The Influence of Social Networks on E-Reputation: How Sportspersons Manage the Relationship with Their Online Community

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ABSTRACT

With the increased importance of the Internet and the use of social media, new opportunities and challenges emerge to manage the relationship with audiences and online communities. While the professional world already acknowledged such dynamics, further analysis is needed in the academic scene. A survey conducted in the sports setting shows that the perception of social networks influences athletes’ e-reputation. However, the motives for following athletes online have no influence on their e-reputation. Finally, the results highlight that e-reputation is not affected by negative content on the internet. This research has both academic and managerial contributions regarding online reputation and social media.

Keywords: E-Reputation, Online Communities, Online Reputation, Social Media, Sport

INTRODUCTION

It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently. - Warren Buffet

During the 2012 London Olympic Games, several athletes were banned from the competition because of their misbehavior on the Internet. On another note, soccer players such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Kaka respectively have 15 and 14 million followers on Twitter. The tennis player Rafael Nadal has 3.6 million followers and the sprinter Usain Bolt has 2.5 million. The retirement of Sir Alex Ferguson is the third most tweeted event after the reelection of Barack Obama and the resignation of Pope Benedict. Sport events do not only occur on stadiums but also on the virtual sphere. While athletes represent real business opportunities – sponsorship agreement can reach tens of millions of dollars – a video on Youtube, a picture on Facebook or a tweet can ruin the reputation of such sportspersons. However, one still can

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wonder whether or not what athletes say online influences their e-reputation.

So far, few studies have analyzed the concept of e-reputation (Chun & Davies, 2001), and fewer articles have investigated the extent to which social media influence the reputation online (Castellano & Dutot, 2013). Hence, it seems crucial to understand the perception of fans regarding the online reputation of their favorite athletes and how such sportspersons manage their relationship with their community through social media in general and social networks more specifically. The aim of this study is twofold: (1) investigate the perception of online communities of sportspersons’ e-reputation, and (2) understand the factors that might affect such perception. Therefore our research question is: Which factors influence the perception of athletes’ e-reputation?

Hereafter, we briefly present the theoretical background and the empirical setting. Then, we display and discuss the main finding of a study conducted in the French context. We conclude with the contributions, limits and avenues for future research.

**Theoretical Background**

In order to better understand e-reputation and its perception on social networks, we first need to define these terms. Such concepts have been widely used in the professional world. However, clarification is needed on academic level.

**From Social Media to Social Networks**

Social media represent the production, consumption and sharing of information through social interaction mostly on the Internet (Castellano & Dutot, 2013). Therefore, the growing importance of the internet and of social networks has many consequences. For instance, from marketing perspective, social media have a great impact on consumer-to-consumer communications (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). In management, Kaplan & Haelein (2010) emphasize the opportunities and benefits for decision makers deriving from the use of social media, especially social networks such as Facebook or Twitter. For example, the use of blogs or virtual teams positively influences the collaborative projects and ultimately the performance of the firm. Finally, the technology-based dimension has been investigated in previous works, such as quality content on the web (ex: Agistein et al., 2008).

Among social media, we can find social networks, which are usually “web sites where users can subscribe and create a profile that represents their virtual identity”. Social networks are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) build a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd and Ellison, 2007: 211). In general, users can share messages, links, videos, pictures, or even games with other members from the same network. All users create a community, and the content is multi-directional. The main social networks are either generalist (Myspace, Facebook, Orkut, Hi5, or Friendster) or specialized (based on hobbies, religion, gender, etc.). They can also be professional (LinkedIn, Viadeo). Social networks represent half of the time spent online, and 85% of the 11-59 years old are present on social networks. Through social media, consumers and other participants are “utilizing platforms to create, share, modify and discuss Internet content” (Kietzmann, et al., 2011: 241).

On another note, social media and social networks also represent challenges that firms need to take into account. First, because many forms of user-generated contents emerged on the Internet, the credibility of the information shared on social networks is questioned (Castillo et al., 2011). Second, an overload of information flourished on social media, which makes it more difficult for followers to find the right information in the right social network (Bian et al., 2008). Finally, managers and decisions makers are not aware to the full extent of the influence of social networks on the firm’s survival and on their sales because Internet users can use social networks as media to create, share or modify content on the Internet (Kietzmann et al., 2011).
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