

TWITTER CAN BE A GOOD REPUTATION MANAGEMENT TOOL

Twitter, a good reputation management tool for sportspeople to help build and sustain reputation.

Abstract

This paper introduces Twitter as a social media tool that has become popular with sportspeople to engage with their fans directly. It demonstrates why it is so popular and how sportspeople use the platform to help build their off-field reputation through various aspects of self-presentation through different types of tweets. It also acknowledges Twitter transgressions where sportspeople have posted reputationally damaging Tweets and finally focusing on how two sportspeople have used Twitter to help sustain and rebuild reputation during and after a scandal. This paper argues that the affordances of Twitter help sportspeople to show various presentations of themselves to help build and sustain reputation.

Reputation management is an important part of a sportsperson's life, idolised by fans for their sporting talent and followed closely both on and off-field. This is more pronounced since social networking sites have given fans access to areas of sportspeople's lives beyond the sports field (Preussler & Kerres, 2013, p.92). This paper argues that when managed well Twitter provides an opportunity for sportspeople to help build and sustain reputation and when necessary help to rebuild reputation during and after a scandal.

Sport is one of the most emotionally invested forms of entertainment that is available to all people. Sportspeople build up strong allegiances from fans through mainly their sports talent but also their off-field presence (Meng et al, 2015, p.200-1). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have significantly impacted the way that sport is being consumed, media created and how teams and sport individuals are connecting with the sports community and fans (Gibbs, 2013, p.15).

TWITTER CAN BE A GOOD REPUTATION MANAGEMENT TOOL

Twitter is a free microblogging platform that allows users to open an account and start posting tweets straight away. This quick and simple method of sharing information allows you to follow other users and their tweets, and vice versa, without seeking permission. Unlike other social media sites this non-reciprocal form of following means that anyone can start following a sportsperson, providing a good opportunity for a sportsperson to start using Twitter as a tool to help build their reputation through self-presentation (Pegoraro, 2010, p.503; Weller et al, 2013 p.6).

Twitter is a hugely popular medium due to its capability of reaching large audiences instantaneously. There are currently 326 million monthly active users (MAUs) on Twitter and 500 million tweets sent each day (Sharma, 2018). Users of Twitter have improved its capability of reach and connecting different networks by the application of @ symbol helping to address and reply to users and the use of #hashtags, linking common areas of interest and easier search functionality (Weller et al, 2013, p.6).

To consider Twitter as a good platform for self-presentation that can help to build and sustain reputation we must first look at how self-presentation is managed. Goffman's theatrical metaphor for self-presentation as a performance proposes the front-stage as performances the audience can observe (Pearson, 2009, para 4-7). Twitter is front-stage with varied audiences and multiple viewpoints. Twitter's fluidity and immediacy of interactivity allows self-presentation to be multi-faceted, tweeting from different persona's; the athlete, humanitarian, brand ambassador, off-field 'ordinary' person, evolving and adapting to external social environments. It is important for a sportsperson to acknowledge this varied audience requiring them to subtly modify their self-presentations yet be cohesive and compliment their offline status (Papacharissi, 2011, p.304).

TWITTER CAN BE A GOOD REPUTATION MANAGEMENT TOOL

Sportspeople were some of the earliest adopters of Twitter to communicate unmediated directly with a wide audience of followers and fans. This self-promotional tool is a big drawcard for sportspeople, seeking to get noticed and gain followers (Preussler & Kerres, 2013, p.94). Being quick and mobile it is an easy platform to use, fitting into a busy lifestyle of training, events, travel and personal life. Messages are short, easy to create, produce and post (Gibbs, 2013, p.66). And the use of multimedia on Twitter further strengthens engagement, Goffman sees these tools as the 'setting' or props for the presentation of self which in turn can enhance reputation if used well (Papacharissi, 2011, p.307). Currently the top male sportsperson on Twitter is Cristiano Ronaldo with 77m followers and the top female, Serena Williams with 10.5m (Cooper, 2019).

Twitter allows content creation to be dynamic, multi-media, and interactive. Social capital is built by interacting with other users and entities within the network through @ to connect, commenting of followers, retweeting and #hashtags, this amplifies the sportsperson through the network increasing exposure, leading to an increase in followers and continuing to build and sustain reputation. Any exposure can attract negative commentary and trolling that could have a detrimental impact on reputation, although this then allows for recourse through another facet of self-presentation (Sanderson, 2013 p.419; Ellison & boyd, p.5-6).

The importance of building reputation through multi-faceted self-presentation and social capital through network reach, helps to create a sportsperson that fans identify with and encourages greater loyalty. These strong advocates are more resistant to negative media and provide positive affirmation and support through crises (Jalonen, H. 2017, p.16-17). Reputation is one way that we recognise the status of sportspeople, it needs to be continually nurtured and sustained by interaction, and never taken for granted. Followers want sportspeople to be engaging, responsive and have something to offer of interest requiring them to strike the balance between protecting their privacy but also sharing enough to engage and draw in their fans (Preussler & Kerres, 2013, p.94, Korzynski & Paniagua, 2016, p.5).

TWITTER CAN BE A GOOD REPUTATION MANAGEMENT TOOL

Sportspeople who build their reputation and personal brand on Twitter may become more marketable and attractive to sponsoring companies looking for a share of the fan audience, increasing exposure of the sponsors brand and vice versa. Cristiano Ronaldo is a good example promoting his association with sponsor Nike “Excited to show you my new Nike Mercurial Superfly 360 LVL UP” boots (C. Ronaldo 30th March 2019). It’s important for sportspeople to continue to have a positive reputation to not jeopardise the sponsors brand. Any negative publicity can result in loss of money to both the sportsperson and associated sponsors (Gibbs, 2013, p.121, Jalonen, 2017, p.17).

The following paragraphs highlight examples of sportspeople’s self-presentation using Twitter aware of the various audiences that they need to present to; fans, media, the industry, activists or marketers. Presenting to fans their reputation as a hard worker with a strong commitment to fitness, training and learning (Sanderson, 2013, p. 425-6). Liverpool FC player Trent Alexander-Arnold, engages with his followers on Twitter with the following “Warming up for the rest of the season @LFC” (T Arnold 13th Feb 2019) and connecting into a wider network of his football club using the @ symbol.

Fan expectations are constant they want to receive first hand news on their idols current status. On 6th February 2019, Rafa Nadal, posted a sequence of tweets “Hi All: I write these words as the end of the season. It has been a complicated year, very good at the tennis level when I have been able to play and at the same time very bad as far as injuries are concerned.” He had over 1000 responses from fans concerned about the injuries, wishing him well and thanking him for not forgetting his fans. He followed up with a tweet thanking all his fans. This interaction on Twitter is a good example of how a sportsperson can sustain reputation by connecting closely with their fans through their sporting career.

Presenting oneself as a humanitarian helps to maintain reputation by tweeting about your affiliation to charitable associations. Usain Bolt uses @ and # to create a connection to the charities he is working with, “I am back at

TWITTER CAN BE A GOOD REPUTATION MANAGEMENT TOOL

@SoccerAid for @Unicef.uk for another year! Don't miss out on the chance to see me play again. Buy your tickets at <http://www.socceraid.org.uk/tickets> and let's defend play for every child #socceraid #UNICEF" (U. Bolt, 27th March 2019).

Sportspeople are role models, reputation on and off field is critical. Besides overt public performances, the more 'back-stage' performance that Goffman describes reflecting an individual's private or family life has become a feature of social media for many sportspeople (Papacharissi, 2011, p.304). This helps them appear more 'real', sustaining and perhaps even boosting reputation. Serena Williams recently tweeted "It completely breaks my heart when I leave the house and Olympia @OlympiaOhanian gets upset and starts crying...." (S. Williams, April 23rd 2019). One of many openly heartfelt tweets, she has used Twitter to show a deeply personal and emotional side, her 'mother' persona. The response was an outpouring from other mothers expressing their understanding through many likes and retweets. This example of engagement shows that they are not just on-field idols but people just like us that we can connect with (Sanderson, 2013 p.426-30).

Twitter affords sportspeople a self-presentation of themselves as newsreporters, for example Shaquille O'Neal announcing his retirement from NBA using a multimedia option via Twitter "I'm retiring Video: <http://bit.ly/kvLtE3> #ShaqRetires" (S. O'Neal, 2nd June 2011). Or providing an alternative opinion to unfavourable media articles, an example of this is golfer John Daly in 2010, taking to Twitter to respond to a journalist's article he did not approve of, encouraging his fans to call the reporter and complain (Sanderson, 2013, p.423). Building reputation from a position of trust as a news disseminator, someone close to the source, provides an alternative lens for followers to review the story, bringing them closer to the sportsperson (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011, p.116).

For a sportsperson, it's important to have built up positive content on social media to help redress future negative sentiment (Mason & Moody, 2014, p.22-23). However there are incidents where sportspeople have posted damaging

TWITTER CAN BE A GOOD REPUTATION MANAGEMENT TOOL

tweets without considering the implications. Australian swimmer, Stephanie Rice tweeted a homophobic slur after Australia beat South Africa in a game of rugby, although she deleted the slur and went on to apologise via Twitter (Associated press, 2010) she lost her Jaguar Corporation sponsorship and her misdemeanor was broadcast globally across all media (Gibbs, 2013, p.122). This is just one example of many Twitter transgressions by sportspeople that have had a negative impact on their reputation, career and proved financially costly. Generally offensive posts are deleted and apologies are issued through Twitter and other forms of media. Twitter has made crisis and reputation management a lot harder to resolve, before social media the concern might be what would appear in the paper the next day, now it is what might be written in a matter of seconds, so response has to be swift and well managed (Bernstein, 2012, p.64).

There are many other instances where sportspeople use Twitter to help sustain and rebuild reputation during and after a scandal. A good example of a notable sports personality who used Twitter both, before, during and after a scandal is Lance Armstrong. Prior to the doping scandal, Armstrong's reputation was well renowned, he'd won seven Tour de France titles, recovered from cancer and started the Livestrong charity. His supporters were widespread from his cycling career and his life beyond cycling, this made his fall from grace even greater.

Armstrong used Twitter as his stage to express a variety of self-presentations aimed at saving face with fans and discrediting his accusers. His response early on in the scandal was denial using Twitter to keep his self-image intact by attacking USADA putting them in a bad light, "My official statement re: @usantidoping's latest witch hunt. [link] unconstitutional" (Hambrick et al, 2015, p.203-4). He also used Twitter as a diversionary tactic focusing on what he was still doing in his sport, reminding fans of what he is actually famous for. Other posts were insights into his personal life using the 'ordinary guy' presentation, aiming to build trust by allowing fans access to those more intimate 'back-stage' areas.

TWITTER CAN BE A GOOD REPUTATION MANAGEMENT TOOL

After the investigation he used Twitter again to combat the negative media coverage, Twitter gave him direct access to a large audience on a personal level in order to retain influence over his followers, utilising the loyalty and equity he had built before the scandal (Hambrick et al, 2015, p. 205-206). Once the findings came out and knowing he'd been exposed his self-presentation was again that of the athlete keeping fit, connecting with fans, and winning back support and trust using images of himself back on the bike.

Although criticism was laid that he did not use Twitter to seek forgiveness or acknowledge wrong-doing after the Oprah Winfrey interview, this didn't seem to have any lasting detrimental effect on his reputation. Today Lance Armstrong is still popular on Twitter focusing on continued fitness, family life, charitable work and supporting the cycling community with frequent commentary. Armstrong had 3.7m followers when the scandal broke and 3.4m today. The fan support and advocacy that he built up prior to the scandal would have been helpful in maintaining some of his reputation even after they found him guilty of doping.

Australian cricketer, David Warner after the ball tampering scandal in late March 2018, used Twitter to show remorse and desire to take responsibility. He posted three tweets following a tearful press conference to explain his position within the process. Then followed up with a tweet on the 5th April "I have today let Cricket Australia know that I fully accept the sanctions imposed on me. I am truly sorry for my actions and will now do everything I can to be a better person, teammate and role model." By using Twitter to present his remorse and acceptance of the sanctions he is able to start rebuilding and repairing the damage to his reputation, this tweet had over 22,000 likes showing fan support for his contrition and further promotion via other forms of news media.

The blurring between personal and public life on Twitter is evident. Interestingly, fans following their hero's on Twitter feel more connected to them by virtue of a more complete impression of the sportspersons identity and life. However, they are also able to separate the two, many fans

TWITTER CAN BE A GOOD REPUTATION MANAGEMENT TOOL

acknowledge that what these sportspeople do in their private life is their own business, as long as they are continuing to compete at the highest level, it doesn't matter about off-field indiscretions, fans will defend them on social media regardless (Johnson, 2011, p.8).

From these two examples it is clear that sportspeople are using Twitter in different ways to repair their image and rebuild reputation. Ideally, the best way to use Twitter for rebuilding reputation is a swift acknowledgment, offering an apology, taking full responsibility and showing remorse, helping rebuild credibility. Presenting a consistent set of messages to their audiences, featuring personal life, charitable and other non-damaging activities helps to prevent alienation of fans. However as Twitter functions to allow varying self-presentations, shifting messages can also work for different audiences (Hambrick et al, p.213-6, Mason & Moody, 2014, p.22).

In conclusion, this paper focused on how sportspeople use Twitter as a reputation management tool. Twitter's appeal due to ease of use, immediacy and fluidity enable sportspeople to manage an impression of themselves via tweets that reflects various self-presentations. These conscious self-presentations help build reputation and social capital by providing the audience with various personas, for example the athlete, humanitarian, mother/father or brand ambassador. Twitter's technological affordance provides a platform to build a large network, through non-reciprocal and non-permission following and connecting via @, retweeting and hashtags, all mechanisms that extend network and reach, encourage interaction, help build support, and further enhance reputation. However, an inappropriate tweet can also risk reputation, so content although appearing to be quick updates, needs to be carefully crafted. And because of the affordances of ease of use, immediacy and network reach the platform can then be used as an ideal tool to help rebuild reputation both during and after a transgression or scandal.

TWITTER CAN BE A GOOD REPUTATION MANAGEMENT TOOL

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TWITTER CAN BE A GOOD REPUTATION MANAGEMENT TOOL

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