Managing Personal Brands via Social Media: A Cross-National Study of Elite Athletes’ Impression Management Behavior

Bart van Bezooijen, Fontys University of Applied Sciences
Monique van Rooijen, Fontys University of Applied Sciences
Jos de Schepper, Griffith University
Popi Sotiriadou, Griffith University

Marketing - Branding (Elite Sport) Thursday, June 7, 2018
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) 1:20 PM
Abstract 2018-047 Room: Sable C

In recent years, academics and practitioners have increasingly invested time and resources to examine athlete branding via social media (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). One of the findings in this body of work is that well-branded athletes can act as social influencers and increase customer and fan engagement with the brand (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Strong brand engagement enables professional sport organizations to further promote their leagues or brands, foster fandom, build reputations, and strengthen brand loyalty (e.g., Miranda, Chamorro, Rubio, & Rodriguez, 2014; Pfahl, Kreutzer, Maleski, Lililbridge, & Ryznar, 2012). While considerable research has been devoted to understand how and why professional sport organizations use social media strategies, it is less clear to what extent this understanding of social media strategies is applicable to individual elite athletes (Geurin, 2017).

The present research is focused on how and why individual athletes engage with various stakeholders (e.g., fans, sponsors, media) through textual and visual social media networks (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube) to develop a personal brand. The process of creating one’s presentation of self is known as self-presentation or impression management (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker & Pontari, 2000). Social media arguably allows an elite athlete to intentionally create, develop, and manage their personal brand.

Although an increased social media presence can attract negative comments from followers (Geurin, 2017; Smith & Sanderson, 2015) well-branded athletes attain several benefits (e.g., salary bonuses, transfer fees, and sponsor contracts) (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014). Furthermore, through social media, athletes can employ more control over their self-presentation and communicate their identity aspects directly to fans and other stakeholders such as sponsors and potential sponsors, media, coaches and other athletes (Smith & Anderson, 2015). When athletes effectively use social media as a relationship-marketing tool, it allows them to increase fan interaction and to sustain brand loyalty (Hambrick & Kang, 2015), as well as leveraging their post-athletic career (Arai et al., 2014). Previous research (e.g., Filo, Lock & Karg, 2015) on self-presentation and social media have focused on content analysis or have used quantitative methods for data collection. Few studies have investigated athlete branding from the athletes’ perspective or produced qualitative data. The present study builds on Geurin’s (2017) work, who interviewed six American female elite athletes on their use of social media as a marketing communication tool. She found that self-presentation styles differed per social media platform and that female athletes used social media as a tool to share both their personal and athletic lives, develop a connection with fans and sponsors, and promote themselves. Yet, none of the female athletes had a formal or strategy. One of the most critical findings in Geurin’s work was that all of the female athletes experienced unwanted public messages, which were often of a sexual nature.

As self-presentation can be contextual and vary across sports, age, gender and country, this study included both female and male elite athletes from two countries (the Netherlands and Australia). The authors conducted a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews (face to face and Skype) in 2017 with athletes from the Netherlands (n=8) and Australia (n=8) who competed in Olympic, Paralympic, or Commonwealth Games. Apart from questions on athletes’ goals, benefits, challenges, and strategies when using social media, the present study also uncovered how athletes use social media in their pre, during, and post-athletic career. Additionally, the study seeks out the athletes’ perceptions of how, why, and when to provide formal social media training during each stage (e.g., junior or senior) of their career. Interviews, which lasted between 30-45 minutes, were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and sent to the athletes for accuracy verification. The authors analyzed the data through qualitative thematic analysis (i.e. sequential coding process).
The findings of this study support Geurin’s (2017) conclusion that elite athletes have little to no formal training in self-presentation or social media use. Similar to the goals of American female athletes (Geurin, 2017), the main motivations for Dutch and Australian athletes of using social media are interacting with their fans, promoting their sport, and sharing personal and athletic related aspects of their life on social media platforms. Although most athletes were conscious of how they self-presented themselves (e.g., time, number, type of posts, and type of social media platform), they also admitted not having a formalised strategy for their self-presentation through social media. Contrary to Geurin’s findings, female athletes in this study did not experience any negative sexually oriented comments. Some of the Dutch and Australian athletes mentioned that social media allowed for an amplification (e.g., reach and impact) of their self-presentation, especially when news was shared in conjunction and aligned with other sport media attention (e.g., through sponsoring and broadcasting). These athletes also seemed to be aware of the benefits of social media for leveraging their post-athletic career and the need to interact with fellow athlete influencers to achieve higher engagement with different stakeholders or to seek advice and assistance. Furthermore, most athletes realised that sharing personal successes or disappointments (personal or sport related), assisted in an enhanced interaction and exposure to their stakeholders. All of the Dutch and Australian athletes mentioned it would be very beneficial to receive formal training from either their national sporting organization or professional sport marketing organizations. One main finding among the Dutch elite athletes was that they seem to be unaware that their personal brand consists of all their media activities, also those in teenager years when sport successes had yet to come.

When considering Goffman’s self-presentation theory, this study offers further qualitative insight into athletes’ perspective on their own self-presentation. The findings presented so far suggest that potential success factors in strengthening a personal brand are for example connecting with influencers (e.g., other very successful athletes) and aligning personal social media use with other media channels. Furthermore, it indicates athletes should be aware that sharing aspects other than their sport performances are equally important for their own self-presentation and that publicly made pre-athletic career activities should also be considered. Based on the lack of and need for effective social media training, a practical recommendation is to develop online training courses on impression management and personal branding, targeted towards the stages of athletes’ athletic career. The research direction to emerge from the findings, which can be used to create strategies that enhance self-presentation and contribute to a well-established personal brand, will be discussed during this presentation.