An Examination of Elite Athletes’ Personal Branding Strategies via New Media

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New media serves as a unique platform for self-presentation and image management for both individuals and organizations (Rui & Stefanone, 2013). Today’s elite athletes face increasing demands to build a personal brand via new media by maintaining their own website, providing frequent updates on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, writing blog posts, and engaging with fans and other stakeholders online. Peña, Arauz, and Sandro Garcia (2011) stated that new media “is an advertising showcase in which athletes are shown as brands in all their magnitude” (p. 296). Brand image success via new media usage, however, requires significant time commitments (Eagleman, 2014), and athletes are expected to utilize these new media tools to build their personal brands while also focusing on their sport-related duties such as training and competing, educational endeavors, and in many cases part-time or full-time jobs to support their training (IOC Athletes’ Kit, 2014).

While brand building via new media requires a significant time commitment on the part of the athletes, recent literature highlights several potential benefits of athletes’ new media use. For example, Sanderson (2008) highlighted its effectiveness in personally crafting one’s public image. Along those lines, Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) examined male and female professional tennis players’ Twitter accounts and found that these athletes used the new media platform to communicate aspects of their personal and social lives to followers. They concluded that new media platforms such as Twitter offer athletes “complete control over how his or her story is told and, by extension, how their brand is framed” (p. 474). Karg and Lock (2014) explained that new media also provides athletes with a wide range of tools for engagement opportunities. Likewise, Hambrick and Kang (2014) noted that new media serves as an effective relationship-marketing tool between athletes and various stakeholders such as fans, sponsors, and potential sponsors, and can contribute to the brand loyalty an athlete receives from his or her stakeholders.

Myriad studies have examined athletes’ new media use by examining content such as tweets, Facebook posts, or blogs (e.g., Burch, Clavio, Eagleman, Major, Pedersen, Frederick, & Blaszka, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010; Peña, Arauz, & Sandro Garcia, 2011; Sanderson, 2008). While this research has begun to provide an understanding of the type of content elite athletes share and the brand image these athletes build via new media, few studies have examined new media usage from the athletes’ perspectives. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to develop an understanding of athletes’ perceptions of and strategies for personal brand building via new media.

Using semi-structured interviews with approximately 8-12 elite athletes, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1 – What are elite athletes’ perceptions of new media use as a personal branding tool?
RQ 2 – How does new media fit into Olympic athletes’ overall personal branding strategy?
RQ 3 – What do elite athletes hope to achieve via new media use in relation to building their personal brand?
RQ 4 – What new media strategies do elite athletes use to achieve their personal branding goals?

The lead researcher’s academic institution granted ethics approval for this study. Interviews will take place in late 2014 and early 2015. Participants include male and female athletes from the United States and Australia who are currently training for the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Interviews will be conducted via telephone and Skype and will be recorded and later transcribed. The transcripts will be qualitatively analyzed in order to answer the four research questions. While the results of this study are not available at the time of this abstract submission, the results will be complete and ready to present by the time of the 2015 NASSM Conference in Ottawa.

This research is unique in that it will reveal the athletes’ perspectives on the use of new media platforms for personal branding. The results of this study, combined with the findings from previous research on the type of content posted...
by athletes via new media, will help to create a more holistic understanding of athletes’ image management and brand building strategies amongst sport management academics and practitioners. The findings will be valuable to sport organizations such as national and international governing bodies of sport who seek to assist elite athletes in various areas of their lives such as personal brand building, sponsor solicitation, time management strategies, and preparing for life after their competitive sport careers. It is possible that such governing bodies can use the results of this study to develop resources that will educate athletes on using their new media strategies and activities to achieve their personal brand building goals.