
THE SHIFTING SANDS OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND ELITE SPORT: A CASE STUDY IN HOW TO MANAGE RELATIONSHIPS AND REPUTATIONS

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Abstract

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AIM OF ABSTRACT/PAPER

Social media engagement is changing the relational dynamic between organisations - and individuals - and their publics. This is particularly evident in the world of elite sport where the market value of an elite athlete is measured by their public reputation which is pinned on healthy relationships with stakeholders, such as fellow athletes, team managers, coaches and, importantly, fans (Hopwood, 2010). In fact, social media analysts have attributed much of Twitter's growth to early adopters in the sports world, and as Gibbs and Haynes (2013) have discovered, Twitter is the predominant social media used by athletes, teams, and leagues for directly engaging with their wider publics. As a continually expanding global business, sport has to grapple with the challenges of how to harness this uncontrolled medium to best advantage, particularly in times of crisis. Seitel and Doorley (2012) observe that reputation is an asset that must be managed and that reputation is about identity. For both the sport business organisation and the individual athlete this is an increasingly fundamental truth which should be at the heart of authentic sport public relations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media has changed forever the sports communication paradigm.

Arguably, it has empowered fans to become participants rather than placid observers. Social media platforms breathe life into reputational crises (McLean, 2013) and in the world of elite athletes, who often enjoy a privileged existence beyond the reach of their fans, this is no exception. Sport inherently is a breeding ground for crises, particularly of a reputational nature. Fuelled by social media, transgressions by elite athletes spread like wildfire worldwide. These can range from in-game competitions, inappropriate tweeting about private lives, entering into 'virtual verbal spats' with fans, detractors and fellow athletes to the arguably more sensational admission of active engagement in doping. With access to social media available on a myriad of mobile devices, it takes little time or effort for fans to voice their opinions in real-time. For example Sanderson (2013) analysed Facebook posts regarding a voluntary move by a football coach between teams. Fans of the team the coach departed responded with posts ranging from character assassination, threats and intimidation to rallying support for a future without the coach. Therefore, social media platforms have become valuable tools in uniting a fan base, frequently to defend the reputations of athletes and "build community and promote preferred representations of athletes and sports figures" (Sanderson, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

Using a case study approach our research examines the intriguing - and still evolving - case of professional elite cyclist Lance Armstrong's fall from grace, when in January 2013 he confessed to an audience of millions on the US-based Oprah Winfrey television show that he had a lengthy history of doping, despite years of denial. The case study on Armstrong, a devotee of Twitter, provides an insight into the world of elite sport and the powerful dynamics of social media to champion heroes and demonise those who fall from grace by their own hand. Although Armstrong is a prolific user of social media platforms in order to engage with his fans he chose traditional media through which to "come clean" on his involvement in doping. We argue that Armstrong's choice of Oprah Winfrey to host his "confession" on her national television program in fact alienated many of his legions of fans on social media, where reaction ranged from disbelief to shock. We argue the reason is found in the bonding power of social media to build personal bridges between an elite athlete and their fans, who can be forgiving of transgressions, but that extends only so far. Secondly, we found that Armstrong's failure to apologise without reservation to his fans in his 'confession' intensified social media outrage.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper examines the bond between fans and sport in the context of social media in order to examine how this relationship could foster forgiveness for elite athletes who confess to transgressions. Our research focusses on how the convergence of social and traditional media is impacting the sport/fan relationship. The findings of this

research will be of relevance to anyone with an interest in the business of sport and social media relationship and reputation management within the sport public relations context.

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