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Review

Organisational impression congruence: A conceptual model of multi-level impression management operation in sports service organisations

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ABSTRACT

The management of images projected to consumer audiences is a key task for sport service organisations; however, the number of “touch points” (interactions between employees and consumers) adds complexity to the process. In this article, the authors present a conceptual model of organisational impression congruence (OrgIC), proposing that organisations will elicit positive consumer-related outcomes if there is alignment between the desired organisational image(s), those projected by the organisation at the management/strategic level, and those projected by customer-facing employees. The conceptual model is underpinned by theories associated with impression management, reputation (as an outcome of impression management action), and cognitive dissonance theory as the basis for outcomes of in/congruence. The authors discuss possible implications and outcomes in relation to previous literature emanating from various fields (e.g., sport management, management, and marketing), and suggest directions for future research. Through the model of OrgIC, the authors contribute to theoretical development and discussion, and provide a tool that could be useful for evaluating the way that sport service organisations present themselves to consumers, and other external audiences.

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1. Introduction

Both organisations and individuals have ideas about how they would like to be viewed by external audiences, be they consumers or other stakeholders. To this end, they engage in impression management. The images we project have implications for how we are viewed by others; that is, people make value judgments about us based on the impressions that we make. This is the same for sport organisations as it is for people, as it is important that they manage the images projected to their consumers. In the case of sport service organisations—such as golf clubs, fitness centres, and stadium concessions operators—the overall impressions that consumers form are not only informed by images projected by the organisation

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(via marketing communications, branding, etc.), but also during a number of “touch points,” or direct interactions with front-line employees. Desirable images that are positively interpreted by consumers can lead to positive outcomes (e.g., purchase behaviour, trust), while poorly received images can have the opposite effect (Elsbach, 2003). On this basis, the projection of coherent images across the various levels of sport service organisations presents a considerable management challenge, and one that merits scholarly attention.

To date, however, few scholars have attempted to investigate impression management at multiple levels of analysis, instead focusing on the behaviours of individuals (e.g., Leary & Kowalski, 1990) or organisations (e.g., Elsbach, 2003). This considerably limits the ability to understand the complex interactions between sport service organisations and their consumers, to identify areas that require managerial attention, and to address them effectively. As Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, and Gilstrap (2008) suggested, “[we must find] ways to integrate IM research across levels to identify relationships and effects that may reside at multiple levels of analysis, including cross-level and multi-level effects” (p. 1098). Indeed, similar calls have long been made for organisational research in general (see Rousseau, 1985). We propose that the first step toward addressing this issue within the present context is to conceptualise the impression management actions of internal stakeholders at different levels of sport service organisations, in order to theorise the cross- and multi-level effects described by Bolino et al. (2008).

To this end, we present a conceptual model of Organisational Impression Congruence (OrgIC). Specifically, we propose that when organisational impression management behaviours and individual (i.e., employees) impression management behaviours align, the organisation is able to project its desired images to external audiences. Here, desired images are those that are explicitly decided upon by high-level employees who are responsible for the strategic direction of the organisation (e.g., CEOs, upper management), and are related to a sport service organisation’s brand. Desired images are an essential component of a sport organisation’s marketing strategy, and have been discussed alongside various terms within the literature, including brand image (Reynolds & Gutman, 1984), brand concept (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnes, 1986), and brand direction (Rubinstein, 1996). Within the model, the aforementioned employees who are responsible for the sport service organisation’s strategic direction are considered to be part of the organisational level, while all other employees (e.g., those in customer-facing roles) make up the individual/employee level. Impression management behaviours at the organisational level include items such as integrated marketing campaigns (inclusive of traditional and social media) and other external communications, while individual level impression management behaviours are typically limited to direct interactions with consumers during the service encounter.

Fig. 1 illustrates how, when organisational impression management is working optimally, the behaviours of actors at organisational and collective/employee levels of analysis produce congruent reputations. This projects a coherent organisational image to consumers, leading to positive outcomes (e.g., developing consumer trust, psychological connection to organisations, etc.). Conversely, when organisational and individual impression management outcomes do not align, incongruent images are projected, potentially leading to negative outcomes (e.g., confusion amongst consumers, cognitive dissonance, distrust, etc.).

In detailing a conceptual model of OrgIC, we discuss the appropriate conceptualisation of impression management outcomes at multiple levels of analysis (i.e., organisational and collective/employee). Possible consumer outcomes are offered, in addition to directions for future research, and empirical testing of the model. Accordingly, we propose that three principal contributions are made: (a) OrgIC provides managers with a conceptual model that can be used to make

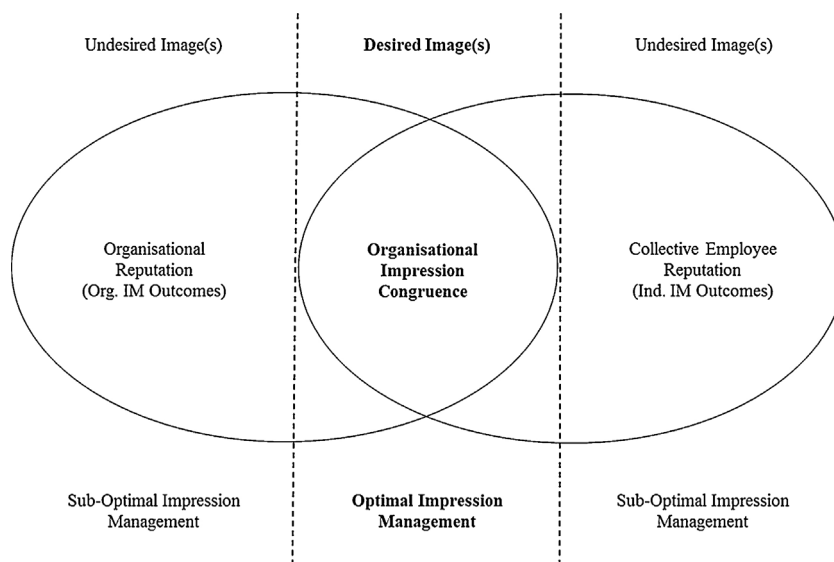


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of OrgIC: Organisational and collective (employee) reputational outcomes of multi-level impression management actions.

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