

# Chapter 3

## Play It Like Beckham!

### The Influence of Social Networks on E-Reputation – The Case of Sportspeople and Their Online Fan Base

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*New opportunities and challenges are emerging thanks to the growing Internet importance and social media usage. Although practitioners have already recognized the strategic dimension of e-reputation and the power of social media, academic research is still in its infancy when it comes to e-reputation determinants in a social networks context. A study was conducted in the sports setting to explore the impact of social networks on the sportspeople's e-reputation. Whereas the study emphasized (1) the influence of social networks' perception on the sportspeople's e-reputation, and the neutral roles of (2) the motives for following sportspeople online, and (3) the negative content on the Internet, additional insights are formulated on maintaining, restoring and managing e-reputation on social networks. Finally, future research directions are suggested on the role of image to control e-reputation.*

#### **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*

Today, there are more than 3.2 billion Internet users globally (International Telecommunication Union, 2015), making them able to see whatever happens online. One of the major abilities of the Internet, beyond its mass communication technology dimension, is its bi-directionality (Dellarocas, 2003). The

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Internet allows firms to reach a very large audience at low cost and individuals to diffuse their personal thoughts, opinions and reactions, making them available to any Internet user (Dellarocas, 2003).

Social media are global, open, transparent, non-hierarchical, interactive and real-time, and are completely shifting individuals' behaviors and expectations (Dutta, 2010). Online social platforms are used by billions of people around the world, making them a genuine phenomenon. The leading social networks worldwide ranked by number of active users are:

- Facebook (1.5 billion users),
- WhatsApp (900 million users), and
- QQ (860 million users) (Statista, 2016a).

Almost two-thirds of American adults use social networking sites. 35% of 65-year-olds and older is doing the same. Such behavior has entirely rebuilt the way people get and share information about everything related to their every day's life (Perrin, 2015).

The top ten Twitter accounts having the highest number of followers worldwide belong mainly to celebrities from the music industry, except Obama's account which is ranking third with more than 70 million followers. The most viewed YouTube channels worldwide per month are those of:

- Music stars (David Guetta and Justin Bieber), and
- Labels (T-Series),
- YouTubers (Ryan ToysReview and Family Fun Pack), and
- Nursery videos (LittleBabyBum) (Statista, 2016b).

Sportspersons have well grasped the social media phenomenon. Indeed, almost all websites of sports clubs have links to their Twitter, Facebook, YouTube official pages and accounts. Moreover, soccer players are a typical example of this social media mania. As of April 2016, Cristiano Ronaldo has more than 41.5 million followers on Twitter, followed by Kaka (24.5 million) and Neymar (21.6 million). Other sports are not left out. Players such as Rafael Nadal (9.2 million followers) and Serena Williams (6.1 million followers) are topping the ranking of most followed Twitter accounts in tennis. Sprinters such as Usain Bolt is nearing 4 million followers and F1 pilots such as Lewis Hamilton is having more than 3.2 million followers. Soccer players (Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi) and clubs (FC Barcelona and Real Madrid) are listed in the top ten most popular Facebook pages based on number of fans (Statista, 2016c).

Sports events are having their share of fame. The retirement of Sir Alex Ferguson in 2013 was the third most tweeted event after the reelection of Barack Obama and the resignation of Pope Benedict. The 2014 World Cup was of the top of conversations on Twitter, generating more than 670 million tweets worldwide (TwitterData, 2014). However, sports events are also having their share of shame. During the 2012 London Olympic Games, several athletes were banned from the competition because of their misbehavior on the Internet. The FIFA corruption crisis in 2015 and the tennis player Maria Sharapova's doping scandal in 2016 were also large online bad buzzes. Finally, it's worth mentioning that an anti-doping database Twitter account (@Dopinglist) was created in September 2008, displaying the most complete database of athletes sanctioned for doping.

The sports industry grows faster than global GDP on average (Kearney, 2011). It is expected to achieve global revenues of US\$ 145.3 billion (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011). When it comes to social media, it

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