

Sports Message

James Cochran

Chris Gerlach

Alyssa Purser

David Sanders

University of Georgia

Abstract

This experiment studies the effects of social media interactions of an individual belonging to an organization and the relationship between that organization and their public. This study takes a closer look at a specific area within this field: the effect social media can have on athletes. We divide our study into three sections: Relational theory; Image Restoration; and Source Credibility. These are integral components in determining the effects of an organization-public relationship regarding social media interactions. Using a posttest only experimental design (N=207), this study delves into what roles relational theory, image restoration, and source credibility play in an organization-public relationship, when that relationship has been damaged.

Introduction

One of the most successful men of today's era, Warren Buffet, was quoted saying, "It takes twenty years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it" (Gaultier-Gaillard & Louisot, 2006, p. 425). It is a simple concept. Yet, one does not need to venture far to find headlines and captivating stories of people and organizations ruining their reputations through press conference faux pas and poorly phrased tweets.

In today's social media society, anyone's voice can be heard in a matter of seconds directly from the person speaking, or rather, typing it (Sanderson, 2011). Imagine how easy is it to stain, or even ruin, an individual's reputation. Does it stop there? Or can this botched reputation spread like a virus throughout an entire organization, impacting the organization's reputation as well?

According to Frost and Cooke (1999), reputation, a synonym for "corporate identity," can be defined as "the image conjured up by the mention of a company's name. It can be positive or negative, strong or weak" (p. 22). Ferguson (1984) stressed the importance of needing to "understand organizations and publics, and the social environment in which they both exist" (Ledingham, 2001, p. 287).

In analyzing the effect of social media use by an individual and the public perception that evolves from that use, the researchers of this study believe that there could be an underlying relationship between the sender and receiver of the message, specifically that of an athlete and their public. Social media sites have bridged the gap between athletes and their fan base, allowing athletes to enter into a more celebrity type role, becoming better known and more popular among society. The presence of sports fans on social media sites "is not lost on sports teams, who use these channels to engage and cultivate relationships with fans" (Sanderson, 2013, p. 490; Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2011). This benefits the athlete by providing them a

fan base that grows at an exponential rate, as well as allowing them a platform for promotional merchandise and appearances, all through maintaining a positive image (Sanderson, 2011).

Establishing and maintaining a positive reputation is essential in an athlete's success, both on and off the field. According to Brazeal (2008), "the 'market value' of an athlete's image hinges on his or her public reputation, which is the domain of the public relations professional" (p. 146). The athletes and the organizations they are tied to rely on this positive image in order to maintain the relationship they have established with their fans. "PR professionals focus on protecting and enhancing that image by building and maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders such as coaches, teammates, organizations, and most importantly, fans" (Brazeal, 2008, p. 146; Hopwood, 2007).

The Internet, especially social media, gives these organizations a way to engage with the public directly (Sweetser, 2010; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; White & Raman, 1999). According to a recent survey, 72% of adults use some type of social networking site (Pew, 2013). Social media usage continues to grow at rapid rates and has become an international phenomenon. The World Wide Web can be considered the first public relations mass medium in that it allows managed communication to flow directly between organizations and mass audiences without the gatekeeping function of other mass media" (White & Raman, 1999, p. 406; Sweetser, 2010, p. 295). The influx of communication possibilities grants the ability for any member of an organization to become an unofficial spokesperson for that organization, whether intentional or not. "Social media have greatly shifted sports media and sports communication, particularly in college sports, because both student-athletes and athletic programs can experience negative consequences stemming from problematic postings" (Sanderson, 2011, p. 493-494).

Social media sites, like Twitter and Facebook, have eliminated the ability for a coach or public relations department to appropriately regulate an athlete's inappropriate behavior online. Although this may seem like common sense to most, the number of deleted tweets and athlete suspensions has done nothing but rise over the past couple of years and the media has captured every moment of it. According to Sanderson (2011), the athletes typically receive traditional media training when dealing with reporters but this is very different from the problem posed by social media sites. Athletic departments have much less control over social media outlets when compared with traditional media outlets (Sanderson, 2011). Sanderson (2011) states that sports organizations "must walk a fine line between athletes' right to expression and organizational interests" (p. 495). The problem is exacerbated by the young age and immaturity of these athletes, as well as their inability to understand their position as a public role model. "The attention of today's media is always drawn towards anything controversial and negative," states Hopwood (2007, p. 295; Fortunato, 2008, p. 119). The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has also started evaluating athletes' social-media profiles to make sure they fall in line with the expected sanctions (Mandel, 2010; Sanderson, 2011). Failing to measure up to these guidelines can cost athletes their eligibility (Sanderson, 2011). This often leads to collegiate universities and athletic organizations trying to avoid negative publicity by covering up scandals. Sweetser (2010) states that previous data have shown that the lack of disclosure by organizations in a social media campaign can hurt the relationship between the organization and the general public. Reputation plays a vital role in developing the organization-public relationship, particularly amongst athletes and their organizational affiliations.

In summary, we believe that the social media interactions of an individual belonging to an organization can have a detrimental effect to not only the individual's reputation, but also the

relationship between the public and the organization that claims him or her. Athletes from all across the board are finding themselves in trouble with their coaches, their organizations, and even at the legal level. College athletes in particular are struggling with this issue, due to being cast into the spotlight so quickly and at such a young age. The apologies that take place after inappropriate content has been posted, then becomes a public matter as opposed to private, due to the excessive growth of mass media (Hearit, 2006; Brazeal, 2008). The researchers further examine the depth of the role social media plays in the organization-public relationship. This study will examine audience perception of an organization when an individual representative of that organization makes a social blunder. This will test our belief that the unfortunate social media actions of one employee can cause reputational damage for an entire company.

Literature Review

Relational Theory

Ferguson (1984) stated that the central focus of studies within public relations should be relationships (Ledingham, 2001). "A relationship is a key component to effective public relations" (Sweetser, 2010, p. 290; Grunig, 1993; Ledingham, 2003). This study adopts that relational view of public relations, functionally, as the "management of organization-public relationships" (Ledingham, 2001, p. 286).

Kelleher's (2009) study showed that people following bloggers representing an organization, feel a strong level of trust and commitment if the organization they represent sustains relational maintenance. Thus, increased communication can lead to stronger organization-public relationships. According to Center and Jackson (1995), "the proper term for the desired outcomes of public relations practice is public relationships. An organization with

effective public relations will attain positive public relationships” (p. 2; Sweetser, 2010). This study intends to examine those relational outcomes further.

Image Restoration

When exploring the tarnishing of reputations, one must also examine the process of image restoration used by public relations departments. Restoring a damaged reputation, specifically of a person or organization that is in the public eye, is a highly analyzed topic of discussion amongst public relations. Injurious behavior will motivate individuals and organizations to devise an image defense in attempt to salvage their name or organization (Brinson & Benoit, 1996; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner). According to Brazeal (2008), “the ‘market value’ of an athlete’s image hinges on his or her public reputation, which is the domain of the public relations professional” (p. 146). It is vital that public relations firms develop a more foolproof strategy in tackling problems, specifically with collegiate athletes. Brazeal (2008) states that “as sports have become a global commodity and the “image value” of athletes has skyrocketed, athlete image management has become an important part of sports PR” (p. 146).

Social media will continue to be a hindrance to public universities, organizations and athletes. Scholarly research in the amalgamation of sports and public relations is rarely tackled but desperately needed. Brazeal (2008) states that “as sports have become a global commodity and the “image value” of athletes has skyrocketed, athlete image management has become an important part of sports PR” (p. 146).

Source Credibility

When examining organization-public relationships, one must examine the source of the information. One important aspect is source credibility. “Credibility refers to the judgments made by a message recipient concerning the believability of a communicator” (Callison, 2001, p.

220). According to O'Keefe (1990), the two most accepted components of communicator credibility are source competence and source trustworthiness (Callison, 2001). Building a positive relationship to attain source credibility is largely determined by the ethical actions taken by public relations practitioners (Bowen, 2004; Sweetser, 2010). A study by Hovland and Weiss (1951) found receiver learning was not overtly affected by high or low source credibility, but opinion change was affected. When comparing opinion change, it was more common for subjects to change towards the stance advocated by someone with high credibility.

The work of Petty and Cacioppo (1986) concluded that source credibility has the ability to alter the effectiveness of a message. A recent study investigating the effectiveness of using the social networking site Twitter in the health communication field found that users discriminated against content based on "trustworthiness" and "expertise," two of the most commonly studied variables in source credibility (Lee & Sundar, 2013).

Research Questions/Hypotheses

RQ1: Can a sports media-based public statement of one athlete or employee affect the organization-public relationship?

RQ2: Does the amount of hours watching sports differ significantly based on gender?

RQ 3: Will participant results vary based on the medium to which they are exposed?

Method

This study implemented a post-test only experiment with a control group, and three other experimental cells, in October of 2013. Only one independent variable was manipulated in this study. The stimulus, an offensive public comment made by the first baseman for the Atlanta Braves, Freddie Freeman, was manipulated by being presented on two different media (See Table 1). This variable was chosen because of the high level of control that the researchers could exert

in the experiment (Sweetser, 2010). The statement was presented as both a Twitter post from the athlete's personal Twitter account and as a newspaper headline in a major local newspaper.

Therefore, the independent variable was the medium in which the stimulus was presented. The study examined the following dependent relationships: 1) attitude change toward the player 2) attitude change towards the major league organization 3) attitude change based on the credibility of the attributed source.

The population was defined as college students at a top public university with a close proximity to Turner Field, home of the Atlanta Braves. Major League Baseball was chosen as the lens through which to view the organization-public relationship, as the MLB has very rigorous and supportive fan bases. This allowed the researchers to thoroughly test the deterioration aspect of a positive relationship. A post-test quasi experimental design was chosen because it allows adequate control of exposure to the stimuli and manipulation of variables (Frey, Botan, Kreps, 2000, p. 171). By granting the researchers explicit control of variable manipulation, the experimental design offers the potential to establish causality (Iyengar, 2002, p. 2).

Though experimental design does come with its potential threats to internal and external validity and reliability, many of these threats were suppressed or eliminated due to this particular experiment's procedures and design. The participants were allowed to partake in the experiment anywhere with an Internet connection strengthening the ecological external validity. The participants will not be examined or observed by researchers in a structured lab setting reducing the impact of the Hawthorne Effect, Mundane Realism, and observation bias. Also, participants could only take the post-test once, so the study was not affected by sensitization. Lastly, the students will not be forced to take it in a lab with other participants greatly reducing any negative effects caused from interparticipant bias. Therefore, due to this design, the experiment had

relatively high levels of both internal and external validity and reliability.

Manipulation checks were conducted to ensure participants were aware of the stimuli to which they were exposed. These manipulation checks were conducted via Pearson's chi square analysis. Participants correctly identified the source of the method to which they were exposed. Results were acceptable based on our chi square test ($\chi^2=51.77, 9 df p \leq .01$). The people in the Tweet cell overwhelmingly believed and acknowledged that they saw a tweet from an athlete. The Newspaper cell produced slightly lower results as 60% of these people thought they saw something from a newspaper about an athlete's statement. In the Control group, 62.5% believe they did not read a statement from the athlete. In the Tweet and Newspaper you can see there kind of mixed in here and 68% believe they read the statement from the athlete himself.

Design

The participants were randomly assigned to one of four possible cells. The first is the control group, who only received the post-test measuring attitude towards both the athlete and the Major League Organization to which the athlete belongs. The second group was the Tweet Cell, who was exposed to the stimulus presented as a Twitter post, and then they were guided to the post-test. The third group was the Newspaper Cell, who was exposed to the stimulus presented as a headline in a major local newspaper and then guided to the post-test. The two previous cells will help determine if source credibility plays an important role in organization-public relationship. The last cell was the Tweet-Newspaper cell, exposed to the stimulus presented as both a Twitter post and a newspaper headline and then guided to the post-test. This allowed the researchers to measure potential relationship deterioration while also examining the medium credibility for potential causality.

Sample and Participants

For the sake of convenience and practicality, the undergraduate students at a large, southeastern university were selected to be the population for this study. This population was chosen because of college students' high use of social media (Pew Internet & American Life, 2009). College students are often avid sports fans as well, which is another reason they were chosen. Sweetser (2010) used a similar sample when researching the effects of an online viral BMW video based on college students high use of social media content.

The research participants for this study stated that they used the Internet an average of 4.78 hours per day ($SD = 4.20$). The participants were composed of undergraduates ($M = 67.2$) and graduate students ($M = 32.6$).

A simple random sample was used among this population and the instrument was designed and hosted on Qualtrics online system, with a link to the experiment was sent via email to the selected students' university email accounts. Two hundred and seven people responded to the email and participated in the experiment ($N=207$).

Instrument

Guaranteed their responses would remain confidential, all participants were administered a post-test quasi experiment containing 29 items on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Responses ranged from *1=strongly disagree* to *5=strongly agree*. There were 25 questions used from a relationship maintenance scale and has been proven valid in previous research by Kelleher (2009) and Sweetser (2010). The relationship maintenance scale measures aspects such as the organization/player's openness to dialogue and organizational responsibility as perceived by the public.

The next 4 questions were used from a credibility scale validated in studies such as the one by Johnson and Kaye (2010) examining blogs and credibility. This scale measures the source's believability, accuracy, fairness, and depth as perceived by the public. The post-test also included several demographic-based questions as well as questions assessing the participants' prior attitude toward the athlete, his organization, and the sport in which they play.

Table 1. Relational Maintenance Indices

Index	Team Relationship (TREL)		Athlete Relationship (AREL)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Index 1: Relationship Index- Communicative Relational Commitment and Responsiveness				
Team Relationship Index Alpha: .228; Athlete Relationship Index Alpha: .208				
Communicate a desire to build a relationship with visitors	3.30	.994	3.08	.852
Discuss the nature of the organization	3.20	.948	3.15	.819
Accept visitor feedback comments	3.34	.823	3.11	.827
Accept visitor email	3.24	.819	3.07	.728
Positively addresses complaints or queries	2.98	.884	2.92	.892
Stress commitment to visitors	3.26	1.016	3.10	.836
Imply a long-term relationship with visitors	3.14	1.057	3.07	.846
Emphasize relationship quality	3.09	1.009	3.02	.915
Demonstrates a commitment to maintaining relationship with visitors	3.40	1.018	3.20	.887
Invite visitors into conversation	3.16	.881	3.15	.947
Index 2: Relationship Index- Responsibility				
Team Relationship Index Alpha: .024; Athlete Relationship Index Alpha: .005				
Use a positive/optimistic tone	3.33	1.165	3.08	1.091
Expresses cheer and optimism about the future	3.51	1.086	3.18	1.051
Perform organizational responsibilities	3.46	.939	3.26	.882
Admit mistakes	3.08	.978	3.00	.902
Provide prompt/uncritical feedback when addressing criticism	2.88	.961	2.89	.958
Directly addresses organizational	3.21	.902	3.15	.856

responsibilities				
Treat visitors as humans	3.63	.949	3.45	.974
Provide connections to competitors	3.00	.831	3.15	.883
Use a sense of humor in communication	3.43	1.052	3.54	.938
Index 3: Conversational Human Voice				
Team Relationship Index Alpha: .991; Athlete Relationship Index Alpha: .475				
Communicate in conversational style	3.40	.947	3.55	1.032
Are interesting in communication	3.34	.976	3.38	1.026
Communicate in a human voice	3.68	.932	3.72	.985
Are open to dialog	3.25	.907	3.25	.930

Table 2. Credibility

Index	Team Credibility (TCRED)		Athlete Credibility (TCRED)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Believability	3.44	.879	3.44	.989
Accuracy	3.30	.940	3.22	1.072
Fairness	3.25	.996	3.07	1.179
Depth	3.02	1.152	3.02	1.181

Results

This experiment broke participants down into four cells, three experimental and one control (N=207). The cells were broken down as follows: Tweet Cell (n=47), Newspaper Cell (n=47), Newspaper + Tweet Cell (n=53), Control (n=60).

Of the sample used in this study, 74.2% were female, while 25.8% of respondents were male. The educational classification descriptors are as follows: 32.6% of participants classified themselves as graduate students; 16.8% classified themselves seniors; 18.9% classified themselves as juniors; 12.6% classified themselves as sophomores; and 18.9% of participants classified themselves as freshmen. The sports specific descriptors labeled 74.3% (valid percent) of the participants as sports fans and 45.0% (valid percent) as baseball fans. The valid percent for those participants that reported they follow athletes on Twitter was 30.3% and the valid percent for those participants that said they follow sports teams on Twitter was 31.2%.

Researchers saw a low number of hours spent per week watching sports programs, $m=4.59$ and $sd=5.13$. The results for hours spent watching baseball every week were even lower, $m=1.44$ and $sd=2.81$.

Although the researchers would have preferred a higher number of sports viewers, plausible explanation for low viewership might be the greater number of female participants. Perhaps if more males participated in the study, there would have been a larger sports fans presence within the study.

Scales examined relationships and credibility on both the behalf of athlete and his respective team. The same scales were implemented to measure responses for both athlete and team. The scales returned a Cronbach's Alpha rating of .93, serving as a reliable measure based on previous research by Sweetser (2010). The inspiration article called for a factor analysis using principal access factoring with verimax rotation. A factor analysis was then completed on the two groups to further prepare the data, but the factor analysis method had to be abandoned in favor on indices.

RQ1: Can the public statement of one individual belonging to an organization affect the organization-public relationship?

The main affects were observed in a one way Anova looking at the difference in responsibility relationship index for athletes. A two-part post hoc analysis reveals statistically significant differences between the tweet and newspaper cell. The tweet cell returned significantly lower results than the newspaper and control cells. This displays the damaging of the athlete's perceived responsibility due to the delivered stimulus.

Researchers conducted a one way ANOVA for each index. TREL_2, measuring perceived responsibility of the Atlanta Braves, returned a statistically significant result, ($F=3.26$,

$p < .05$). A Tukey post-hoc test was conducted to observe the specific differences between groups. The Tweet cells and control cells showed stark differences in participant response (M difference=5.06, $p < .05$). This supports the hypothesis that the statement of one individual can damage the organization-public relationship.

RQ2: Does the amount of hours watching sports differ significantly based on gender?

Researchers conducted a T-test for genders on the amount of hours of sports watched per week. This resulted in statistically significant results (male $M=7.38$ $SD=7.365$, female $M=4.13$ $SD=4.241$). The study also revealed statistically significant results in the amount of hours participants watched baseball per week (male $M=2.88$ $SD= 4.426$, female $M=1.22$ $SD=2.175$). The researchers saw significant results also in the amount of Atlanta Braves Baseball games watched in 2013 (male $M=25.38$ $SD=41.754$, female $M= 9.87$ $SD=21.010$).

RQ 3: Will participant results vary based on the medium to which they are exposed?

As mentioned previously, the only indices returning statistically significant results were A_Rel2 and T_Rel2. One-way ANOVAs were run on all indices, but results were consistent between the tweet cell and newspaper cell. However, A_Rel2 did return significant results when considering the medium to which the audience was exposed. Interactive effects for A_Rel2 were measured using a Tukey posthoc test. The test revealed $md=5.63$, $sig < .05$ between the newspaper cells and tweet cells. For T_Rel2, the between group interactions effects were insignificant for newspaper cell and tweet cell. The results indicate the medium did cause a difference in participant reaction, but the difference was not consistent across all indices.

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to determine the ability of an individual statement to damage an organization public-relationship. While only two indices returned statistically significant

results, the research still provides information relevant to the public relations field. Demographic research reported males watched sports overwhelmingly more than females did, providing researchers with sufficient information to answer RQ1. This provides information for researchers based on the overall demographics of sports fans, as not only did males reportedly watch significantly more hours of sports per week, a significant more number of males also considered themselves baseball fans. As the study was conducted in a city with a reputable sports history, the researchers expected females to consume sports at a higher level and for more of the female respondents to consider themselves sports fans. This demonstrates that even in a city with an emphasis on athletic teams, sports consumption remains heavily biased towards the male gender. In the college town that the research was conducted the university population is predominately female. This helps explain the gender ratio for the study.

The next research question (RQ 2) aimed to investigate the relationship of the individual and the organization when an individual member of the organization makes a socially unacceptable statement. Results displayed that the participants did not drastically alter their perception of the organization based on the actions of the individual. However, individuals did report poorer perceptions of responsibility for both the athlete and the individual. This provides crucial information for the field of public relations. The study shows that individuals do not have the power to completely destroy an organization-public relationship with one ill-advised statement. However, the individual *does* have the power to have a negative impact on the organization's perceived responsibility. As the individual acts irresponsibly, the participant shifts a portion of the blame onto the shoulders of the organization.

The third research question (RQ 3) is based on audience responses to different mediums. There is a different response from audiences based on mediums. When exposed to a newspaper

article and tweet the audience responded differently to the two mediums. However, there was inconsistency across the two indices. Responsibility was the only difference in response across the indices. This could mean that audiences associate tweets with personal responsibility. Fans are not as quick to judge a team based on a tweet versus an athlete.

The researchers recommend future studies be conducted to further examine this issue. This study may have suffered from participants either holding a minimal knowledge of or caring minimally for sports. A lack of interest could have been responsible for the lack of attitude change. Researchers should also investigate the ability for an individual's statement to damage the organization-public relationship when the public is comprised of "super fans," or individuals who hold the organization in very high esteem. This will allow researchers to investigate whether one individual can damage the organization-public relationship when the individual has a greater amount of personal investment or reliability with the organization. The researchers also recommend replicating this study in the corporate sector, with a corporation as the organization in question.

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