) and caption. Neither comments under the captions, number of likes, nor engagement were counted in this content. This is because the popularity of each post is not the purpose of this study – a linear presentation of organizational self is. Acknowledging that certain types of content may engage stakeholders more is a worthy consideration when discerning posting behaviors but is not a part of this exploratory study.

Qualitative content theme analysis was also used by Watkins and Smith (2022) in a parallel study analyzing visual representations of Instagram posts for organizational identity themes. The researchers used both photos and videos along with captions for units of analyses. As of 2024, video use on Instagram has increased – therefore, video and photo footage will be coded and while each will be categorized separately, themes will replicate given similar organizational identity goals. In other words, both video posts and photo posts will have shared themes. Captions may be visible on either the photo and video or in the post itself, as Instagram allows for both. For the purposes of this study, it will not matter where the caption appears as its presence is for the same reason – to add a textual representation of the theme to the post viewer.

Sample

Due to the fact that development teams exist in many forms of motorsport, it was important to use directly a comparable group of teams for replicable and reliable research. Therefore, the team accounts of development teams active in the United States Formula (USF) Juniors series during the 2024 season were used for analysis. The USF Juniors series is a feeder series for drivers interested in open-wheel racing. Drivers are able to compete starting at age 14. Drivers eventually move through the USF series (there are three circuits – Juniors, Pro, and Pro 200) and from there can move either the IndyCar development series, Indy NXT, or a Formula series, such as Formula 3. By design, all drivers in the USF series are in a developmental phase and actively pursuing sponsorships. As the USF Juniors series is the first rung on the ladder for racer development, has the lowest cost of entry, and is for the youngest drivers for open-wheel

racing, it was deemed an ideal study group for this research.

There were eight development teams in the USF Juniors series in 2024:

- DC Autosport
- DEForce Racing
- Exclusive Autosport
- InterMS (International Motorsport)
- Jay Howard Driver Development
- Pole Position Motorsports
- Velocity Racing Development (VRD)
- Zanella Racing

As expected, each team had an active Instagram account during the 2024 season. Some teams, such as VRD, Jay Howard, and InterMS, compete in not only the USF Juniors series but other feeder circuits such as for karting, Mazda teen series, and more. For consistency, only posts containing drivers competing in USF Juniors races during 2024 were coded. Every post from the off-season (silly season) from November 1, 2023 until the championship crowning event at Portland International Raceway in August through the end of that month in August 31, 2024 was viewed and coded. Generic team posts were all counted since their purposes would have been overall team message conveyance, not just for a particular series.

Coding

Coding protocol followed similar Instagram-related content analysis studies (see Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2015; Watkins & Smith, 2022). Organizational identity theory posited that themes from team posts would likely have positive attributes of the team displayed, while prior athlete content analysis studies posited that athletes would employ self-presentation tactics. Since teams posting on behalf of young athletes has not been applied in this context, themes were developed in this study based on organizational identity self-presentation to determine the intended theme for athletes as posted by the teams. For the purposes of this study, a photo was coded when either a static photo or a social media graphic was used (e.g. a Happy Thanksgiving post with a graphic element of a turkey). This was coded this way for two reasons: 1) graphic images often also use photos of cars or buildings in the graphic, muddying the prominent visual cue and 2) a static image conveys a theme (information sharing, for example) that would not hinder theme emergence. Instagram in 2024 often includes graphics and photos or videos embedded together, and while perhaps not prudent for all studies, was coded with photos for the purposes of this study.

For the caption portion of the posts, these were coded for theme as matched with the accompanying visual representation. Initial categories were produced and interpreted for context (e.g. sarcasm or use of vernacular) to allow for themes to match not just from text alone but from the part the text played in the overall interpretive value of the post, including the photo/video. On Instagram, captions may be short or drawn from pop culture references such as popular music lyrics or trending social media topics. Thus, the caption was viewed with the photo or video and then coded in toto. Each post was viewed no fewer than three times – first, for content theme based on photo/video, secondly, for caption relevance to theme (or deviation from theme), and thirdly, for overall post inclusive of text and visual cue. Intercoder reliability was conducted by taking a 10% sample of the posts and comparing independent coding results to ensure consistency in theme agreement. The independent coders were upper-level undergraduate university students with social media research experience trained in content analysis. The primary researcher coded every post's photo or video; the independent coders coded 10% of the posts. Intercoder agreement reached a .83 using Cohen's Kappa for agreement

test, indicating a fit result for intercoder agreement (Hsu & Field, 2003).

As photo and video social media posts with accompanying text are typical in modern Instagram use, the study of each Instagram post as one unit of analysis inclusive of visual and textual evidence was deemed most prudent, and intercoder agreement demonstrated common agreement on themes. This is important to note as sometimes generic photos of cars or scenery would not give information about what a post's intent was, and the caption was key to determining the theme of the post. This content analysis considered the post in toto as the unit of analysis on review of each post.

Results

For all eight teams combined, there were 1,053 posts between November 1, 2023 until August 31, 2024 – the end of the month for the USF Juniors 2024 season. The USF series has its own social media branding, including headshot photos of drivers without their helmets with a similar USF branded background. These photos were used by teams often when drivers placed in races or qualified well. Table 1 shows the aggregate number of posts, the dominant theme of each team's account and how many times a specific driver was the focus of the post (as opposed to the team or all drivers at once).

Themes

Instagram posts were identified in 11 categories, mostly around team identity features, following organizational identity theory tenets of positivity: being a place for winners, a place where the team perseveres through setbacks, a place to have fun, and a place where hard work happens. The 11 categories in order of popularity were: information sharing, individual driver post, all drivers post, coach or staff post, "we have fun," "we are successful," "we persevere," join us, "we work hard," sponsor post, and safety. Themes were sometimes, but not always, discernible without reading the captions.

Captions and photos or videos were coded as viewed together as one post. The eleven themes, in order of appearance in aggregate, are noted in Table 2. The top three themes are explained below, with other themes condensed into a singular subsection.

Table 1
Team Instagram Followers (as of November 2024), Posts, and Prominent Themes

Team Name	No. of Followers	No. of Posts	Prominent Theme	Individual Driver	Comments
DC Autosport	457	0	N/A	0	Last active in 2022
DEForce Racing	25,400	163	Information sharing	35	109 photos; 54 videos
Exclusive Autosport	4,596	160	Information sharing	51	120 photos; 40 videos
InterMS	10,700	133	Information sharing	55	110 photos; 23 videos
J Howard DD	10,000	290	Information sharing	86	240 photos; 50 videos
Pole Position	407	58	Information sharing	17	50 photos; 8 videos
VRD	21,500	157	Individual driver	82	98 photos; 59 videos
Zanella Racing	2,750	92	Information sharing	10	76 photos; 16 videos

Table 2
Motorsport Development Team Instagram Posts by Popularity of Theme

Team Instagram Post Themes (by order of overall popularity)
1. Information sharing
2. Our drivers are winners: Individual drivers
3. All team drivers together
4. Coaches, principals, staff
5. Join us
6. Our team is successful
7. We will persevere
8. We have fun
9. Sponsor posts
10. We work hard
11. Safety

Information sharing

Every team but one used their Instagram account primarily for information sharing. Most of the teams shared information regularly about driver qualifying order for races, driver setup for the races, or driver appearances, and participation in race weekends, in aggregate. A typical post for many teams included a photo with a caption listing the placement of each driver after qualifying or a summary of the race weekend with final rankings after races. While VRD used its Instagram primarily for individual driver posts, information sharing was the second most popular theme, with 63 out of 157 posts, or 40% of posts. Information sharing was the dominant theme for the remaining seven development teams.

Information sharing also included letting followers know where the team was racing that weekend. A typical post would include a caption noting, "the team will be at this track this weekend," with an accompanying photo of the track or a short video with generic footage of the track. Other information sharing posts were designed for followers in presence at the track during the weekend. Driver autograph session announcements were listed with time and place at the track. Times for various races were also popular posts.

Holiday themed posts, such as "Happy Thanksgiving" or "Happy Holidays" posts, were coded as information sharing and were not used by all teams but were used by multiple teams, usually with a graphic of the relevant holiday.

Our drivers are winners – individual driver posts

Pole Position Motorsports did not have any posts addressing the success of its drivers. By contrast, VRD posted prominently about its driver successes, and it was the most prominent theme on the team's account, at 82 out of 157 posts, or 52% of posts. Eventual 2024 USF Juniors series champion, 16-year-old Max Taylor, was a VRD driver. He received significant attention for his wins and qualifying, which included several pole positions. Jay Howard Racing Development posted often about individual drivers, inevitably about successes they had winning races, claiming pole positions or passing other drivers during races.

A typical post about a particular driver would be a still photo of the driver smiling in his fire suit with a trophy and a raised finger signifying first place. Captions underneath were similar to one by International Motorsports on June 16 with the caption, "FIRST. WIN. @augieschirripa claims his first-ever USF Juniors victory in a chaotic Race 2 of the @continental_tire VIR Grand Prix, the third win for @internationalmotorposrt this season." The caption was accompanied by a headshot of Schirripa, wearing his fire suit but no helmet, and smiling.

A second often-shared Instagram post was a video of a driver spraying a bottled champagne-looking beverage (likely sparking grape juice for youth drivers) on victory lane after a win. Smiles and laughter among the drivers while the beverage was spraying on one another and the victory podium was included in videos. InterMS posted often about individual drivers as well, with 55 posts out of 133 highlighting individual

drivers – 41% of posts. Exclusive Autosports posted 51 posts of drivers, at 32% of posts.

Individual driver posts were coded for personal or professional dress and activity. Drivers were in their fire suits all the time, representing their participation in the sport. Only VRD had videos of drivers in streetwear (shirts and t-shirts), with interviews with individual drivers and staff around the paddock. VRD had an Australian driver, Xavier Kokai, on the team. Two posts of Xavier teaching the team about Australian words and playing music were included in team content. Overall, young drivers were inevitably shown on track or in the paddock areas in their race suits. Usually, drivers were shown with their helmets on. The USF branded headshots without helmets were used most often for individual driver placements or qualifying posts, or the team would post a victory stance with a trophy for drivers, also.

Driver signing announcements (new drivers joining the team) were common. In development teams, drivers might sign on at any time and are not necessarily with a team all season. This is a deviation from main circuits, where drivers are usually announced in the off-season and remain with teams throughout the season.

All Drivers Together

Teams did not post about multiple drivers at once often. As a percentage of posts, Zanella did most often, with 10 posts of 92, or 11%. Jay Howard posted 11 times about all drivers, which was 4% of total posts. VRD posted 7 times out of 157 posts, for 4% of posts as well. Exclusive Autosports posted once acknowledging all drivers, as did DEForce Racing. InterMS posted twice about all drivers. When posting about all drivers, an example from Zanella was a video showing all of the drivers in their cars during a race weekend. Each driver was given a short piece of the video shoot with the individual car number visible. The caption of, "Getting ready for the weekend," was a common caption for a post featuring all drivers.

Join us; our team is successful; we will persevere

Pole Position Motorsports announced that it was a new team with a post on February 4, 2024. The second most prominent theme of its Instagram posts was categorized as, "join us." Typical posts included talking about how there was space available for renting cars that weekend, or that testing options were available. Zanella Racing also had "join us" as its second most popular post, with 37 out of 92 posts related to this theme, fully 40% of posts. While the timing of posts was not considered in this study, during the coding process it was noted that Zanella Racing used the "join us" theme almost exclusively until the race season started in April 2024. Jay Howard Racing had four posts encouraging joining the team, which tied for second fewest of its posting behaviors – only the "perseverance" category was lower for this team. InterMS had four "join us" posts. Jay Howard Racing had four join us posts, and InterMS also had four. VRD did not have a single "join us" post, and DEForce did not, either.

A typical "join us" post, from February 4, 2024 on the Pole Position Motorsports account, was captioned, "Under the leadership of our team manager, Yannick, renowned for his demanding, meticulous and passionate nature, you'll soar to new heights in this sport. #polepositionmotorsports." The accompanying photo is Coach Yannick smiling with an iPad in his hand while in the garage near a car.

VRD, the development team with the second highest social media following, posted several times about how successful the teams and drivers were. Jay Howard posted eleven times about being successful, more often than they posted about having fun or seeking drivers (the join us category). The "our team is successful" category was a different theme than praising individual drivers, because the posts were coded as team-based if the team or "us" was mentioned rather

than a particular driver. InterMS posted five times about being successful and Zanella posted eight times. Exclusive Autosport posted seven times about being successful. DEForce posted twice about being successful, and Pole Position did not post at all about being successful.

An "our team is successful" post from Jay Howard Racing was the July 23, 2024 caption, "Success North of the Border!" accompanied by a video of drivers briefly interviewed about how well they performed and receiving hugs from coaches. Teams posted after race weekends with photos and captions of determination to do better and learn after disappointing race weekends. Perseverance posts were coded based on captions. Jay Howard Racing had only one post about persevering, and InterMS used the theme twice – it was among the least used themes on Instagram. Exclusive Autosport had five posts about persevering. Typical phrases on persevering posts include this post from Exclusive Autosport on May 12, 2024: "We saw some highs and lows, but the drivers and crew fought hard all weekend and didn't give up." Zanella Racing had one post about persevering. Pole Position did not post about perseverance at all. VRD and Zanella posted about perseverance once, while Exclusive Autosports used the perseverance theme five times. The most active user of the perseverance theme was DEForce Racing, with nine posts, or 6% of posts.

A DEForce Racing posting from March 8, 2024 was typical of a perseverance post, with the caption: "Racing teaches us valuable lessons in resilience. Congrats to our team for pushing through. We keep our heads high, eyes forward. The finish line isn't the end, it's the start of our next race." The accompanying photo included coaching staff on pit road talking together, without a driver nearby.

Coaches, Principals, and Staff; Have fun; We work hard; Safety

Most teams did not post about their coaches, principals, or staff at all. DEForce posted three times about the coaches, with "thank you" posts each time. The coach and staff category was not a primary category of other teams' posts – if a coach was shown, they were in the background working with a driver, the main focus of the post. Drivers alone were shown in victory poses or qualifying poses.

Pole Position Motorsports had the theme "have fun" appear fourth most often among its posts (7 out of 58 or 12% of posts). For Jay Howard Racing, having fun was tied with "join us" as one of the least prominent themes. Similarly, InterMS had one "have fun" post. VRD had six "have fun" posts. It was typically marked by drivers laughing or participating in a silly activity. Exclusive Autosport used the "tortilla challenge" meme to demonstrate fun, with two drivers trying to slap each other with a tortilla to see who would spray water out of their mouths. Otherwise, there was little posting about having fun.

Hard work was not mentioned by every team, but was given its own theme as hard work was specifically mentioned on behalf of the team and not related to success or a specific driver. One post from Jay Howard Racing noted, "We work hard to get results," with a photo of a driver in a car preparing to race. Only one team mentioned safety. It was an InterMS post. The accompanying caption was, "safety is important," and included a photo of a race car. The photo was not of a specific driver and did not further mention any situation, so was its own category. There were no other posts by any team about safety.

Sponsored posts

Jay Howard Racing was sponsored by Lucas Oil and had three posts about Lucas Oil during the 2024 season. InterMS had only one sponsored post, tagging Piki's Events for thanks catering and event assistance during a race weekend. In

sponsored posts, names with an account tag and comment mention were used.

Discussion

The first main takeaway from motorsport team development Instagram accounts was the enormous gap among social media followings among teams. DEForce Racing had the highest following with 25,400 followers, followed by Velocity Racing Development (VRD) with 21,500 followers. The next closest team was InterMS with slightly over 50% of those following numbers. As DEForce had the 2023 USF series winner and VRD had the 2024 USF series winner, it can be surmised that winning perpetuates a social media following. However, causation cannot be based on the winning alone because, as this study and prior research has suggested, strong social media followings can also be indicative of future success, as well. New young drivers want to be with winning teams, and if they see the teams looking like winners on Instagram, they take their talent to that team. Either could be true.

Development teams all relied on one dominant theme in the majority of photo posts: generic serious photos of drivers in their fire suits and helmets. This portrayed an overall organizational identity of seriousness – the drivers were there to work. The teams largely followed a typical pattern chronologically: drivers sign with teams in November and receive individual attention for their announcement. The announcements inevitably call upon a trope of thankfulness to be with the team and readiness to work hard. Every young driver was in a fire suit, the uniform of the sport, multiple times during the season's posts, with only VRD showing drivers in street clothing at any point. Drivers were also mostly in their helmets, unless posed for the USF headshots or a few other instances. This is important to note because for individual branding, visible faces are key – showing faces is a marker of personalization and even vulnerability. In other words, a driver without a helmet is not in race-ready mode but available to communicate with others. Photo posts were coded in aggregate and not separately for photo and caption, so the number of photos of drivers in helmets or without headgear was not separately coded. A future study considering such aspects could offer additional insights into the level of personalization that teams offered for individual drivers, and even compared to a driver's personal account, to see how the professional team and professional individual account paralleled or deviated. In this case, drivers were shown professionally and ready for sport in most photos. All drivers were male aside from Ava Dobson of Jay Howard Racing. She was shown similarly to the male drivers, with her helmet off and in a natural pose. While gender distinctives would not be generalizable with only one woman driver during the 2024 season, this research suggests that gender is not a consideration in team posting.

Videos rallied around common themes depending on team size or team prominence during race weekends. The two themes were generic racing footage or individual driver footage. On Zanella Racing's Instagram account, generic video footage of race weekends was generally used. These could be called "hype videos" given the footage presented. In almost all videos, the elements were the same: montage clips of suited-up drivers getting into their cars, cars racing around the tracks, flags waving, and quick shots of fans and coaches. Generic footage of the location, such as unique track characteristics (sculptures at Barber Motorsports Park in Birmingham, Alabama or palm trees in Miami), shared the commonality around the spectacle of presence at the race. The lack of specific footage or focus on specific driver or coach gave the interpretive viewpoint of team participation at something special, but not because of one person. On Jay Howard and VRD's accounts, however, a more overt focus on

specific drivers racing and winning was used as video footage. Shots of victory lane and raised trophies appeared more prominently on these accounts. Videos were more often used of people when winning, and general footage when not winning. Drivers were worth spending video footage on when they were successful, in other words.

Motorsports development teams have different budgets, different histories, and different structures. It is in this inherent imbalance that team Instagram presences may live. The teams themselves were all present during the USF Juniors series in 2024. However, the attention that was paid to social media varied greatly based on posting amounts and types of posts by each team. It was not necessarily true that larger teams were much more active on social media and included more videos – Exclusive Autosport has fewer than 5,000 followers yet posted 160 times, including 57 posts about individual drivers. Therefore, it was not universal that larger teams with more followers were most active in posting.

Themes were surprisingly compressed for the amount of varied work that a development team completes during a season. With mechanics, coaches, principals, drivers, sponsors, families, and fans all intertwined with development series, a broader list of themes could have been possible. However, organizational identity was tightly presented in posts, with two main themes overshadowing the others – information sharing and successful individual drivers.

Turning to organizational identity as portrayed on development team accounts, conclusions can be made that teams primarily want to be seen as sources of information about their teams and how the teams perform during race weekends. This implies important conveyances: that teams want to be seen as present at the tracks and races, that they want to have a say in how their race weekends went, and that they want to have a voice in information sharing about the races. Such participatory information sharing falls into in-house content creation and reporting. Given that there are fewer media at development team events such as USF race weekends, serving as information authorities convey credibility to development teams and help information seekers learn about the races and drivers.

The second most prominent theme of individual driver successes/announcements conveys that the team actively promotes its individual drivers. This study did not code for percent of individual drivers compared to one another to see if there was equity in access to social media among all drivers. Anecdotally, it can be confirmed that equal Instagram appearances of all of a team's drivers did not occur. VRD racer Max Taylor, for example, received far more social media posts from VRD than any other team drivers. He won the series championship, so inevitable extra posts for his success were perhaps unavoidable. However, it would be interesting to know if other teammates or their families were satisfied with the disproportionate posting – teams do not necessarily have to promise equity in posting, but drivers would notice that they were not being posted as often as other drivers, which could perhaps breed concerns of favoritism or inequity of resources. For teams, showing winning drivers seemed the more important goal. For organizational identity, demonstrating success overshadows equity of driver presentation. This is a possible impediment to individual driver branding. If a driver is not given enough Instagram attention from the team, they are perhaps perceived as less marketable and worthy of sponsor investment.

Teams were not interested in demonstrating the personal sides of drivers. The teams were "all business" in their posts. Fun or non racing-centric posts were less than 5% of any team's posts. Therefore, development teams want to be perceived as serious places for career development. Considering the youth of most

development series drivers, with an entry age of 14 for USF Juniors, teams would seem to want to include fun as part of the experience. A "business-only" organizational identity may ease the minds of families paying a lot of money for their child's racing career, and so they may be the target audience.

The lack of sponsorship posts was noticeable and interesting. The lack of sponsorship or partnership posts was a distinctive lack of opportunity noted for a sport constantly hungry for sponsors. Development teams are noticeably not interested in assisting with sponsors, leaving this task to individual drivers and their Instagram accounts, presumably. If the foundation of team posting includes wanting successful drivers, team posting behaviors tee up opportunities for individual drivers to pursue sponsors but do not overtly assist them. Coupled with unequal individual driver posting behaviors, there is much movement that could be made toward using team accounts more thoughtfully. Assisting drivers with sponsorships in important ways by thinking equitably about all drivers and using more overt sponsorship posting behavior can help young drivers gain exposure. Leaving sponsorship-chasing exclusively to drivers, when development team accounts could use additional posting strategies to help promote racers would be a win-win. Young racers may be less likely to run out of money if sponsorship opportunities could be more readily tied to social media posts by teams. Organizational identity suggests that teams are using their accounts to promote their drivers, but only in simplistic, "this driver did well this week" ways rather than more dynamic sharing opportunities.

Unknown until the coding process and study of captions, three teams had bilingual posts: Exclusive Autosport, DEForce and InterMS had Spanish-language posts. InterMS had five bilingual posts, DEForce had two and Exclusive had one – all posts included English, as well. Several racers with Latin American, Central American, and Cuban backgrounds participated in the USF series during 2024 – only the captions demonstrated the bilingual language use. Photos and videos alone did not contain Spanish. For organizational identity, this finding is included in this study both to add nuance to the themes discovered and to offer marketing insight. Motorsports development teams interested in courting non-English-speaking drivers are wise to include other languages in posts. While USF is based in the United States, drivers are welcomed from any country. Spanish-speaking coaches offer targeted help to Spanish-speaking drivers, and in turn offer attractive sponsorship opportunities for brands with Spanish-speaking fans.

Motorsports marketing will continue to evolve in social media spaces but will not abate soon. Rather, Instagram, TikTok and other social media will likely continue to be main avenues for team promotion. This snapshot of youth driver motorsports development teams in 2024 offers insights into organizational identity as expressed on Instagram, along with possible avenues for engaging with sponsor opportunities in addition to signing opportunities more inclusively.

Limitations and Future Study

This research focused on organizational identity in the context of motorsport development teams promoting young racers while also promoting themselves. Therefore, one lens was used when conducting the content analysis – a linear lens that consisted of counting and categorizing posts without considering algorithm maximization techniques. While this method contributed to clarity of coding and thematic analysis, several ancillary aspects were, by necessity, not included. Instagram accounts exists in a robust algorithm and promotional space where decisions are made about hashtags, tagging, and cooperative posts. Music is sometimes added to posts, also. This study

acknowledges that all of these factors can play roles in posting behaviors. This initial study to learn team posting behaviors can easily be built upon to include such nuances, and as Instagram and other visual social media continue to evolve, could yield helpful insight into further organizational identity. Comments and interaction were not studied when coding posts – learning what posts resonated by studying engagement could offer insights into how viewers and fans are joining in the conversations with development teams.

Interviews with young drivers after signing with development teams might offer insights into whether Instagram played a role in organizational identity perception. As Watkins and Smith (2022) explained, an organization's portrayal on Instagram propels a certain desired interpretation. Instagram posts may truly attract drivers looking for development teams; using Instagram accounts for more overt sponsorship assistance is an important next step.

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