Network, Network, Network! Determinants of Athlete Social Media Brand Growth During Events

Nataliya Bredikhina, Temple University
Keshav Gupta, Temple University
Thilo Kunkel (Advisor), Temple University

Marketing - Branding (Professional Sport)
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Session: Branding 1

Brand building and relationship development is important for athletes (Doyle et al., 2020); hence, athletes leverage social media platforms to build and strengthen their personal brands (Kunkel et al., 2020). The size of athletes’ personal brands on social media is measured by follower count (Su et al., 2020) and anecdotal evidence suggests that sport events can accelerate athlete brand growth (e.g., USOC, 2018). However, the factors influencing athlete brand growth during a sport event and the influence of brand-to-brand networking on athlete brands remain underexplored (Su et al., 2020).

In this study, we examine athlete-related (pre-existing social media presence, regularity of posting activity), event-related (event days), and brand networking-related (social media tagging among athletes and by the event, and the presence of star athletes on the team) factors as determinants of athlete brand growth. We also explore the patterns of athlete brand networking on social media during an event to test propositions within the sport brand ecosystem framework (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020).

We employed a mixed-method study with a multiple regression and social network analyses. Data (athletes’ follower count, posting frequency, and usage of tags by athletes and the event) were collected daily from Instagram in the context of an international sporting event in 2019. Data were collected for 13 days (three days of and five days before and after the event) for all 14 participating athletes, resulting in 182 units of observation. We tested the regression model in R using the wild cluster bootstrap-se technique and performed the network analysis in UCINET 6/NetDraw.

Athletes’ following on Instagram grew on average by 22,812.79 (SD=28,147.55) followers and the regression model significantly predicted athlete brand growth (R2=.85). Pre-existing athlete follower count positively impacted brand growth, confirming prior findings by Su et al. (2020). Yet, the impact of posting frequency was not significant, suggesting that for prominent athletes, posting regularity is of minor importance (c.f., Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2020). The event days had no significant impact on athlete brand growth, but being tagged by the event positively impacted athlete brand growth implying that, as a master brand, the event impacted athlete brands (Kunkel et al., 2013). This shows that for athletes to reap the benefits from participating at an event, the event needs to actively promote the athletes through tagging their account. Similarly, being tagged by other athletes and having star teammates with large followings positively influenced athlete brand growth, demonstrating the potential of brand networking (Zhang et al., 2016) for expanding athlete brands and showing that brand alliances with star athletes influence brand growth.

The visualization of the brand network of tagged accounts showed that the observed brand relationships reflected the event brand ecosystem hierarchy, theoretically proposed by Kunkel and Biscaia (2020). These findings indicate the importance of collaborative brand-brand networking within the sport brand ecosystem. Overall, we contribute to sport management literature by extending prior research on athlete brands (Su et al., 2020) through providing insights on factors that stimulate athlete brand growth during an event and deriving useful practical implications.