Organizational Impression Congruence: A Conceptual Framework for Sport Service Organizations

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Both organizations and individuals have ideas about how they would like to be viewed by external audiences. To this end they engage in impression management, defined by Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, and Gilstrap (2008, p. 1080) as, “efforts by an actor to create, maintain, protect, or otherwise alter an image held by a target audience.” In the current study, the authors offer a conceptual model of Organizational Impression Congruence (OIC), proposing that, when the outcomes of organizational and employee impression management align, the organization is able to project desired images to consumers. For example, if the organization and its employees project congruent and desirable images, consumers will form a coherent overall opinion of the organization. Theoretically, congruent impression management outcomes would result in favorable responses from consumers (e.g., consumer trust, loyalty, perceived brand equity, etc.), while incongruent impression would be negatively evaluated.

Theoretical Foundations & Proposition Development

The origins of impression management lie in Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgic model, in which he conceptualized social life as a theatrical production. Goffman characterized persons engaged in social interactions as “actors” who are attempting to control the images of themselves that they project to their audience, in pursuit of certain desired ends. Scholars have studied how (and to what ends) individuals (e.g., Leary & Kowalski, 1990) and organizations (e.g., Elsbach, 2003) manage the images they project to external audiences; however, there has been little investigation of how these actions affect each other. In addition, the vast majority of scholars have examined impression management within organizations (i.e., between employees and their colleagues or supervisors) (see Bolino et al., 2008). In the sport industry, the impression management activities of individual employees and service organizations also target individuals (e.g., consumers) outside of the organization. As such, sport management provides a novel context for the study of impression management at multiple levels of analysis.

There is a considerable amount of literature in which scholars have examined the relationship between employee and organizational identity (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), but this must be seen as distinct from impression management. Impressions and images are not identities. As noted in writings pertaining to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, pp. 366-367), identities consist of “those aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from the social categories to which he (sic) perceives himself (sic) as belonging.” Individuals choose to associate themselves with certain groups (in group), and disassociate themselves from others (out group), toward the formation of a positive self-concept. When an individual or an organization engages in impression management, they are controlling how this self is portrayed to external audiences (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Tedeschi & Reiss, 1981). Accordingly, impression management refers less to the performance of identity than it does to the selection of which aspects of identity the actor wishes to reveal, obscure, or manipulate. This distinction is important for managers, as affecting the images that employees project (e.g., through internal marketing or staff training) is a considerably more realistic proposition than affecting the identities held by employees. This is particularly pertinent in sport service organizations, where there is often high employee turnover in consumer-facing roles (Schlesinger & Heskett, 1991).

The images projected by the organization and its employees are received and interpreted by external audiences (e.g., consumers), resulting in the formation of reputations (Whetten & Mackey, 2002). Individual impression management activities contribute to collective reputations (i.e., what consumers think of the employees as a collective), while the impression management outcomes of an organization’s top management team (i.e., those responsible for the strategic direction of the organization) contribute to overall organizational reputation. The formation of these reputations will overlap and affect one another to some extent; however, concepts within the sport management
literature provide a basis for better understanding how consumers make associations with different, mutually
constitutive components of sporting objects. For example, from the literature on points of attachment and team
identification (Kwon, Trail, & Anderson, 2005; Wann & Branscombe, 1993) we learn that consumers form
psychological connections with different facets of “the team” (e.g., players, coaches, venue), while still forming an
overall connection. Similarly here, consumer perceptions of organizational and individual impressions will create
collective (employee) and organizational reputations that have independent and interdependent aspects.

The study of organizational and collective (employee) reputations as outcomes of impression management within the
OIC model is most appropriate, as reputation operates in the same way across all levels of analysis; as concluded by
Ferris et al. (2014) in their comprehensive review of reputation literature. Other popular constructs, such as brand
association (Low & Lamb, 2000) and brand personality (Aaker & Fournier, 1995) can be applied at an organizational
level, but there is no suggestion within the literature that they operate in the same way at individual or collective
levels of analysis.

Contributions, Implications & Future Directions
Reputations are extremely important and valuable to sport (and other) organizations. As such, the management of
impression by the organization at the top management level, and its employees are crucial in the development of
these reputations. The conceptual model of OIC provides managers with a framework through which their own
impression management activities (e.g., marketing initiatives, corporate branding, public relations) can be examined
in conjunction with the images that are projected by their employees (e.g., manner during service encounters). This
can help to identify areas of incongruence, which may not necessarily include the comparison of good and bad
customer service, but instead the projection of incoherent images at different levels. The implication of impression
management within the OIC model presents managers with behaviors (i.e., impression management activities) that
they can affect toward improved organizational performance.

The proposed conceptual model of OIC also represents the first step toward a multi-level operationalization of
reputation as an empirically testable outcome of impression management activities. Future research should
concentrate on consumer outcomes of organizational impression congruence and incongruence, both psychographic
(e.g., consumer trust) and behavioral (e.g., purchase behavior).