The Role of Social Media Influencers in Sport Branding: Unfamiliar Brands in Familiar Markets

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As a customer-centric space, social media allows users to generate and contribute content on various platforms in the form of stories, videos, and visuals. Ordinary consumers have the ability to accumulate cultural capital by sharing information with members of their digital communities. With this, the nobodies of yesterday are the somebodies of today. As contributors gain sizeable followers, they develop into social media influencers (SMIs) (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017). Narratives communicated by SMIs are often perceived as compelling, sincere, and reliable by members of their digital community (Lim, Cheah, & Wong, 2017). Particularly, elements of cultural capital such as relatability, accessibility, and intimacy give rise to authority, leading consumers to value SMIs’ recommendations. Hence, SMIs do not rely on formal power (e.g., celebrity athletes) or prestige (e.g., social class), but, rather, on their role as a connection point between peers and ‘what matters’ in their community (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). Three common features characterize SMIs: what one knows (level of expertise), whom one knows (network size) and who one is (traits and values) (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014).

SMIs often respond to the needs and interests of their digital community and their followers consider them both sources and guides (Khamis et al., 2017). As such, SMIs have persuasive power and likely shape audience attitudes (Audrezet et al., 2018). They can disseminate negative or positive messages, possibly affecting a company’s brand (Khamis et al., 2017). In fact, several studies (e.g., Khamis et al., 2017; Lim et al., 2017) reported that SMIs can generate behavioral and attitudinal changes. Some consider SMIs to be competing hostile voices, whereas others recognize them as allies in promoting companies’ brands (Freberg et al., 2011). In mainstream marketing, SMIs are increasingly approached to promote products as brand ambassadors and storytellers (Audrezet et al., 2018).

SMIs in sport management has received limited academic attention. As Abeza, O’Reilly and Seguin (2017) reported, managers in the four major league sports believe that fans are more likely to listen to SMIs who may sway opinions positively or negatively. Therefore, this study examines the role of SMIs in sport teams’ branding by focusing on a franchise that recently entered a marketplace. Three research questions guide the study: RQ1. How do SMIs use their official Twitter account for team-related branding? RQ2. What team-related branding roles do SMIs play when using their official Twitter account? RQ3. What differences and similarities exist amongst SMIs in their use of Twitter for team-related branding?

As a study in-progress, we adopt multi-method qualitative approach: netnography and semi-structured interview. The netnography is based on data gathered from the Twitter accounts of 20 SMIs over a period of six months. SMIs are community members of the Canadian Football League’s Ottawa Redblacks, a franchise that entered the League in 2014 following the folding of two franchises in the same market. Twitter data will be gathered using Open Broadcaster Software. Informed by the first study, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with the identified SMIs to gain a first-hand evidence on the topic.