ATHLETE PRODUCT ENDORSEMENT AND USE OF TWITTER

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Synopsis:
The practice of using celebrity athletes for product endorsement have been rising over the past decades (Ruihley et al., 2010), where athletes from both team and individual sports endorsed a wide variety of industry products and services (O'Reilly and Braedley, 2008; Ruihley et al., 2010). According to O'Reilly and Braedley (2008), athletes' product endorsement results in numerous benefits including increasing sales, generating brand awareness, and increasing stock prices. Following these and other similar benefits, studies have been conducted to examine the effectiveness of different media endorsement channels such as TV (e.g., O'Reilly & Braedley, 2008) and magazines (e.g., Ruihley et al., 2010). Researchers have also explored the presence of athletes endorsement on Twitter (e.g., Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011; Kassing and Sanderson, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). However, with the ever changing technological environment, assessing the practice of online product endorsement on the athletes own media channel will produce further understanding that has the potential to inform strategy and marketing decisions. Hence, this study explores world top 50 athletes use of their official Twitter account for the purpose of product endorsement.

Abstract:
Research Background: The increased popularity of professional sport has contributed to elevating exceptional athletes to national star status (Stevens, Lathrop, & Bradish, 2003), where these athletes became symbols of athletic excellence and exemplified the ideals of a rising sport culture (Boorstin, 1992). Star athletes, such as Messi, are global celebrities or global brand personalities (Stevens, Lathrop, & Bradish, 2003), where the symbiotic and interdependent relationship between the media and professional sports plays a prominent role in raising athletes to the near mythical status in society (Bruce & Tini, 2008). In turn, marketers use the star players' sport appeal to endorse sport and non-sport products (Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011), and their likeable and trustworthy persona to positively influence consumers' purchase decisions (Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011; O'Reilly & Braedley, 2008; Ruihley, Runyan, & Lear, 2010).

The practice of using celebrity athletes for product endorsement have been rising over the past decades (Ruihley et al., 2010), where athletes from both team and individual sports endorsed a wide variety of industry products and services (O'Reilly and Braedley, 2008; Ruihley et al., 2010). According to O'Reilly and Braedley (2008), athletes' product endorsement results in numerous benefits including increasing sales, generating brand awareness, and increasing stock prices. Following these and other similar benefits, studies have been conducted to examine the effectiveness of different media endorsement channels such as TV (e.g., O'Reilly & Braedley, 2008) and magazines (e.g., Ruihley et al., 2010). Researchers have also explored the presence of athletes endorsement on Twitter (e.g., Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011; Kassing and Sanderson, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). However, with the ever changing technological environment, assessing the practice of online product endorsement on the athletes own media channel will produce further understanding that has the potential to inform strategy and marketing decisions. Hence, this study explores world top 50 athletes use of their official Twitter account for the purpose of product endorsement.

Research questions: The following four research questions guide the study: (i) To what extent do world top athletes use their official Twitter account for product endorsement?, (ii) what common characteristics can be identified among world top athletes in endorsing products and services on their official Twitter page? (iii) what is the preferred type of content (i.e., video, picture, text, audio) used by world top athletes official Twitter account in endorsing products and services?, and (iv) what observable difference can be identified in the use of world top athletes official Twitter account in products and services endorsement (i.e., between the two genders and type of sports)?

Research method: English-speaking athletes with the highest number of social media followers in 10 different sports made up our sample. A total of 50 athletes were identified. Data was accessed via http://www.tweeting-athletes.com/. The sports include Track and field (e.g., Usain Bolt = 3,314,577 followers), MMA (e.g., Georges St-Pierre = 1,083,753), Tennis (e.g., Rafael Nadal = 7,619,690 followers), NHL (e.g., Alex Ovechkin = 985,728 followers), NBA (e.g., LeBron James = 19,671,122 followers), Golf (e.g., Tiger Woods= 4,285,019 followers), MLB (e.g., Nick Swisher = 1,730,041 followers), NFL (Chad OchoCinco Johnson = 3,591,678 followers), Cycling (e.g. Lance Armstrong (ret.) = 3,837,328 followers), Soccer (e.g., Cristiano Ronaldo = 34,285,233 followers). All Tweets and related Twitter usage statics were gathered using NCapture from September 1st to December 30th, 2014. NCapture is an add-on optional feature of NVivo 10 that captures data such as Facebook posts and Twitter feeds (Hart and Taylor, 2013). The data captured was imported from NCapture into NVivo and then exported to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. NCapture also generates numerical data on the number of tweets, number of followers, number of accounts being followed, and number of retweets. Leximancer was used to extract textual data from different types of documents (e.g., Twitter feeds), analyze the data to determine concepts, their relationships as themes, their importance and proximity, and displays the results as a visual concept map (Sotiriadou et al., 2014).

Results. The study will identify the extent to which world top athletes use their official Twitter account for product endorsement, common characteristics in their practices, their preferred type of content, and any observable differences in terms of gender and type of sport. Based on the findings, the researchers will

formulate recommendations for practice. Detailed findings will be presented at EASM.

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