Impression Management (IM) in Sport: Introduction and Recommendations for Future Research
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Like other organizations, sport organizations (and the people functioning within them) are strategic actors committed to sustaining social standing and influencing the environment in which they operate (King, Felin, & Whetten, 2010; McDonnell & King, 2013). Within this environment, these social actors are dependent on the approval of stakeholders, who in turn, provide the resources they need to survive (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Oliver, 1997). What makes sport unique (especially highly commercialized sport) are the significant number of stakeholders and “license holders” (Washington & Patterson, 2011). Also unique to sport is the intense media scrutiny (Bruce & Tini, 2008), which typically highlights negative events (Barnett, 1990; Rowe, 1999). In sum, today’s sporting environment presents several managerial tensions. From both a micro (i.e., athletes, employees) and macro (i.e., sport organizations) perspective, social actors in sport must formulate new ways to exert control over the image they project to their audience. It could be argued that failing to do so engenders disapproval of stakeholders, thereby affecting social standing and potential impact on their respective environment.

This presentation will center Erving Goffman’s (1959) impression management (IM) theory as an area of scholarship that is well-suited to assist social actors in sport exert control over image. Work in this area has garnered considerable attention from organizational and social psychology scholars but has been relatively unexplored in sport management. In light of this, the presentation will draw upon extant organizational behavior and social psychology literature to accomplish the following: (i) introduce IM to sport management thereby providing insight as to how IM can be contextualized within sport, and (ii) identify research gaps and offer recommendations for scholars who may be interested in this area of scholarship. As strategic actors, committed to sustaining social standing and influencing the environment in which they operate, social actors in sport will find the employment of IM valuable for exerting control over image.

Theoretical Framework
Defined, IM is characterized as “the conscious or unconscious attempt to control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions” (Schlenker, 1980, p. 6). To control image, IM users employ a collection of behaviors and actions. (A table of IM behaviors will be provided). Central to Goffman’s (1959) IM theory is the existence of an actor and an audience. Goffman’s (1959) likened IM users to actors who routinely engage in performances in front of audiences. A performance is defined as “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by its continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on its observers” (Goffman 1959, p. 22). During such performances, actors attempt to exert control over the audience’s perception of them. These, among other theatrical terms, will be elaborated upon in the presentation.

Gardner and Martinoko (1988) highlighted that the relationship between an actor and audience is a constant social exchange in which both parties alternatively and simultaneously assume the role of actor and audience. For instance, within an interview context, an interviewee occupies the role of actor but also assumes the role of audience when they judge the interviewer’s reactions and whether the work environment is conducive for them. An interviewer judges an interviewee as they respond to questions, thus playing the role of an audience. However, they also play an actor role when the interviewee asks questions about their organization. Still, whatever role one occupies, the goal is to develop congruence between one’s self-concept and the feedback from the opposing side (Schulz, 2012). This creates a “situation.”

Literature Review
Scholars have examined IM at both the individual and organizational levels of analysis. At the individual level, researchers have mainly concentrated their efforts in three areas: performance appraisals, the interview process, and scale development and measurement. With regard to performance appraisals, Wayne and Liden (1995) proposed a
model suggesting that employee IM behavior impacts performance appraisal via supervisors’ liking of and similarity to the employee. They found support for their model, demonstrating that IM behavior had a significant, indirect impact on supervisor performance appraisals. Investigations of IM in interviews have showed that prospective employees use IM on their applications and during an interview with the hope of receiving a job offer (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). This includes both verbal (e.g., self-promotion) and non-verbal cues (e.g., frequent smiling and maintaining eye contact) (Levashina et al., 2014). Gilmore and Ferris’ (1989) field experiment indicated that applicants IM behavior, regardless of the applicant’s credentials, influenced interviewers. The presentation will also discuss the three IM scales. For instance, Kumar and Beyerlein (1991) developed the Measure of Ingratiatory Behaviors in Organizational Settings (MIBOS) scale. This 24-item scale measures the frequency in which employees employ four types of ingratiation (i.e., self-presentation, other enhancement, favor rendering, and opinion conformity).

Within the last few decades, researchers have started viewing organizations as social actors. Essentially, just like people, organizations, too, have purpose and intentions (Whetten, Felin, & King, 2009). Elsbach, Sutton, and Principe (1998) defined organizational impression management (OIM) as “any action purposefully designed and carried out to influence an audience’s perceptions of an organization” (p. 68). Research in this area focuses on defensive and assertive uses of IM. Defensive OIM occurs after an event that threatens to spoil an organization’s image (e.g., BP oil spill, Enron, NBA ‘malice in the palace’) and involves tailored communications that attempt to ameliorate the image held by the public (Elsbach et al., 1998). Elsbach (1994) found that verbal accounts illustrating acknowledgements are more effective than denials when trying to defend organizational legitimacy. Assertive OIM attempts to prevent controversies from occurring. Elsbach et al.’s (1998) qualitative study found that hospitals use assertive OIM to avert patients’ attention from hospital charges and prompt emotions that cause patients to simplify how they process hospital charges.

Implications for Sport Management
The work of Goffman (1959) and other IM scholars is very much reflected in sport. For example, viewing sport management from an IM perspective, scholars encounter how sport is permeated with dramas that require “doing” in hopes of manufacturing a reaction or confirmation from an audience to achieve social standing and wield influence. Based on the literature, the presentation will conclude by identifying research gaps and addressing future areas of sport IM research. For instance, it is evident that the bulk of IM research is concentrated in a few areas. The presentation will discuss how researchers could examine behaviors such as defamation, intentionally looking bad, intimidation, boasting, and self-handicapping, all of which occur in sport. While previous sport research may explain how actors can enhance social standing, what has yet to be answered is, how can actors achieve desired outcomes with behaviors that are generally viewed as negative? For instance, how does trash talk impact an athlete’s image? Studies in these areas would most certainly be considered original given the lack of research on these behaviors. This research would also contribute to a better understanding of IM behaviors from a general perspective, thereby informing IM theory. Other areas at the individual level will also be discussed. From an OIM perspective, researchers could also explore how audiences perceive this defamation. This research could offer insight on the degree to which a sport organization can defame another and still be viewed positively, thus providing useful information on whether or not it is a good idea to defame one’s competitor.