Social Media Self-Promotion: The Impact of Mindsets on Sport Content Effectiveness

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Investigating how people react to athletic images becomes a compelling entry point to study the role of sport in the digital marketing domain (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). Pictures taken in the gym have become one of the trendiest themes appearing on social media sites (e.g., the hashtag #gym has been used 112,466,632 times). Besides selfies, posts that document gym activities are a popular option for individuals who use athletic images to enrich their online presence. According to the study of middle-class males, the athletic image acquired by disciplined fitness training signals an aspirational self (Baas, 2015). In this regard, many social media users (i.e., the signaler) use athletic images as a self-promotion tool, which in turn enables sport companies to instantly reach a highly relevant audience (e.g., Adidas recently recruited 25 female influencers to promote their sport apparel). As a result, sport marketers are facing the challenge to select appropriate influencers that are perceived trustworthy by their followers. One important factor that impacts the effectiveness of influencer marketing is consumers’ mindset, which directly impacts their appraisal of others (Heslin, Latham, & VandeWalle, 2005). Researchers have shown that consumers’ mindset significantly impacts their reaction to different framings of advertising appeals (e.g., Park & John, 2012; Yorkston, Nunes, & Matt, 2010). However, little research has investigated how these athletic images are perceived by the observer depending on their mindsets. In the current study, we propose that individuals’ implicit mindset will influence the effectiveness of athletic images as a self-promotion tool on social media.

Theoretical Framework

The current study is built on the knowledge from signaling theory and implicit theory. According to signaling theory, the signaler has some unobservable attributes that are conveyed through the signal to another party (Donath, 2007). Researchers identified people who post gym activities aim to signal how much time they invest in their looks (Marshall, Lefringausen, & Ferenczi, 2015). However, different types of athletic images may have a different level of effectiveness in delivering the signal depending on how the observer interprets them. A selfie picture, for instance, disseminates the signal through a pose of the athletic body of the signaler. In contrast, a workout picture delivers the signal through displaying the action of the exercise.

Athletic images on social media can be highly appealing but also aversive to the observer. While these images may be perceived as a positive factor because persistency is associated with the exercise (Thøgersen-Ntoumani & Ntoumanis, 2006), athletic images may also prime the audience to perceive the signaler as narcissistic, especially when they post selfies (Marshall, et al., 2015). From a personal branding perspective, an athletic image is a self-promotion tool conveying “persuasive messages”.

In the current study, we propose that different types of athletic image influence how the observer evaluates the perceived trustworthiness of the signaler based on their mindset. According to implicit theory, people with a fixed mindset consider that individuals’ personality traits and qualities are stable, while people with a growth mindset believe that individuals’ personality traits can be developed through learning (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Existing literature suggests that people with a fixed mindset, compared to people with a growth mindset, are more receptive to cues signaling their knowledge and competence (Mathur, Chun, & Maheswaran, 2016). Researchers also found people with a growth mindset are more open to changing states such as innovative branding practice than people with a fixed mindset are (Murphy & Dweck, 2016). As a result, people with a fixed mindset have a higher need for progress cue in a goal pursuit setting (e.g., the remaining time of a task) compared to people with a growth mindset, because they have a higher level of uncertainty toward the goal completion (Mathur, Block, & Yucel-Aybat, 2014). In the other words, people with a fixed mindset need explicit evidence of the traits that the other brand or individual wants to display. Consequently, we propose that people with a fixed mindset (vs. a growth mindset) will respond more favorably to action pictures documenting the exercise with respect to the perceived trustworthiness of the signaler (H1), because they interpret the action picture as a solid evidence of physical exercise that substantiates the
signal of time and effort being invested. In contrast, we predict people with a growth mindset (vs. a fixed mindset) will respond more favorably to a posed selfie picture with respect to the perceived trustworthiness of the signaler (H2), because they embrace the selfie as a confidence display of the signaler’s body, which is a process of self-branding.

Method
Seventy-one undergraduates (69.2% male) participated in a 2 (image type: pose selfie vs. action) × 2 (mindset: fixed vs. growth) between-subjects experiment. Participants were asked to complete an online survey, which included the implicit self-theory measure (Levy et al., 2001) in the first section. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two Instagram profiles, which contained either a posed gym selfie or an action picture. We controlled all other content displayed in the manipulations. Participants evaluated the perceived trustworthiness on three 5-point scales (Asada & Ko, 2016), such as “Untrustworthy-Trustworthy”. These three items were averaged to form a composite perceived trustworthiness score (α=.836). The participants were also asked to report their perception of body image, the level of fitness, and perceived importance of exercise in their self. These variables were used as covariates in the analysis. The hypotheses were tested through an ANCOVA analysis using SPSS 24.

Results
We obtained significant between-subjects interaction effects between the athletic image type and the mindset on the perceived trustworthiness on the signaler (F (1, 64) = 7.65, p < .01).

Further analysis revealed that, as anticipated, when the action picture was present, respondents with a fixed mindset evaluated the signaler more trustworthy than respondents with a growth mindset (M_Fixed = 3.78, M_Growth = 3.05; F (1, 64) = 7.172, p = .010), thereby supporting Hypothesis 1. When the posed selfie was present, respondents with a growth mindset evaluated the signaler more trustworthy than respondents with a fixed mindset (M_Fixed = 3.15, M_Growth = 3.57). However, mean scores did not differ significantly (F (1, 64) = 1.667, p = .153).

Discussion
Echoing the view that social media is a critical tool in sport marketing research (Filo, et al., 2015), the present research shows that mindsets impact how individuals evaluate personal brands on social media. The study shows that people with a fixed mindset prefer social media posts that demonstrate the actual action of activities, which demonstrates the un observed qualities that the signaler tries to convey. While past research has shown that mindsets can influence how observers evaluate brands (Murphy & Dweck, 2016), the current research on the relationship between mindset and athletic images adds to a limited but growing stream of work that examines how sport-related content impacts consumer behavior on social media (e.g., Cunningham & Bright, 2012). This study has implications for both sports organizations and athletes to optimize their online branding strategies – companies can utilize this information for working with appropriate influencers or developing sponsorship strategies, whereas influencers (e.g., athletes) can maximize their social media postings. This preliminary study will provide a foundation for future research regarding the interaction of individual mindset and the practice of self-promotion using sport-related content.