THE IMPACTS OF TWITTER TRANSGRESSIONS ON AN ATHLETE'S BRAND

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Abstract—
This research studied how athletes' Twitter usage impact's fan attitudes toward their brand. Specifically, attitudes toward one's favorite athlete when the athlete tweeted a negative (highly offensive) message (i.e. a Twitter transgression) and when the athlete tweeted a positive (highly inspirational) message were analyzed. Results indicated that attitudes toward the athlete after tweeting a negative message (n = 122) were significantly more negative (M = 6.76) than after tweeting a positive message (n = 142 M= 21.04). Discussion focuses around how an athlete's brand awareness may be impacted by a Twitter transgression and areas for future research are presented.

I. INTRODUCTION

Most discussion of brand management relates to corporations such as Nike or Adidas, however, individual athletes also can be thought of as a brand (Arai et al., 2013). Thus, athletes can take steps to build brand equity by increasing brand awareness and by presenting a positive brand image (Keller, 1993). One way that athletes can boost their brand and engage fans and sponsors is by using the social networking site Twitter.

Top athletes often earn the majority of their money through endorsements, and the rise of social networking sites give athletes one more avenue for attracting these endorsement deals (Pegoraro and Jinnah, 2012). The social networking site Twitter appears to allow an athlete to cultivate his or her brand, and provides the medium through which the athlete can potentially earn endorsement dollars. For example, in 2011, Shaquille O'Neal's media strategists estimated that he could earn one to five million dollars through brand shout-outs on Twitter alone ("$5 million in 140 characters," 2011). This was due to his 4.3 million followers, which has since grown to around 6.3 million in less than a year ("$5 million in 140 characters," 2011; SHAQ).

Although Twitter allows professional athletes to present their own messages, communicate with followers, and potentially earn a significant amount of advertising revenue dollars, the media is filled with a number of stories about athletes making costly mistakes on Twitter. The fact is that these tweets are often unfiltered by marketers or public relation professionals (Pegoraro, 2010). Although Twitter can allow for one to quickly build up a brand, Twitter's simplicity of use and "a lack of social-media training" can lead to missteps that can be detrimental to a brand as well (Holmes, 2011).

Clearly, anecdotal wisdom views tweets as being able to impact an athlete's brand in both negative and positive ways. However, no known studies have empirically tested these claims. The current study seeks to fill this gap by empirically testing the impact athletes' tweets have on attitude perceptions of the athlete. That is, do Twitter transgressions (i.e. offensive tweets) impact attitude perceptions of fans differently than positive tweets? An experiment is undertaken in which attitude perceptions of the athlete under conditions of a positive (inspiring) and negative (offensive) tweet are compared, followed by a discussion of the findings along with managerial implications and areas for future research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Social Networking Site

Social networking sites are among the most popular Internet sites. According to the Pew Research Center, 67% of all Internet users utilize at least one social networking site (Duggan and Brenner, 2013). Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social network sites

as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site" (p. 211). Boyd and Ellison (2007) make a distinction between social network and social networking sites, but as in many other studies, the terms are used interchangeably in this research. The focus of this research is on a particular social networking site—Twitter.

Twitter is a social networking site that has seen tremendous growth since its launch in late 2006 (Java et al, 2006). Specifically, Twitter is often described as a microblogging tool (Java et al, 2006) that allows individuals to read, respond to, and post short 140 character messages. Twitter also allows users to re-tweet, tag a tweet as a favorite, and share links, photos, and videos to potentially millions of individuals. Thus, Twitter allows for a great deal of interactivity between followers, which facilitates user generated content (UGC) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM).

B. Athletes on Twitter

According to Marwick and Boyd (2011) "celebrity practitioners" use Twitter for a variety of reasons including public recognition, fan maintenance, affiliation, intimacy, authenticity, and sincerity. Marwick and Boyd (2011) focus on celebrities, who they refer to as "celebrity practitioners," but the focus of this research is on a particular type of celebrity, the athlete. A couple of recent articles have specifically looked at the Twitter usage of athletes (Hambrick et al, 2011; Pegoraro, 2010). Pegoraro (2010) broke athlete tweets into six categories. The categories are as follow: "relating to personal life," "relating to business life," "relating to their sport," "other sport or athlete reference," "responding to fans," and "pop culture or landmark reference" (Pegoraro, 2010, p. 507). Hambrick et al. (2011) also analyzed athlete tweets identified six categories similar to Pegoraro (2010).

The category labeled "relating to business life" is the category where Pegoraro (2010) places

promotional tweets. In this research, promotional tweets are defined as twitter messages that promote companies, brands, products, services or charities. For example, on January 30, 2013, Los Angeles Angels' star first baseman Albert Pujols tweeted "Check out the new Elite Bat from It looks & feels perfect" (PujolsFive, 2013). This is a prime example of a promotional tweet. Clearly Pujols is promoting Marucci Sports in this tweet.

For decades now, marketers have utilized celebrities (including athletes) as spokesmen for their products. "About 25% of US advertisements employ celebrity endorsers" (Amos et al. 2008; Shimp, 2000). Marketers use celebrities in hopes of transferring meaning from the celebrity to the product being endorsed (Amos et al., 2008). But studies have found that most of the Tweets that athletes are sending do not contain advertisements for products or other types of sponsored messages (Hambrick et al, 2011; Pegoraro, 2010). Pegoraro (2010) speculates that many athlete endorsement deals may not yet give athletes the financial incentive to post these types of tweets. However, sites like sponsoredtweets.com have made it even easier for companies (even small companies) to obtain athlete endorsers on Twitter. For example, through sponsoredtweets.com, Philadelphia Eagles' quarterback Michael Vick can be hired to send a promotional tweet for $1,300 per tweet (Sponsored tweets, n.d.). Many other athletes are also available for differing prices.

C. Athletes As a Brand

As previously mentioned, marketers use celebrities (i.e. athletes) in hopes of transferring meaning from the celebrity to the product being endorsed (Amos et al., 2008). Thus, marketers often attempt to utilize athletes with strong brand equity. Keller (1993) defines brand equity as "the marketing effects uniquely attributable to the brand (p. 1)." Brand equity can occur only in the presence of brand knowledge (Keller, 1993). Keller (1993) also breaks brand knowledge into two components, brand awareness and brand image. Berry (2000), in his service-branding model appears to present the same two concepts giving one a different title, and suggests that brand awareness and brand meaning (brand image) both impact service brand equity.

Thus, brand awareness and brand image represent important concepts within the branding literature, and should play a role in defining an athlete's brand (Keller, 1993).

D. Brand Awareness

Keller (1993) describes brand awareness as relating "to the strength of the brand node or trace in memory, as reflected by consumers' ability to identify the brand under different conditions (Rossiter and Percy, 1987)" (p. 3). Specific to Twitter, often times, an athlete's Twitter transgression (i.e. offensive tweet) will be highly publicized. This in turn places the athlete's name (i.e. brand) in the minds of the populace. That is, the athlete's brand awareness increases.

It can also be argued that an athlete's Twitter transgression may increase the exposure of his or her Twitter account. In a social network like Twitter, each individual is considered a node, while the relationships between nodes are called links (Barabasi, 2010). But why would a Twitter transgression increase the popularity of an athlete's Twitter account? Popularity can be thought of as the fitness of one's Twitter account. Barabasi (2010) states, "fitness is the node's ability to attract links"(p. 9). As previously discussed, individuals may follow athletes for entertainment. It can be argued that the media frenzy and the back and forth arguments between followers and the athlete may be viewed as a form of entertainment to some.
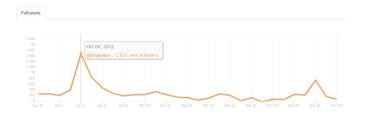
As discussed earlier, Twitter transgressions can negatively impact an athlete's brand. Attention and backlash can come from even simple misunderstandings on Twitter. For example, on October 2nd, 2012, former Rutgers football player Eric LeGrand, tweeted Olympic track star Lolo Jones the following tweet: "Want to race me." Jones responded with her own tweet stating, "get checked for a concussion. Clearly u've been hit in the head … cos u aren't beating a track athlete." What Jones did not realize is that LeGrand was only jesting. Back in 2010, LeGrand was paralyzed in a football game, and has become well known within the sports world. However, Jones did not seem to know this, as she appeared unaware of his career ending injury. Jones later apologized, and LeGrand appeared

unoffended, and even stood up for Jones against her naysayers (Sieczkowski, 2012). However others where not so understanding. But what happened to Jones' Twitter account?

As seen in Figure 1, provided by Wildfire Social Media Monitor, the amount of people following Lolo Jones on Twitter appears to have increased starting October 3rd and peaked October 4th after her October 2nd Twitter transgression. On October 1st, Jones had 208 new followers. This is in stark contrast to her 1,637 new followers on October 4th. October 4th is a couple of days after the original tweet, but this gave time for the story to be circulated throughout the media.

It is apparent that Jones' Twitter blunder did not go unnoticed. Jones later retweeted one understanding follower, "Well at least one person understands. 20K more will send hate tweets" (Sieczkowski, 2012). Thus, Jones' brand awareness seems to have been positively impacted by her Twitter transgression.

Figure 1: *Lolo Jones' New Twitter Followers*

E. Brand Image

Although an athlete's brand awareness may be positively impacted by a Twitter transgression, the same may not be true when it comes to his or her brand image. Keller (1993) defines brand image "as perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (p. 3). Given this definition, it appears that there may be many brand associations that make up brand image. However, this research focuses on brand attitude (i.e. attitude toward the athlete). In discussing Keller's conceptualization of brand image, Faircloth et al. (2001) makes a distinction between brand image and brand attitude:

"Keller views brand image as the perceptual beliefs about a brand's attribute, benefit, and attitude association, which are frequently seen as the basis for an overall evaluation of, or attitude toward, the brand. Thus, brand image, which is a holistic construct formed from a gestalt of all the brand associations related to the brand, is different from brand attitude, which is a consumer's overall evaluation of the brand. Frequently confused with brand image, brand attitude is conceptualized as just one of the various associations used in the formation of the brand image" (p. 60).

Thus, as an early study on athletes and Twitter, this research focuses on brand attitude (i.e. attitude toward the athlete), which is just one attribute that makes up a brand's image. This research seeks to understand how attitudes toward one's favorite athlete differ under conditions of a positive (inspiring) tweet and a negative (offensive) tweet.

As mentioned in the introduction, it is clear that anecdotal wisdom views tweets as having the power to change attitudes. However, it could be argued that one's attitude toward his or her favorite athlete may be strong enough to resist a Twitter transgression, but a recent study in consumer psychology appears to lend support to the former view. Monga and John (2008) found that "negative publicity can diminish positive consumer perceptions of a brand (p. 320)". It seems reasonable to assume that when an athlete commits a Twitter transgression, his or her brand will be associated with the transgression. Thus, a Twitter transgression may negatively impact attitudes toward the athlete. Therefore, H1 follows as:

> H1: Individuals will have more negative attitudes towards their favorite athlete when the athlete posts an offensive tweet, than when the athlete posts an inspiring tweet.

Several research questions are also proposed when comparing attitudes toward one's favorite athlete under the condition of an offensive tweet and an inspiring tweet. Since this is an early study analyzing Twitter and athletes' brands, it would be

of interest to understand how age and gender impact attitudes toward athletes after tweeting.

> RQ 1: How does age impact attitudes toward one's favorite athlete?
> RQ 2: How does gender impact attitudes toward one's favorite athlete?

III. METHODS

In an attempt to lend support to the previously stated hypothesis, an experiment was conducted using two different scenarios involving positive (inspiring) and negative (offensive) tweets. An experimental setting provides the benefits of randomization, and allows for stronger casual arguments (Pedhazur & Shmelkin, 1991, p. 224). Thus, an experimental setting appears to be appropriate for the study.

A. Stimuli Development

Two scenarios were developed for the experiment at hand to allow the researchers to compare attitude perceptions of an athlete under conditions of a positive (inspiring) and negative (offensive) tweet. Therefore, a scenario in which an athlete tweeted a positive (very inspiring) message and a scenario in which an athlete tweeted a negative (highly offensive) message was created.

B. Participants and Procedure

Data was collected from 300 subjects on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Each participant was compensated $0.50 for his or her participation. The use of subjects from Mechanical Turk, an online survey distribution medium is appropriate for the current investigation because of its focus on the online social networking site Twitter. MTurk users work online, and therefore have experience with online sites, and possibly Twitter. Furthermore, Buhrmester et al. (2011) found that "overall, MTurk can be used to obtain high-quality data inexpensively and rapidly" (p. 3).

At the beginning of the survey, participants were asked to type their favorite professional athlete along with the sport he or she plays. Following this,

participants' Twitter usage was measured using a three item Likert scale adapted from Mathwick and Rigdon (2004). Participants were asked to respond to statements (e.g. "I spend several hours a week on Twitter") on a seven-point scale which ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of two scenarios: Positive tweet (inspirational) or Negative tweet (offensive). Participants assigned to the positive tweet (inspirational) scenario read the following: Imagine that athlete X (favorite athlete) "tweets" on Twitter, a comment that you find ***very inspirational***, while participants assigned to the negative tweet (offensive) scenario read the following: Imagine that athlete X (favorite athlete) "tweets" on Twitter, a comment that you find ***highly offensive***.

After viewing the scenario, participants were asked to indicate their attitude toward the athlete with the scenario in mind. Attitude toward the athlete was measured using a four item semantic differential scale adapted from Freling and Forbes (2005). Items were measured on an eight-point bipolar adjective scale (Favorable-Unfavorable, Good-Bad, Likable-Unlikable, Pleasant-Unpleasant). Following this, participants received a manipulation check question, which read: "In the scenario, did the athlete make an inspirational or offensive tweet"? Participants were then asked to respond to several demographic questions.

C. Analysis

A total of 300 participants responded to the survey. During data cleaning, 36 responses were removed due to inaccurate responses (e.g. listing the athlete's name when the survey asked for his or her sport), participants' responding with a non-athlete (e.g. listing Mick Jagger as an athlete), or for participants' failing the manipulation check. This resulted in a total of 264 usable surveys with 142 participants in the inspirational tweet condition and 122 participants in the offensive tweet condition. 180 participants (68.2%) were male while 84 participants (31.8%) were female. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 70 (*M*= 30.01; *SD* = 8.46) with the majority of respondents (51.1%) between 18 and 27.

IV. RESULTS

Using SPSS 19, a bivariate regression analysis was performed prior to testing the hypothesis to determine if Twitter usage significantly impacted attitude toward the favorite athlete following the tweet under investigation. The result of the regression analysis found that Twitter usage did not significantly explain attitudes toward the athlete, Thus, Twitter usage was not utilized as a covariate.

Because Twitter usage did not significantly predict attitude toward the favorite athlete, ANOVA was used to test our stated hypothesis and research questions. Results indicated that type of message the athlete tweeted significantly impacted attitudes toward the athlete (F (1, 262) = 487.07, p = .001, η^2 = .650), supporting our hypothesis. Table 1 show the mean attitude scores across all subjects where higher scores indicate stronger positive attitudes for an inspirational Tweet and stronger negative attitudes for an offensive tweet. Specifically, as seen in Table 1, fans displayed stronger negative attitudes toward an athlete that posted an offensive tweet than the positive attitudes created when the athlete posted an inspirational tweet. The main effects of age and gender on attitudes were found to be insignificant. Table 2 and 3 show that type of tweet had significant impacts on subjects' attitudes towards the athlete.

Table 1
Summary of Study: Group mean scores

Condition	N	M	SD
Inspirational Tweet	142	6.68	3.53
Offensive Tweet	122	21.04	6.76

Table 2
Summary of between subjects ANOVA: Team athlete group

Condition	Dependent variable	F	Sig.	η^2
Type of Tweet	Att. Toward the athlete	379.62	.001*	.643

* p <.01

Table 3
Summary of between subjects ANOVA: Individual athlete group

Condition	Dependent variable	F	Sig.	η^2

Type of Tweet   Att. Toward the athlete   131.25
   .001[*]   .728
* p <.01

V. DISCUSSION

The results of this study found that individuals have more negative attitudes toward their favorite athlete when the athlete posts an offensive tweet, than when the athlete posts an inspiring tweet. Further, Twitter usage did not significantly explain attitudes toward the athlete. Therefore, it appears that the type and manner of information an athlete posts on Twitter can significantly impact the attitudes fans have of that personality.

This discussion will focus on the managerial implications of the current study along with present areas for future research. However, before doing so, it is necessary to state limitations of the current study. The first limitation was the lack of use of the fan identification scale. Future studies should incorporate a fan identification scale with the athlete.

A. Managerial Implications

This study provides some early empirical support in favor of the notion that athletes' Twitter usage can impact their brand. Thus, this finding is important to companies, athletes, and sports organizations. For example, using balance theory, companies use celebrities in hopes of transferring meaning from the celebrity to the product being endorsed (Dalakas & Levin, 2005; Amos et al., 2008). Therefore, companies should be aware of the Twitter usage of their spokespeople. One possible way to protect a sponsor's brand is to review athletes' previous Twitter history to establish risks before signing an endorsement deal with the sport personality.

Athletes must also be aware of the impact that their Tweets may have on their reputation and future endorsement deals. Although, companies may not be eager to sign an athlete with a bad Twitter reputation to an endorsement deal, it is also plausible to foresee companies dropping athlete endorsers for content on Twitter. The athlete must understand that what he or she posts online is enduring, can impact his or her reputation, and may be viewed by numerous people. As discussed in the Lolo Jones example, Twitter transgressions may impact an athlete's brand awareness. Although a Twitter transgression may be publicized and result in the athlete's name being presented to a larger audience, this study found that Twitter transgressions can negatively impact attitudes toward the athlete. Thus, athletes should understand that all publicity might not be beneficial.

Many athletes tweet after or even during games. Therefore, after a player is upset or even during a game where emotions may be high, it may behoove the athlete to let some time pass in order for emotions to die down before tweeting. Although Twitter allows fans more access to athletes' lives, and the appeal to the messages may be due to their raw and unfiltered content, athletes may consider hiring public relations professionals to advise the athlete on properly using the medium to engage the public.

Sports teams and organizations should also be concerned with the Twitter usage of athletes. Often times, the athlete represents the face of the organization. Therefore, what hurts the image of the athlete may very well damage the image of the organization. Although limiting the time when an athlete may tweet (i.e. during a game) is an option for mitigating Twitter transgressions, a better option may be to require athlete's to take a short social media class that discusses cultivating a positive online reputation. At the college level, at least some athletes are already receiving some sort of social media training. However, "50.9% say they've received no social media education/training" (DeShazo, 2013, p.1).

B. Future Research

The current study provides numerous avenues for researchers to continue investigation into the usage of social media by athletes and sports personalities. First, the current study focused on an individual's favorite athlete. Future study should investigate the attitudes an individual has toward a player or personality they dislike or have indifferent feelings toward. Additionally, the current study measured attitude toward the athlete or personality at one moment in time, and attitude toward the athlete was measured directly after participants were exposed to

the scenario. Effects of the scenario may wear off after an extended period of time, therefore, longitudinal studies would be helpful in understanding the impact of athlete tweets on their enduring brands.

Future research should also focus on the impact of a negative tweet on a brand endorsed by the athlete sending the tweet. Although this study found that attitudes toward the athlete are more negative after an offensive tweet, attitudes toward a product endorsed by the same athlete may not be impacted by the tweet. Further, it would be interesting for future research to investigate how negative attitudes toward the athlete or personality after a Twitter transgression are mitigated with an apology. Individuals may also be less impacted by a Twitter transgression if the athlete follows the Tweet with an outstanding athletic performance. That is, fans may be more forgiving if the player helps his or her team to win.

This research discussed Twitter transgressions and operationalized a transgression as a tweet perceived to be highly offensive to the individual reader. Future studies may develop a typology of Twitter transgressions that distinguishes between different types of Twitter transgressions. Individuals may perceive the athlete differently depending upon which transgression was committed.

The current study investigated what impact a negative or offensive tweet sent by an athlete or sport personality can have on fan attitude toward their brand. Results showed that fans developed a more negative attitude toward athletes that sent an offensive tweet than those that sent an inspiring tweet. Investigation into social media carries important practical implications, and the current study adds to the literature in this area.

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