Brand Management in a Niche Sport: An LPGA Golfer’s Use of Instagram

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Though the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) has seen a recent uptick in attendance and television viewership for its major events (WorldGolf, 2015), its product has traditionally lacked stability in comparison to its male counterpart (i.e., Professional Golf Association (PGA Tour)), due in part to meager overall sponsorship support (Lough & Irwin, 2001). A number of LPGA events, such as the Airbus and Reignwood Pine Valley Classics, have been canceled in 2015, much attributed to a dearth of sponsorship sustenance. Furthermore, golf as a whole has been challenged in drawing a wider audience, given its consideration as a niche sport.

According to Greenhalgh and Greenwell (2013), niche sports are those that “don’t receive significant mainstream attention, often referred to as fringe, non-mainstream, emerging, second-tier, or non traditional” (p. 101). As professional niche sports do not inherently come with the mass media appeal of the more prominent sport leagues, they are habitually tasked with finding unique ways to extend brand awareness and generate consumer interest. Branding is essential in activating consumer attitudes toward a product and impacting future consumption behaviors related with the brand (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2014). Products with ample brand salience are more likely to be the recipients of increased consumer loyalty. Given such benefits, products seeking market growth constantly attempt to grow brand equity.

The LPGA has employed a variety of strategies in terms of making its players and the Tour relevant to the media. Former LPGA president, Ty Votaw, unveiled a Five Points of Celebrity marketing plan, stressing player performance, approachability, passion and joy, appearance, and relevance. The Tour has also offered to subsidize the cost for players to obtain a personal brand manager so that athletes may better present themselves as relevant brands (Thomaselli, 2006). Subsequently, golfers have begun using their own strategies to engage their audience by developing social media platforms, which enable a great deal of control over their publicity, including both the frequency and content of the message. For instance, Lexi Thompson has utilized Instagram to share workout and golf lesson videos with her fans. Other more prominent leagues, such as the NBA and NFL are able to rely on the integrated nature of both the traditional media (e.g., TV broadcasts) and the emergence of a social media platform, while the less prominent leagues (e.g., LPGA), are forced to market themselves through a heavier reliance on user-generated content through social media (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, Facebook). Though traditional media is still an important piece of the marketing puzzle, new media communication has emerged as an ideal tool for underrepresented sports or athletes (Clavio & Kian, 2010).

Athletes or brands can utilize their social media platforms to connect with fans in a more relevant way than is possible through the one-way channel of traditional media. Given the LPGA’s status as a niche sport and its lack of mainstream media focus, it seems plausible that players’ own social media platforms may be useful in generating the desired level of publicity by both the athlete and the LPGA as a whole. While research has examined social media’s ability to incite interest among sport fans (Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012), this study aims to examine the way that a niche sport athlete uses social media to manage her brand. The following research questions were used to guide this analysis: RQ1: How has a popular LPGA golfer utilized social media to communicate with fans? RQ2: What aspects of brand management are on display by a popular LPGA golfer’s use of social media?

Natalie Gulbis was the LPGA Rookie of the Year in 2002 but has not performed well in recent years. During the 2015 golf season, Gulbis didn’t make the cut in more than half of her 14 tournament appearances (LPGA, 2015). Despite this unimpressive performance on the golf course, with approximately 238,000 followers on Twitter and 87,100 followers on Instagram, Gulbis is one of the most popular LPGA golfers on social media (Lenzi, 2015). Most of the content on Gulbis’ Twitter includes photos linked from her Instagram account. According to LPGA Senior Director of Social Media Marketing, Tina Barnes-Budd, Instagram is the LPGA’s fastest growing social-media channel (Bae, 2015). Since limited academic attention has been placed on the specific use of Instagram for brand management, this study focused on Natalie Gulbis’ Instagram posts over the course of a year (Aug. 15, 2014-Aug.
15, 2015). A total of 800 photos and captions were analyzed. All photos and captions were copied and pasted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and assigned a unit number.

Data were interpreted using inductive analysis. As such, no preconceived theories were used to influence the interpretation of the data. Rather, this analysis involved multiple examinations of raw data in an attempt to make interpretations of the intent of Gulbis’ use of Instagram. Two coders conducted the analysis. Hence, inter-coder reliability was necessary (Elo & Kyngas, 2007). The coding process involved both coders independently listing their interpretation of each photo and caption without any predetermined themes. Upon first comparison, the coders achieved 79% simple agreement on photo and caption interpretation and 95% simple agreement on theme placement, thus satisfying Neuendorf’s (2002) recommendation of overall bi-coder agreement being no lower than 80%.

A preliminary inspection of the data has revealed eight themes: active brand mention (n=237), passive brand presentation (n=104), travel showcase (n=25), golf and fitness tips (n=19), charitable focus (n=31), health and fitness activity (n=44), role as broadcaster (n=31), and holiday and fan messages (n=25). Posts were also identified as either golf (n=219) or non-golf related photos (n=181).

Results from this study will be discussed relative to the ever-growing research involving social media, brand management, and consumer engagement. Because the LPGA Tour is comprised of over 125 international competitors, results from this study may have global practical value. Sixty-six of the posts provided direct promotion for an LPGA event, which helps to use the individual athlete’s followers to contribute to promotion of the LPGA brand. Additionally, in line with Votaw’s original vision to integrate the golfers’ lives and stories to branding, just under half of the photos posted provided a look into Gulbis’ life outside of golf. As marketers of niche sport products continue to focus on consumer expansion, findings from this study will be relevant to a wide variety of similar organizations for which developing and sustaining valuable consumers is a priority.