

Brand Management in a Niche Sport: A Case Study of An LPGA Golfer's Use of Instagram

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Abstract

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. The purpose of this case study was to examine a year's worth of a Ladies Professional Golf Association golfer's (i.e., Natalie Gulbis) Instagram posts as they relate to brand management. A total of 400 photos and their captions were analyzed inductively, which resulted in the emergence of three primary categories (athletic expertise, community outreach, and travel) with six subsequent themes. Photos were also tagged as being either golf (n = 219) or non-golf related (n = 181). These themes are discussed as they relate to Gulbis' brand management, as well as the impact her posts could have on the LPGA, sponsors, and other niche sport participants.

Introduction

The Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) has seen a recent uptick in attendance for its major events (WorldGolf, 2015), though 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, were canceled in 2015, much attributed to a dearth of sponsorship sustenance. Television viewership appears to be on a downward trend, as well. Though the Golf Channel has augmented the production of LPGA tournament coverage, viewership has not had a corresponding increase (Baron, 2015). In fact, LPGA television ratings were down a reported 40% in 2015 from the previous year (Bohannon, 2015). Furthermore, golf in general has been challenged to draw a wider audience, in comparison to its mainstream counterparts in North America, most notably, the National Football League (NFL), National Basketball Association (NBA), Major League Baseball (MLB), and National Hockey League (NHL; SBRnet, 2015).

While the PGA Tour certainly receives mainstream media attention, with coverage on the Golf Channel and its CBS network contract, the LPGA can be considered a niche sport, with respect to attendance, viewership, sponsorship, and media coverage (Greenhalgh, Simmons, Hambrick, & Greenwell, 2011). 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). To illustrate, the LPGA, per Cooky, Messner, and Hextrum (2013), received a mere .3% of total sports coverage, a clear indication of its niche status.

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. The more prominent professional entities, like the

NBA or the NFL, are able to rely on the integrated nature of both traditional media (e.g., TV broadcasts) and the emergence of social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, Facebook), while the less prominent leagues, like the LPGA, are forced to market themselves through a heavier reliance on user-generated content delivered through personal social media accounts. Though traditional media is still an important piece of the marketing puzzle, new media communication has emerged as an ideal tool for sports or athletes who receive less coverage (Clavio & Kian, 2010).

Thus, effectively utilizing new media is vital for niche sport athletes who compete on the LPGA Tour. The organization appears to recognize such and has employed a variety of strategies to generate brand awareness. Former president Ty Votaw unveiled what was deemed a “Five Points of Celebrity” marketing plan, stressing player performance, approachability, passion and joy, appearance, and relevance (Wolter, 2010). His goal at the time was to make Tour players relevant, both on and off the course. The Tour has even offered to subsidize the cost for players to obtain a personal brand manager in an effort to boost individual and sport marketability (Thomaselli, 2006). Subsequently, golfers have used their own strategies to engage audiences by developing new media platforms, which enable a great deal of control over their publicity, including both the frequency and content of the message.

For instance, LPGA star Michelle Wie engages with fans on a variety of social media platforms, including Instagram and Snapchat. Content on these sites ranges from specific promotion of sponsors to posts about food and friends in Wie’s life outside of golf. In general, through social media, athletes have the power to establish their brands using not only their athletic credibility, but also by developing a persona on and off the playing field (Sanderson, 2011). Such goal-directed behaviors certainly fall in line with Votaw’s vision.

Social media is also a valuable platform to connect with younger audiences (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Nonetheless, the fans who engage with the LPGA on Facebook and Twitter range between the ages of 35 and 55 (Bae, 2015). As such, the Tour has also indicated a desire to engage with a younger audience through improved use of platforms like Instagram, considering that the younger demographic represents a target for the league’s continued growth (Gregg, 2014). Furthermore, Instagram has become the fastest growing social media platform, compliments of such younger demographics, as approximately 53% of its users range between the age of 18 and 29 (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). Conjointly, Tina Barnes-Bud, senior director of social media marketing for the LPGA, claimed that Instagram was the LPGA’s fastest growing social-media channel (Bae, 2015).

Given social media’s ability to stimulate brand awareness to niche products, the purpose of this case study was to explore an LPGA golfer’s use of Instagram, a social networking platform that has recently seen a boost in popularity with young people (Salomon, 2013). Golfer Natalie Gulbis was selected as a case to examine for this study, due to her status as one of the most popular athletes on the LPGA Tour. Gulbis was the LPGA Rookie of the Year in 2002 and reached a ranking as high as the top-20, but her on-course performance has declined over the last decade. During the 2015 season, Gulbis failed to make the cut in more than half of her 14 tournament appearances (LPGA, 2015). She often gains the opportunity to compete in tournaments based on sponsors’ exemptions. This means that, instead of qualifying for events based on score and performance, Gulbis is invited to play in tournaments due to the attention or intrigue that her celebrity status can draw to the event. Ideally, her participation can increase the number of spectators watching the event, both live and on the broadcast, which is ultimately beneficial for both Gulbis, as well as the LPGA sponsors and media partners.

As of late 2016, Gulbis is ranked No. 616 on the Rolex LPGA World Rankings, yet with approximately 252,000 followers on Twitter and 136,000 followers on Instagram, she is one of the most popular LPGA golfers on social media (see Table 1). Most of the content on Gulbis' Twitter profile includes photos linked from her Instagram account, which further illustrates the relevance of Instagram as a social networking platform. Social media enables Gulbis to extend her celebrity status beyond her appearances on the course, further boosting her relevance, but also promoting increased exposure for her sponsors. Therefore, the following sections will explore the value of utilizing social media as a sport-marketing tool, along with the benefits of celebrity endorsements, particularly from athletes.

Table 1: *LPGA Instagram Followers*

Golfers	World Ranking	Number of Instagram followers
Michelle Wie	152	244,000
Lexi Thompson	4	191,000
Natalie Gulbis	616	136,000
Paula Creamer	82	115,000
Lydia Ko	1	87,500

Social media & sport marketing

Social media has become an increasingly valuable platform for the sport industry. Organizations have used it in numerous ways, including to connect with fans, generate product awareness, and augment website traffic (Newman, Peck, Harris, & Wilhide, 2013). Furthermore, its low cost and viral engagement capabilities allow it to be a viable podium to spur increased organizational consumption (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2014).

Similar to providing sponsors with a worldwide reach through athlete on-course sponsorship, social media has also given athletes a platform to reach fans globally (Kotler, 2011), a feature that makes it unique from traditional advertising. This is also a desirable characteristic for the LPGA and its sponsors, who operate within an international league focus. Given the LPGA's status as a niche sport, it seems plausible that players' own social media platforms may be useful in generating the desired level of publicity for both the athlete and the LPGA as a whole. This publicity can help leverage endorsement deals for the athletes, and leverage current sponsors and media rights deals with the LPGA.

Athletes have been known to use social networking sites for their benefits, particularly to enhance their own brand recognition and star appeal, both inside and outside of their profession (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). According to Pegoraro (2010), "the new transparency offered by social media allows athletes to give fans a glimpse behind the celebrity curtain and really see how their sports heroes live" (p. 504). In fact, Hambrick and colleagues (2010) found direct communication with both fans and other athletes to be the most popular usage of Twitter for athletes. It has been suggested that communication with other athletes in a public forum may represent an intentional decision to provide fans with an opportunity to witness unfiltered player-to-player dialogue (Hambrick et al., 2010).

This type of behavior relates to a concept of Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, which indicates that individuals engage in different types of behaviors in a clear attempt to foster a positive image. These types of behaviors are referred to as front and backstage presentations, to which people tend to communicate as if they are performers in a show (Goffman, 1959). According to Smith and Sanderson (2015), "with frontstage performances, one is typically very guarded and cautious of the 'self' that they are presenting, whereas with backstage performances, one is generally less scripted and perhaps less filtered with the 'self' that is presented" (p. 343). These insights into the backstage of an athlete's life can help generate positive impressions from fans who get to know the athlete off the court.

Previous content analyses involving the self-presentation of PGA Tour golfers and professional tennis players on Twitter have exhibited similar results. Hull (2014) focused on tweets during the Masters golf tournament, while Lebel & Danylchuk (2012) used tennis' U.S. Open as a setting. Both studies found conversation with fans and other players to be the most prevalent use of Twitter. Behind the scenes "scoop," meaning information and insight about the golfer's life outside of typical media exposure, represented the second-most common theme in both studies. Together, these studies highlight the ability for social media to present the athlete as relevant and interesting outside of competition, and expanding the emphasis to the athletes as humans.

Nevertheless, scholars have also noted gender differences with regard to athlete branding on social media, particularly in the context of backstage presentations and niche sport representation. Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) found female tennis players to be more likely than males to use Twitter for brand management. Likewise, Coche (2014) found that female tennis players and golfers were more likely to publicize career achievements in their Twitter profile bios, while men appeared to focus on non-field related information, such as religion and family.

Recent work has examined Instagram for gender comparisons amongst athletes. Smith and Sanderson (2015) found that females were more likely to engage in touch behavior and be seen in indelicate poses. Neither men nor women, consisting of both niche and non-niche sports, appeared to use the platform to display content involving athletic competition. On the contrary, Guerin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) focused on Olympic athlete Instagram use and engagement. The athletes represented the following sports: diving, gymnastics, swimming, and track and field, all of which would be deemed niche sports. In general, photos involving one's personal life were found to be the most prevalent. However, when comparing the two sexes, men were more likely to showcase photos amidst competition, while females were more likely to be in non-sport settings. Furthermore, Guerin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) noted that females were more likely to appear in their posts (non-athletic), suggesting that women were less likely to rely solely on game competition as a mechanism to enhance their brand. In relation to Goffman's theory of self-presentation, this provides additional evidence to suggest that social media is a viable platform for backstage presentation, as the public is customarily exposed to their athletic performance (front stage).

Interestingly enough, though social media would appear to provide a worthwhile outlet for athletes to generate increased exposure for their sponsors, support for such behavior has been minimal, at best. Hambrick and colleagues (2010) analyzed general Twitter usage from athletes of a variety of sport leagues (NBA, MLB, WNBA, NFL, MLS, golf, auto racing, minor league baseball, other) and found just 5% of tweets to be promotional. Hambrick and Mahoney (2011) looked specifically at Twitter usage of sport stars Lance Armstrong and Serena Williams and

found that promotional materials comprised just 12% of their tweets. Even surrounding the Masters Tournament, one of golf's most popular events, in a sport that relies heavily on sponsorship involvement, Hull (2014) found that only 10% of player tweets during the 2013 event had a sponsorship connection.

While recent research has focused on Instagram (Guerin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015), the majority of sport management social media research has primarily examined the use of Twitter and Facebook. In fact, an encompassing review of social media scholarship in sport management noted that Instagram has not received enough attention in recent years (Abeza, O'Reilly, Seguin, & Nzindukiyimana, 2015). To that extent, scholars have called for more athlete and social media research outside of Twitter (Coche, 2014). Though similarities appear to exist amongst professional athletes' use of Twitter (Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011; Hull, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010), given that photos and videos are the staples of Instagram, it is reasonable to surmise that different uses may emerge.

While other researchers have examined social media's ability to incite interest among sport fans (Clavio & Walsh, 2013) or how athletes have used social media (i.e., Twitter) for image boosting purposes (Hambrick, Frederick, & Sanderson, 2015) this study aimed to examine the way that a popular athlete within a niche sport (i.e., Natalie Gulbis) uses Instagram to establish her brand and provide value to her sponsors. Unlike traditional media, which covers primarily mainstream sport, on social media, the athletes themselves are in control of the messaging. Instagram allows athletes to control their message and therefore manage their brand independently from traditional media headlines. Hence, the following research question is proposed:

RQ1: How does a professional niche sport athlete (Natalie Gulbis) use Instagram?

Celebrity endorsement

Celebrities have traditionally been viable candidates for product endorsement contracts (Boyd & Shank, 2004). Famous people are perceived as strong endorsers because their connection to a product in and of itself incites public interest due to their popularity (Premeaux, 2006). To that extent, companies continually strive to associate themselves with an individual that invokes ample public connection (Carlson & Donovan, 2008). Clearly, professional athletes, due to their status, fit such prerequisite. While celebrities have the ability to generate awareness, their association with a product can impact consumers' attitudes toward a brand and consumption behaviors (Boyd & Shank, 2004).

Considerable work has claimed that effective endorsing, which relies on persuasive power, is often the product of ample perceived credibility, comprised of facets such as attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness (Till & Busler, 2000). In the context of the impact of celebrity spokespersons' influence on purchase intentions, Ohanian (1991) found perceived endorser expertise to be the most salient characteristic. This lends to a belief that an athlete would likely be regarded as a legitimate expert when vouching for products used for sport-related benefits. Additionally, the more successful an athlete is, the more likely they will be perceived as an expert, and thus be considered a successful endorser (Stone, Joseph, & Jones, 2003). These ideas have been reflected by a concept known as the match-up hypothesis (Kamins, 1990; Till & Busler, 2000). In essence, consumers are more likely to be persuaded if sport celebrities can claim the product as an indication for their success, as the brand is linked to the endorser (Till & Busler, 2000). Within that context, it is reasonable to surmise that Michael Jordan's endorsements of Nike and Gatorade were much more successful than that of his cologne release. These claims were experimentally supported by Till and Busler (2000), who found that

an athlete (as opposed to an actor) endorsing an energy bar resulted in significantly higher attitudes toward the product brand. In fact, athletes have been found to be the most prevalent type of celebrity endorser, more so than music artists or movie stars (Carlson & Donovan, 2008). In aggregate, companies spent approximately \$836 million on athlete endorsements in 2015, with tennis star Roger Federer the highest paid at roughly \$58 million (McCarthy, 2015).

Professional golfers rely heavily on earnings collected off the course through endorsement contracts, licensing fees, speaking engagements, and golf course architecture, among other things, to supplement their on-course winnings. Many of the top-earning golfers make more income off the course than they do from tournament winnings. In 2015, for example, Rory McIlroy earned \$9,468,190 on the golf course, while he earned another \$37,500,000 off the course (Money flows up, 2015). With a dozen LPGA wins, and two Player of the Year awards in the last three years, Stacy Lewis was the highest earning female golfer in 2015, coming in as third on the LPGA money list with \$1,893,423 on-course earnings, while earning another \$3,900,000 off the golf course (Money flows up, 2015).

As Jang, Ko, Kim, and Jeong (2015) noted, golfers are desirable athletes for brands to target for endorsement contracts for a number of reasons. First, golfers, especially the more successful ones, are exposed on site and on television for more than five hours per day of play. While on the course, they act as “human billboards” with logos from their sponsors lining their hat, shirt, bag, and shoes (Jang et al., 2015, p. 413). Sponsors choosing professional golfers as endorsers of their products also stand to gain from the generally higher income earning fans that tune in to watch professional golf. Lastly, the fact that professional golf events are played around the world helps sponsors seeking extended reach the opportunity to gain exposure from a global audience (Jang et al., 2015). Nevertheless, research has yet to examine how a platform like Instagram, which has mass allure and predominately relies on visual appeal, could be used as a complement to a golfer seeking to showcase her sponsors. A range of sponsors like TaylorMade/adidas, Lexus, Pure Silk, and MGM Grand are currently partnered with Gulbis. Given the importance of these endorsement deals for golfers, particularly female golfers, who earn less mainstream media attention, the following research question guided the second portion of the analysis:

RQ2: How does a niche sport athlete (Natalie Gulbis) use Instagram to provide exposure to her sponsors?

Methods

To explore the role that Instagram plays in the presentation and promotion of a niche sport athlete, this study utilized a content analysis methodology to explore Gulbis' Instagram posts over the course of a year (August 15, 2014–August 15, 2015). A year was selected as the sampling frame to ensure that the most recent golf season and off-season were included for analysis at the time of data analysis. Content analysis is a frequently used form of social science investigative inquiry to analyze media content (Krippendorff, 2004). It allows researchers to take data, be it qualitative or quantitative, and draw inferences via segmented categories and themes. Per Grbich (2010), content analyses are quite valuable research tools because “the addition of some thematic codes derived from mining down much deeper into the documentation can provide other levels of interpretation and theorizing and a more complete picture of what is happening” (p. 123). By analyzing and categorizing specific themes across the set of Instagram posts, researchers can develop a stronger perspective in understanding an emerging form of goal-directed social media behavior.

Data collection and analysis

Photos and captions associated with each post from Gulbis' verified Instagram account over the course of a year were documented using screenshots. A total of 400 points of analysis (photos and captions) were included for analyses. Data were interpreted using inductive analysis, meaning no preconceived theories were used to influence the interpretation of the data (Merriam, 2009). According to Elo and Kyngäs (2007), inductive approaches are appropriate if the phenomenon is still maturing. Furthermore, "it is very flexible, and there is no simple, 'right' way of doing it" (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007, p. 113). This recommendation coincides with the current project, given the lack of previous research specifically exploring Instagram as a tool to provide exposure for athletes as a brand management tool.

This analysis involved multiple examinations of raw data in an attempt to make interpretations about the intent of Gulbis' use of Instagram. Two coders independently listed their interpretation of each photo and caption without any predetermined themes. Inter-coder reliability was then evaluated to test the consensus between both coders (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Upon first comparison, the coders achieved 79% simple agreement on photo and caption interpretation and 95.4% simple agreement on theme placement, thus satisfying Neuendorf's (2002) recommendation of overall bi-coder agreement being no lower than 80%. Furthermore, to account for any errors or the effect of mere chance in bi-coder agreement, a Cohen's Kappa test was performed. The Kappa calculation of .944 ($p < .001$) indicated that the overall agreement between the two coders was robust (Kvalseth, 1989). Once the codes were agreed upon, both researchers assigned the codes to themes they felt best reflected the codes. Again, researchers discussed any differences of code placement, and the final six themes in their respective three categories were formed.

Results

Given the relative infancy of research aimed at understanding Instagram use for brand management, the first research question was intentionally broad and sought to explain how a niche sport athlete, golfer Natalie Gulbis, uses Instagram. An analysis of the year's worth of Instagram posts resulted in the emergence of three primary categories and six themes. As a general breakdown, Instagram posts included 55% golf-related ($n = 219$) and 45% non-golf related posts ($n = 181$). Golf-related posts came in a variety of formats, both professional and casual. Some were professional action shots like the one seen in Figure 1 ("Thank you to all the fans and volunteers for this weeks @lpga_tour event in Dallas!! Love playing here"), while others were videos of Gulbis working on a part of her swing on the driving range like Figure 2 ("Post round practice @lpga_tour #lottechampionship"). Non-golf related posts were divided into themes such as health and fitness, fan messages, charity focus, and travel references. These posts provided insight into Gulbis' life outside of her time spent practicing or playing golf.

To answer the first research question, the categories emergent across the year of Gulbis' Instagram posts included demonstration of the following: athletic expertise ($n = 319$), community outreach ($n = 56$), and travel ($n = 25$). An example from each of the categories and their respective themes can be seen in Table 2. The following section will provide examples of each of the major themes.

Table 2: *Theme references*

Themes	Number of References	Examples
Golf Related	219	Figure 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
Non-golf related	181	Figure 9, 10, 11, 12, 13
Athletic Expertise	319	
Role as a Golfer	247	Figure 1, 2, 5, 6, 7
Health and Fitness	44	Figure 3, 4
Commentator	31	Figure 8
Community Outreach	56	
Fan messages	25	Figure 9
Charity Focus	31	Figure 10, 11
Travel References	25	Figure 12, 13
Active Brand Mention	237	Figure 14
Passive Brand Mention	104	Figure 15

Athletic expertise

Posts where Gulbis was deemed to be reinforcing her role as an expert or credible source on being a professional athlete were categorized in the athletic expertise category ($n = 319$). This was the most dominant category apparent throughout the year of posts. The themes for this athletic expertise included her role as a golfer, health and fitness, and role as a commentator.

The first theme within the athletic expertise theme was role as a golfer ($n = 247$), which included posts that were distinct references to Gulbis golfing in LPGA Tour events, as well as other posts, including pictures and videos of Gulbis practicing and playing golf. For Gulbis to maintain relevance as an LPGA golfer, Instagram enables her to provide fans with updates while competing, and to provide additional exposure to the LPGA Tour in the hopes of strengthening its brand. One of the photos Gulbis posted prior to participating in the Evian Open in France pictured her holding the trophy from when she won the event in 2007 (Figure 5). This post is an example of Gulbis reminding followers of her relevance on Tour, despite her declining performance on the course. In one of the Tour-related posts, Gulbis was able to provide fans with live updates about her upcoming tee time so that interested fans can tune in (see Figure 6 “Last practice before round one of the #MeijerLpga event starts. I tee off at 12:45 tomorrow”).

Gulbis also posted more general content of herself working on her golf game through the use of both videos and photos. Figure 7 provides an example of her providing fans with a specific drill that she uses to work on her swing (“Practice session in Korea. Two part drill I do this drill daily to help with my wrist set and position at the top. @lpga_tour #korea”).

The health and fitness theme ($n = 44$) provided fans the opportunity to see how Gulbis remains physically fit to compete as a professional athlete. These posts ranged from action shots of Gulbis pursuing one of her non-golf hobbies, paddle boarding (see Figure 3 “Hard to believe it's November here. We went on a 2 hour paddle. Went along the coast and golf course. ✱”), to a view of Gulbis in the gym doing a lunge, or even preparing to do yoga with her husband (see Figure 4 “Hubby doesn't look as excited as I am for yoga time!!”).

In addition to promoting her expertise in playing golf and being physically fit, Gulbis also posted ($n = 31$) photos about her expertise as a golf broadcaster with both *Sirius XM* radio and *Fox Sports*. One post, for example, expressed Gulbis' excitement to take part in covering the men's U.S. Open (see Figure 8 “So much fun working for @foxsports #usopen following Phil, Bubba and Angel”).

Community outreach

Another recurring idea over the year of Instagram posts was that of community outreach, which was comprised of themes such as fan messages ($n = 25$) and charity focus ($n = 31$). Fan messages reflected Gulbis' various forms of outreach specifically directed to Instagram followers. These posts were generally on display during holidays, like Easter, Christmas, and Memorial Day (see Figure 9 “Thank you to the brave men and women who continue to fight for our freedoms”). These messages did not include a direct sponsor or golf reference, but instead were fairly generic holiday references.

Gulbis, however, did, at times, mix sponsor or brand messaging with her community outreach posts, generally to benefit a charity. An example here in Figure 10, Gulbis captioned her post:

@Fitbit challenge this week. Benefiting the @bgca of Atlantic City. How many steps do you think I will take during a day. Including a tournament round of golf. I will be trying to take extra steps so Horizon Blue Cross can donate more \$\$ to the kids.

Gulbis tagged and promoted FitBit in the post, but its focus was to raise money for the Boys and Girls Club (BGC) of Atlantic City. The BGC is a charity that Gulbis posts about frequently. She even has her own BGC that she raises money for in Las Vegas, where she lives during much of the year. Figure 11 shows a picture of Gulbis at her local BCG with the caption: “At my NG [Natalie Gulbis] boys and girls club today we are making Mother's Day cards. And braiding hair.” The posts were occasionally golf-related, for instance when Gulbis provided tutelage to children on the driving range. For the most part, though, they largely showcased non-golf related activities with kids. This is another area of Gulbis' career in which she is able to establish roots and relevance beyond her performance on the golf course to stimulate a sustaining and positive reputation.

Travel

The travel category ($n = 25$) emerged with a mixture of posts related with traveling to the next LPGA event (Figure 12 “Vegas, Orlando now New Jersey. @spg golf event today!! Few more days in the States then to Asia for a few @lpga_tour events”). Other posts reflected travels during off-weeks (see Figure 13 “Last dinner in Mexico!!! Such an incredible spot!! Beach, views golf, snorkeling, food, spa, hotel @stregispuntamita. Can't wait to come back!”).

Brand exposure

Beyond a general look at Gulbis' Instagram use, the second research question explored the ways in which Gulbis provided exposure to her sponsors through her Instagram posts. In 59% ($n = 237$) of Instagram captions, Gulbis provided active brand mentions to 34 different brands. A brand reference was placed in the active brand reference category when the brand was specifically tagged or mentioned in the caption of the photo.

Meanwhile, a passive brand mention included clear placement of a brand's logo, without specifically tagging the brand in the photo caption. An active brand mention, for example, is seen in Figure 14 "Thanks @rsm913 and @ahill2585 for my new sweet @adidasoriginals watches. Love! #adidaswatch." While this post is overtly promoting the watch, Gulbis also provided ample passive brand exposure ($n = 104$) on Instagram. For instance, she was seen wearing adidas golf and fitness clothes and running shoes, but did not tag the respective brand in the caption. Taylor Made also received a great deal of passive exposure ($n = 77$), via Gulbis' bag, hat, or clothes logo placement (see Figure 15). Likewise, because Lexus has a logo on Gulbis' golf hat, most golf-related photos include a reference for Lexus. While some celebrities specifically tag brands and then use an "ad" hashtag or clear denotation that the brand promotion is paid, Gulbis used a mixture of active and passive brand messaging while posting about another topic, like the other themes in this study (e.g., athletic expertise), without overtly tagging that the post was paid for or an advertisement.

Discussion

Social media is an emergent topic of interest for researchers and practitioners alike, as it has been adopted as an important tool for athletes and sport organizations to interact and market themselves to the public (Hutchins, 2014). Abeza et al. (2015) have noted the continued need for research that examines social media tools beyond the well-documented platforms like Twitter and Facebook, which currently dominate the sport social media literature. Instagram, specifically, is a social marketing tool that has not yet been thoroughly researched with respect to athlete use and brand management, especially for those seeking increased exposure and engagement with fans.

Unlike previous work that found social media sites like Twitter were used scarcely from a promotional standpoint (Hambrick et al., 2010; Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011; Hull, 2014), this case study of Gulbis indicated that Instagram can serve as a strong platform for the display of athletic marketing. In fact, when only 5% of tweets were found to be promotional, Hambrick et al. (2010) noted that social media was not being used to the fullest extent by professional athletes. On the contrary, Gulbis' messages appeared to be less predicated on fan interaction, but increasingly brand-directed, be it her sponsors or the LPGA Tour. Of the 400 posts and captions analyzed, 341 contained some degree of brand mention, with 237 of them perceived as "actively" promoted.

Simply put, in a sport where traditional media coverage is sparse, Gulbis appears to have done a reputable job of providing value to her sponsors by integrating products and brand references in more than half of her Instagram posts over the course of a year. However, it should be noted that it is unclear whether the stark shift in promotional material is due to Gulbis being a golfer, in a sport where endorsements are so integral to financial success, or whether the visual nature of

Instagram serves well as a platform to provide exposure for sponsor's logos or brand names in the captions.

While the 136,000 followers of Gulbis' account are certainly not as substantial as those associated with mainstream sports, it is reasonable to suggest that her followers are a targeted group who may perceive the active sponsor mentions as natural and less sales-oriented. Though it is unclear as to the specific impact that Gulbis' Instagram posts have had on the sponsoring companies, be it financial or reputational, Gulbis provides ample references to her primary sponsors. This is important, as consumers' awareness and perceptions of a product are the foundation of brand management (Braunstein & Ross, 2010). Specifically, scholars have touted the following benefits of strong brand equity: robust merchandising prospects, augmented corporate partnership enthusiasm, and increased loyalty during times of economic or performance decline (Mullin et al., 2014). However, others have argued, brand equity is obsolete without product awareness (Braunstein & Ross, 2010; Mullin et al., 2014). In simple terms, product awareness is a necessary starting point for the evolution of brand equity and eventual ability to induce consumption intentions (Finlay, Trafimow, & Villareal, 2002).

Upon generating product awareness, it is also essential to demonstrate product benefits as a way to incite consumer attachment. To that extent, Grisaffe and Nguyen (2011) found effective marketing features and individually produced benefits to be two vital antecedents toward establishing brand attachment. It is reasonable to suggest that Gulbis' propensity to use sponsored products for golf tutorial videos would be an effective marketing feature through a social media platform, while stressing individually-produced benefits. Hence, Instagram allows Gulbis to market directly to an interested audience in her followers. The dynamic visual capabilities of Instagram, specializing in photo and video sharing (Hu, Manikonda, & Kambhampati, 2014), also allow her to effectively demonstrate benefits of using sponsored products.

Furthermore, Gulbis appears to showcase her brands in a way that does not come across as a paid advertisement, but rather through "tags" or photographs with brands while she is actually using them in her daily life. This authenticity is something that is difficult to convey in traditional advertising (e.g., TV commercial). Such visual demonstration of how she utilizes certain products in her profession may also further showcase authenticity when endorsing a product, as opposed to simply assuming the audience trusts her verbal claims of its effectiveness. In fact, a meta-analysis on celebrity endorser and advertising success research found trustworthiness to have the second-highest effect size on endorsement effectiveness, more so than variables such as expertise, attractiveness, likeability, and performance (Amos, Holmes, & Stratton, 2008). Consequentially, prospective consumers can see the connection between Gulbis (i.e., the endorser) and the products she uses as a *professional* golfer. This could be useful for Gulbis' sponsors; since scholars have also touted the effectiveness of the consumer believing the endorser is an expert (Cunningham, Fink, & Kenix, 2008; Ohanian, 1991). The themes that emerged from the first research question provide insight into the areas in which Gulbis may be perceived as a credible source (e.g., fitness, golf, travel).

Instagram also provides Gulbis with the opportunity to clarify the relationship that she has with golf and fitness brands, in particular with her video tutorials, furthering the effectiveness of her promotion of golf and fitness-related brands. In a recent study exploring the ways in which Olympians used Instagram, Guerin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) found that athletes were not taking advantage of presenting themselves competing in their sport. Gulbis, on the other hand, did seem to display a good balance of Instagram posts capturing her practice and competition,

during her workouts, and of her life outside of golf. These posts grant fans a form of behind-the-scenes access (Sanderson, 2013) that is rarely provided through traditional media and further establishes Gulbis' role as a golfer.

These findings may be indicative of Instagram's ability to promulgate different forms of athlete social media motives, in comparison to Facebook and Twitter. Similar to this study, Smith and Sanderson (2015)'s analysis of athletes' use of Instagram found endorsement representation to be a major theme within analyzed posts. As indicated in the literature review, while endorsements are an integral component of many athletes' earning potential, they are especially important for golfers who rely not on secured salaries, since course paychecks fluctuate based on performances. In the 2014 golf season, Gulbis earned just \$20,447 on Tour playing in 35 events (Official money, 2015). The cost just to attend these 35 events would likely outweigh the revenue earned if there were no supplemental income accrued through sponsorship and endorsement deals. This is an important consideration for golfers, as golf is unique in comparison to mainstream sports, in which teams pay for a player's travel costs.

Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014) suggested that athletes can enhance their brand image by focusing on athletic talents, attractiveness, and overall marketability. Gulbis integrated each of these components with her sponsors' products. In all, almost half of the posted photos provided a look into Gulbis' life outside of golf, which may also help to connect with followers on topics beyond the golf course alone. The fact that Instagram is such a visual platform, focused on photo and video uploads, makes it especially useful for athletes, like Gulbis, who are deemed attractive. Gulbis has been named one of the "most beautiful women in golf" (Marksbury, 2014), appeared in the 2012 SI Swimsuit edition wearing body paint, and is generally known for her sex appeal. It is therefore understandable that she would gravitate toward a platform that focused on photos of her to leverage this part herself and of her brand, and may serve as an influence to future athletes generally perceived to have good looks. Furthermore, according to Ohanian (1991), the most effective endorsers are able to add attractiveness to the package of expertise and trustworthiness.

In line with Votaw's original vision to integrate the golfers' lives and stories with branding, the themes that emerged from the analysis indicate that Gulbis uses her Instagram account to provide fans with insight into her life, both on and off the golf course. Gulbis presented herself as a recognized golfer, but also as a wife, and an individual who pursues fitness and philanthropy, in addition to having hobbies (e.g. paddle boarding). This appears to be a direct attempt to allow fans the opportunity to identify with the human side of Gulbis, as opposed to the distant celebrity. This is especially valuable, given their celebrity status, and represents a platform to which fans, in essence, receive exclusive and intimate access. Through the showcasing of the grueling golf travel schedule, Gulbis gave fans a glimpse of the less-than-glamorous aspect of being a professional athlete. However, by demonstrating that Gulbis has relevance outside of golf, it is also reasonable to suggest that her rather lackluster performance on the golf course may have a smaller impact on her viability as a product endorser.

From a personal branding standpoint, providing insights into life on and off the golf course, Gulbis may appeal to a broader range of potential sponsors who can tie their brand to Gulbis, as a credible and trustworthy endorser for more than just professional golf-related brands (Till & Busler, 2000). As previously noted, Gulbis is not a top contender on the golf course. While she has performed well in the past, she is currently ranked internationally as 616th among LPGA golfers. While it is possible that she improves her on-course performance from one event to the next, the posts throughout the year that were not related with her skills on the golf course can

be a strategic move to show fans and specifically sponsors that her relevance extends beyond on-course performance. Posts such as those in which she expresses excitement to be in the broadcasting role, for example, may clarify her interest and abilities to pursue both radio and TV broadcasting roles in the future. This can help to maintain and grow sponsorship deals in the future without the single pressure of performing on the course to be valuable to future sponsors.

Future research and limitations

Given that research on the uses of Instagram in the sport industry is in its relative infancy, there are plenty of avenues to direct future research efforts. While the focus of this study was exploring Natalie Gulbis' approach to using Instagram and how that provided exposure for her sponsors, future research could further analyze the ways in which the LPGA and its various events benefit from Gulbis' social media successes. In addition to bolstering Gulbis' personal off-the-course brand, golf can benefit from this exposure, as media contracts have become an increasingly vital form of revenue generation for sport entities (Ejiochi, 2014). When an athlete's personal brand is strong, the organizations, sponsors, and fans surrounding that athlete can benefit (Parmentier & Ficsher, 2012). For a sport that lacks mainstream branding, Gulbis' Instagram efforts may not only benefit her career, but the LPGA can unquestionably reap similar benefits through enhanced television ratings and radio discussion.

To extend this study's understanding of the role that social media, and specifically Instagram plays in personal branding for a niche sport athlete, researchers could solicit feedback from followers of, in this case, Gulbis' Instagram account. This feedback could be collected with two separate goals in mind. First, feedback from Instagram followers could be analyzed from a sponsor's perspective to measure outcomes related with other brands' exposure from her account throughout the year. This could include awareness and recall of specific sponsors, as well as their purchase intentions toward these brands.

Similarly, feedback from Gulbis' official sponsors would be useful in determining the value they perceive to derive from Gulbis' use of Instagram to promote their brands. To develop an understanding of the monetary value that Gulbis and other athletes provide their sponsors via social media channels like Instagram, a quantitative formula could be applied to brand mentions and endorsements. In relation to Gulbis being able to demonstrate her own value as a brand, followers' engagement with each of the themes could be evaluated to inform the direction that her account should continue to be utilized. The effectiveness of Gulbis' individual posts could be measured, in small part, by analyzing the comments and number of likes each post collected to evaluate trends in the types of content followers respond to most and with positive sentiment.

Another direction for future research could focus on a comparison of Gulbis' Instagram account to other LPGA golfers, both those who are highly-ranked and those who have a higher celebrity status to determine whether themes exist across LPGA golfers with regard to endorsement awareness and viability. Athletes from other niche sports could also be examined to explore whether similar themes exist in maintaining relevance and strengthening the brand outside of their sport.

Limitations from this research are that the Instagram posts were only evaluated over the course of a single year, from one LPGA golfer, and thus may not lack generalizability across all niche sports. Within that context, larger trends may exist as sponsorships and performance fluctuate over time. A second limitation is that the data used to answer the research questions about brand management are only from the perspective of what was seen on the Instagram account,

and include no triangulation from Gulbis and her management team, or from the perspective of the sponsor. This lack of collaboration is in large part due to the confidentiality agreement that Gulbis has signed on all of her sponsorship deals, but future research could benefit from an evaluation and talk of strategy connecting the content posted on Instagram and other brand management decisions.

Results from this study may have global practical value due to the fact that the LPGA Tour is heavily comprised of international competitors. Instagram is accessible in nearly all parts of the world and is controlled by the athlete (or their brand managers). Golfers worldwide can engage in social media efforts to promote their brand, without the reliance on any traditional media sources that may reduce an athlete's ability to promote themselves and their sponsors. Similarly, fans from around the world can follow their favorite athlete without needing local news and media coverage to be the gatekeeper of information. As marketers of niche sport products continue to focus on consumer expansion, findings from this study are relevant to a wide variety of similar organizations for which developing and sustaining valuable consumers is a priority.

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List of Figures



Figure 1. Professionally Captured Role as a Golfer

Captioned: "Thank you to all the fans and volunteers for this weeks @lpga_tour event in Dallas!! Love playing here"



Figure 2. Role as a Golfer Video

Captioned: "Post round practice @lpga_tour #lottechampionship"



Figure 3. Paddle Boarding for Health and Fitness

Captioned: "Hard to believe it's November here. We went on a 2 hour paddle. Went along the coast and golf course.

*"

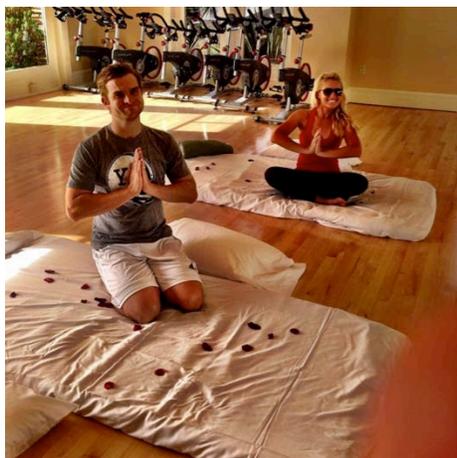


Figure 4. Health and Fitness with Husband

Captioned: "Hubby doesn't look as excited as I am for yoga time!!"

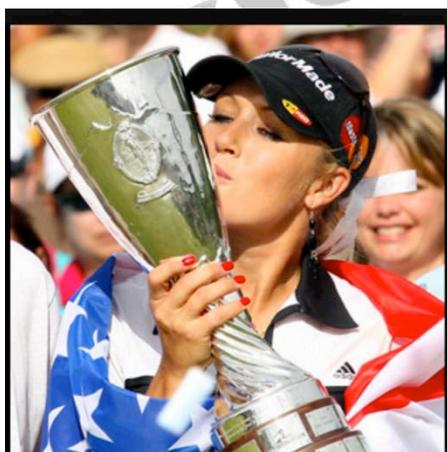


Figure 5. LPGA Champion Trophy Throwback

Captioned: "Evian Masters week for LPGA. So many incredible memories from playing in beautiful Evian France. Very disappointed to not be back playing this week. Still need a few more weeks. #fbf"



Figure 6. Reference to Upcoming LPGA Event

"Last practice before round one of the #MeijerLpga event starts. I tee off at 12:45 tomorrow"



Figure 7. Practice Drill

Captioned: "Practice session in Korea. Two part drill I do this drill daily to help with my wrist set and position at the top. @lpga_tour #korea"



Figure 8. Role as a Commentator

Captioned: "So much fun working for @foxsports #usopen following Phil, Bubba and Angel"

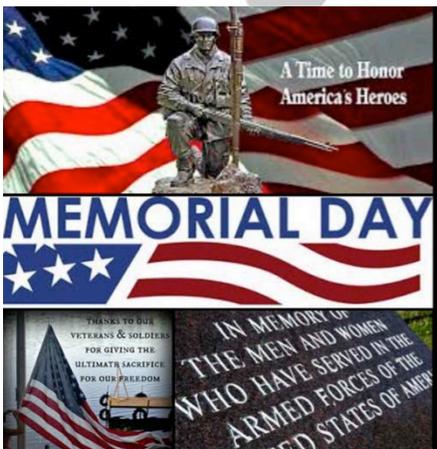


Figure 9. Message to Fans

Captioned: "Thank you to the brave men and women who continue to fight for our freedoms"



Figure 10. Charity Focus

Captioned: “@Fitbit challenge this week. Benefiting the @bgca of Atlantic City. How many steps do you think I will take during a day. Including a tournament round of golf. I will be trying to take extra steps so Horizon Blue Cross can donate more \$\$ to the kids.”



Figure 11. Boys and Girls Club Charity Focus

Captioned: “At my NG [Natalie Gulbis] boys and girls club today we are making Mother's Day cards. And braiding hair.”



Figure 12. Golf Travel References

Captioned: “Vegas, Orlando now New Jersey. @spg golf event today!! Few more days in the States then to Asia for a few @lpga_tour events”

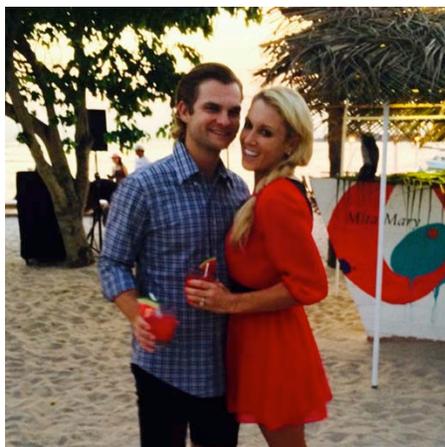


Figure 13. Travel Reference with Husband

Captioned: "Last dinner in Mexico!!! Such an incredible spot!! Beach, views golf, snorkeling, food, spa, hotel @stregispuntamita. Can't wait to come back!"



Figure 14. Active Brand Mention

Captioned: "Thanks @rsm913 and @ahill2585 for my new sweet @adidasoriginals watches. Love! #adidaswatch."



Figure 15. Passive Brand Exposure

Captioned: "Very high view from the room Off to practice #PureSilk Bahamas @lpga_tour event this week."