Managing Brand Image via Twitter: A Study of Professional Athletes’ Impression Management (IM) Behavior

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Dating back to the work of Goffman (1955), social psychologists have alluded to the manner in which people intentionally manage the impressions they portray to others (Wayne & Liden, 1995). This tactic is known as impression management (IM), defined as “efforts by an actor to create, maintain, protect, or otherwise alter an image held by a target audience” (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008, p. 1080). In order to achieve a desirable image, an actor (i.e., person employing IM) will employ certain tactics with the hope of appearing competent to their target (i.e., person or group at whom IM is geared toward) (Bolino et al., 2008; Pollach & Kerbler, 2011). To date, however, there is a dearth of research focusing on IM from a sport management viewpoint; the majority of IM research is in fields such as organization science and social psychology. We argue sport contexts provide excellent empirical settings from which to illustrate IM behavior. To that end, the empirical evidence in the present study (in progress) will answer the following research question: What IM tactics do professional athletes utilize in consideration of their brand image? To do so, the study focuses on one of the best practices for professional athlete brand image building, Twitter, employing a mixed-method content-analytic design (Pollach & Kerbler, 2011). Thus, the unit of analysis is professional athlete tweets. Although there are other means through which professional athletes use IM, Twitter is centered in order to guarantee the study has an unmistakably defined unit of analysis (Pollach & Kerbler, 2011). Theoretically, the study answers the research question by employing IM behaviors identified by Bolino et al. (2008). This includes both assertive IM (proactively managing impressions to develop and enhance an image) as well as defensive forms of IM (intended to reactively manage an image).

With the advent of social media, a person of influence (e.g., professional athlete) is arguably better able to utilize IM behaviors to create and develop their brand image. For example, through their tweets, they are able to connect with fans, apologize for transgressions, self-promote themselves, and boast about their accomplishments. In view of this, IM behavior is analogous to brand management. For instance, the primary construct within brand management research—brand equity—is expressed from a consumer's perspective as the assets and liabilities linked to the brand that add or subtract from the value of the brand in the minds of its consumers (Aaker, 1991). That is, consumer-based brand equity is essentially the strength, uniqueness, and favorability of the impressions a target has of an actor. Despite the significance of employing IM in creating, maintaining, and protecting a brand image, there is very little research dovetailing IM and brand management. In fact, research investigating IM at the individual level is generally focused on four areas: 1) influence on the outcome of job interviews (Proost, Witte, Schreurs, & Derous, 2010; Tsai, Huang, Wu, & Lo, 2010), 2) how it is used in appraisals, promotions, and career success (Zivnuska, Kacmar, Witt, Carlson, & Bratton, 2004), 3) how applicants utilize IM in their résumés (Kaplan & Fisher, 2009), and 4) observers’ evaluations of IM behavior (Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006; Rudman, 1998). Therefore, the present study extends the use of IM into a different context (i.e., sport), thereby illustrating how sport can be used to extend IM tenets, and also demonstrates how IM can guide brand image research in sport management to answer questions yet to be investigated.

In line with previous research (i.e., Hambrick, Simmon, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010) we will examine tweets from professional athletes drawn from the athlete Twitter account verification websites sportsin140.com and TweetingAthletes.com. Professional athletes will be randomly selected from multiple sport categories to be included in this study. All 20 tweets visible on the homepage of the athlete’s Twitter account will be examined (Hambrick et al., 2010). Subsequently, a quantitative content analysis will be utilized to examine the impression management behaviors employed by athletes on Twitter. A content analysis is defined as the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005). This method will permit us to condense the text into content categories through the application of a coding scheme (Kolbe &
Burnett, 1991). For instance, tweets will be assigned to content categories. To ensure intercoder reliability, two independent coders will code a 20% sub-sample of the data. Once intercoder-reliability is confirmed, the entire data will be analyzed and the appropriate statistical analysis will be performed on the dataset. The quantitative content analysis will be followed by a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000; Morant, 1998). Pollach & Kerbler (2011) recommend this in order to overcome the limitations of content analysis that are solely quantitative in nature. The qualitative content analysis will provide a further in-depth understanding of IM behavior not achievable through quantitative means.

From a practical utility perspective, we surmise the study will provide fundamental insight to professional athletes’ and their brand managers on how they manage their Twitter feeds and communication with their stakeholders via this mechanism. Given the advent of social media in recent years, Twitter has emerged as an important tool for professional athletes to build, preserve, and safeguard their brand image. The presentation will include a further discussion of practical utility, in addition to the finalized results, tables with content categories and definitions of IM behavior, limitations, and future research directions.