The Influence of Athletes' Social Media Activities on Perceived Brand Image and Fan Behavior

Sangwon Na, Temple University
Thilo Kunkel (Advisor), Temple University

Marketing - Branding (Professional Sport)  Saturday, June 9, 2018
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  1:30 PM
Abstract 2018-352  Room: Sable B

Social media channels, such as Twitter and Instagram, have become popular tools for professional athletes seeking to interact with their fans (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010) and to manage their brand image (Agyemang & Williams, 2016). Athlete-related content is either posted directly on the athlete’s account or posted by other accounts, such as official team, league, or media accounts. In both cases, fans are exposed to content related to the athlete (Pegoraro, 2010). However, there is a gap in understanding the role of the source on how fans perceive the athlete’s brand image. While previous studies mainly focused on examinations of overall branding strategies and the challenges of athlete branding (e.g., Agyemang & Williams, 2016; Hodge & Walker, 2015), investigating the effectiveness of different sources of information has been ignored. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to examine the role of sources in developing athletes’ brand image and influencing fan behavior.

Signaling theory functions as the theoretical framework of this study, as is useful for reducing information asymmetry between the sender and receiver (Spence, 2002; Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011). The sender selects whether and how to communicate with the receivers and the receiver decides how to interpret the information. Depending on the sender's tactics and the receiver’s interpretations, the receiver reacts accordingly. For example, when a professional athlete directly posts a photo which highlights his attractive appearance, some fans may interpret the posting as bragging about his body and develop a negative attitude toward the athlete. However, if the athlete’s fan club posts that photo with tagging the athlete, the information asymmetry may be reduced, and fans react positively. Consequently, signaling theory can explain the relationship between postings from athletes’ social media channels and fans’ interpretation of the postings.

Previous literature from source credibility indicates that media message effectiveness depends on the message creator's perceived credibility (Charbonneau & Garland, 2005). Credible sources effect sport fans’ beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Erdogan, Baker, & Tagg, 2001; Ohanian, 1991; Shank 2002). For example, the main reason that sport fans follow an athlete on Twitter is that the athlete is considered an expert in a sport (Clavio & Kian, 2010), which is an important aspect of source credibility in the field of sport (Koo, Ruihley, & Dittrmore, 2012). Also, regarding a delivery of sport news via Twitter, individuals’ attitude toward a tweet’s source and the credibility of the message creator differently influence the retweeting intention of followers (Boehmer & Tandoc, 2015). Therefore, the following research question guided this study. RQ: How do different sources of the social media posts influence an athlete’s brand image and fans’ online behaviors?

This study will be designed as an online experiment. Respondents will be randomly assigned to five groups exposed to the same content posted by the social media channels of five different sources (i.e., the athlete, his team, a fan club, the league, and a sport content provider). The postings consist of three categories of athletes’ brand image, which highlights the athlete’s athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle based on Arai, Ko, and Kaplanidou’s (2013) brand image classifications. Thus, respondents will be exposed to nine postings (three postings for each brand image). Subsequently, we measure perceived athlete brand image (Arai et al., 2013), level of fandom, and online consumer behaviors, such as the intention to retweet. Data analysis will include descriptive statistics and ANCOVA to compare the brand image among five different groups using SPSS 24.0, and SEM with mediation and moderation procedures to examine the influence of athletes’ social media activities on brand image and fan behavior using Mplus 8.0.

The data collection for the main study that will be presented at the conference is currently ongoing. However, a pilot study (N = 47) has been conducted to measure perceived athlete brand image from two distinct categories: direct posts and indirect posts. Direct posts indicated pictures that were posted by the athlete (n = 24), and indirect posts that are posted by other sources including team, leagues, and fans (n = 23). Both groups were exposed to the same
content on the pictures, but the source varied. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 34, most were male (n = 35; 74.5%), student (n = 35; 74.5%), and between 18-24 years old (n = 44; 93.6%). The result of the t-test indicated that the control group exposed to direct posts from the athlete (M = 5.57, SD = .52) perceived the brand image of marketable lifestyle more positively (t (45) = -2.301, p = .026) compared to the experimental group exposed to indirect posts (M = 5.13, SD = .77). However, the experimental group exposed to indirect posts (M = 5.53, SD = .80) perceived the brand image of athletic performance more positively compared to the control group exposed to direct posts (M = 5.02, SD = .98) although the result of the t-test was not statistically significant (t (45) = 1.957, p = .057). Similarly, the experimental group exposed to indirect posts (M = 4.90, SD = .80) perceived the brand image of attractive appearance more positively compared to the control group exposed to direct posts (M = 4.68, SD = .91) although the results of the t-test was not statistically significant (t (45) = .902, p = .372).

The pilot study yielded interesting results although the study was conducted with a limited sample size (N = 47) and designed with only two different sources (athlete vs. other). The result of the pilot study indicated that fans perceived a more positive image of the athlete when the athlete directly posted photos that highlighted the brand image of marketable lifestyle. The result was in accordance with the previous studies that professional athletes are more willing to share their personal lives to interact with fans and create a positive brand image (Fredeick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2014; Pegoraro, 2010). However, fans exposed to photos directly posted by the athlete had a less favorable perception of the athlete’s brand image of athletic performance and attractive appearance, compared to fans exposed to indirect postings.

Overall, the pilot study justified the proposed main study. The study will contribute to our understanding of signaling theory by explaining the relationship between athletes’ social media postings and fans’ interpretation of the postings. This study also will contribute to understanding source credibility by suggesting that fans prefer original content from a credible source (Boehmer & Tandoc, 2015); and bragging literature by suggesting that fans have a negative attitude toward self-postings that highlight individuals’ abilities (Sekthon, Bickart, Trudel, & Foumier, 2015). Consequently, the study has implications on athlete branding, as it will provide practical guidelines for social media activities of athletes, teams, and sponsors by suggesting which type of brand image should be posted by which source of sport entity.