Examining the Content of Tweets for Individual Sport Athletes versus Team Sport Athletes and its Implications on Self-branding

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The resurgence of new communication technologies has virtually transformed the sport industry (Hutchins, 2011; Sanderson, 2011). Specifically, the traditional methods of production and consumption of media have been augmented by versatile online social media channels, which allow athletes to connect directly with a wider audience of followers and introduce the fans to a unique method for interacting with their favorite athletes (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010). Further, a variety of studies exist that have concentrated on investigating athlete communication patterns on Twitter. Sanderson (2013) revealed rookie athletes used Twitter to communicate a multi-faceted self outside of competition. Hambrick et al. (2010) examined Twitter use among professional athletes by investigating the content of 1,962 tweets and placing them into six categories that derived from studies conducted by Seo and Green (2008) and Clavio (2008). It was discovered that the athletes’ tweets tend to be more direct, unlike most impersonal communications filtered through a team’s public relations department (Hambrick et al., 2010). Interestingly, the findings of Hambrick et al. (2010) indicate that only five percent of tweets fell under the promotional category. Considering the fact that the athletes did not release many promotional tweets in this study, Hambrick et al. (2010) still emphasize that Twitter users may find promotional tweets a useful information source, which sport organizations should take advantage of. Numerous authors have found that Twitter brings athletes and fans closer together and gives fans a window into professional athletes’ personal lives (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010).

In the realm of sport marketing, a brand is defined as “a name, design, symbol, or any combination that a sports organization uses to differentiate its products from the competition” (Shank, 2001, p. 265). Keller (2008) asserted that a branded product may be a person such as David Beckham, and Arai et al. (2014) echoed the point by suggesting that all individual athletes can be classified as brands because every athlete can be characterized based on their name, distinctive appearance, and a personality. Finally, it has been suggested that modern athletes should be viewed as cultural symbols whereas major companies can utilize their status to tap into emerging markets and differentiate themselves from the competition (Gilchrist, 2005).

Due to the popularity of Twitter as a self-promotional medium and the emergence of athletes as brands, the purpose of this study is to investigate the differences in the content of tweets for individual sport athletes in comparison with team sport athletes. Further, this study will further our understanding of the intricacies associated with the athletes’ self-promotional activities on the online social media network Twitter in the context of individual and team sport environments. There has been limited attention given to exploring how professional athletes, who represent two diverse sport settings, promote their personal brands through social media outlets. Therefore, our emphasis is on the analysis of how individual and team sport environments influence the content of self-branding conversations initiated by professional athletes on Twitter.

Methods and Anticipated Contribution
Content analysis will be used to analyze and categorize the tweets. The subjects will include the most followed team and individual sport professional players with verified Twitter accounts. Five sports were used for both team and professional sport athletes. The team sports included basketball, soccer, football, hockey, and baseball professional athletes while the individual sports included tennis, golf, skateboarding, mixed martial arts, and swimming professional athletes. Researchers will independently code tweets which will be utilized to conduct content analysis and subsequently generate new categories and determine the most effective categories to reach consumers. Each
tweet will be coded by the researchers and placed into the predetermined corresponding categories. The following categories, which will be used in this study, were developed by Hambrick et al. (2010) from two past studies examining motivations for using sports websites (Seo & Green, 2008) and intercollegiate athletics message boards (Clavio, 2008). The categories derived and updated by the researchers in the current study include diversion, personal, athlete exchange, and promotional.

An additional aspect of this research study will be to determine which of the content categories have the most impact on consumers. A convenience sample of undergraduate sports management students will be used to determine the effect of tweets on sports consumers. The students will be given the definition of each content category and will be asked to evaluate representative tweets on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (least) to 7 (most) using the following adjectives: interesting, useful, entertaining, engaging, and meaningful. Participants will also rate each tweet based on the likelihood of engaging to the tweet by replying, retweeting or favoriting using the same scale of 1 (least likely) to 7 (most likely). The tweets used will be three randomly chosen tweets from each content category. Once data is collected, the researchers will be able to determine which content category is most favorable for consumers and will be able to be utilized by athletes in promoting their self-brand.

As seen in the aforementioned studies, athletes do not release many promotional tweets, but users may find promotional tweets a useful information source. For example, sport organizations can now use social media channels like Twitter for promotional and fan involvement purposes (Williams et al., 2014), and players can manage their personal Twitter pages and utilize them to discuss their social lives and playing performances (Hambrick et al., 2010). This provides an opportunity and implication in athlete-branding strategies. The results of this study will allow for athletes to develop marketing strategies based on the most impact on the tweet consumers which, in turn, could allow these athletes to better position their brand and to capture untapped market segments.