Examining the National Women’s Soccer League’s Brand Building Through Instagram

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Social media has become a dominant force in the everyday lives of both businesses and consumers. The direct access that social media platforms provide to consumers in particular, has been lauded as a unique touchpoint that has become highly sought after by businesses as a tool to grow brands (Walsh, Clavio, Lovell, & Blaszka, 2013). Instagram, a visual-based social platform, has been found to be particularly suited towards social media brand building (Abeza, Seguin, O’Reilly, & Nzindukiyimana, 2017; Schuh, 2017). This is made evident by the fact that of the roughly 500 million Instagram users, approximately 70% are accounts linked to American businesses, many of which are sport organizations (Lister, 2017). Brand associations and brand personality are interconnected elements that when working symbiotically, render a well-defined organizational brand that can impact consumer loyalty (Wallace, Wilson, & Miloch, 2011). Developing a clearly defined brand is viewed as a vital component of strategic marketing as it helps to differentiate brands from their competitors, thus creating a competitive advantage in the cluttered sporting marketplace (Addis, 2009).

While research has been conducted on brand building on social media, there has been little to no critical evaluation of how women’s professional sport is using Instagram to develop digital brands. This may be an important puzzle piece in elevating women’s professional sport. The purpose of this study was to evaluate how teams within the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) utilize Instagram to communicate their brands. Four NWSL’s teams were selected for analysis based upon their final standings at the conclusion of the 2017 season. The placement of teams was used as selection criteria to allow for comparison of branding based on performance. Individual posts from each respective account served as the units for analyses. This included static posts, images, gifs, links, and videos (n = 1,636). Following Watkins and Lee’s (2016) procedure, a content analysis of each post was conducted. Each post was coded on the brand association scale (Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006), and brand personality dimensions (Aaker, 1997), emergent coding was also undertaken to accommodate those posts not reflected in the a priori frameworks. Coding was undertaken independently and then collaboratively by two of the researchers to enhance trustworthiness (Ballinger, 2006).

The findings revealed that all four teams utilized a similar branding strategy. Over 40% of the posts for each team utilized the brand personality dimension ‘competence’ which was the most commonly employed brand personality in the sample. The most commonly utilized brand association was ‘social interaction’, which was used in more than 30% of all posts examined. Results suggest that the teams within the NWSL have utilized a unique branding approach that differs from other major sport entities that highlight star players most frequently as brand associations (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013; Watkins & Lee, 2016). This approach may provide differentiation in the marketplace or further reinforce the ‘otherness’ of women’s sport. Implications of this branding decision will be explored in relation to the sustainability of the NWSL.