EXAMINING THE EFFECTS OF TWITTER USAGE ON

ATHLETE BRAND PERSONALITY

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PERSONALITY

The way athletes are able to communicate with their fans has changed considerably over the last decade (Clavio & Kian, 2010). Athletes have the ability to distribute messages through Twitter that may reflect their personality characteristics. Through these tweets, consumers have the ability to possibly relate directly with the athlete based on the characteristics they portray.

Given the importance of social media and brand personality, this study combined those two to examine athlete brand personality. A mixed methodology approach (content analysis and survey methodology) was used to determine consumer's view of an athlete's brand personality on Twitter. Prior to the study, a pretest was conducted to identify athlete-based brand personality items that could apply to any athlete. Through the pre-test, 16 brand personality characteristics were identified. Furthermore, a thematic analysis was conducted which confirmed six additional athlete brand personality characteristics bringing the total number of characteristics to 22. Utilizing these 22 athlete based brand personality characteristics, the consumer evaluated the athlete's brand personality characteristics on Twitter. To examine brand personality characteristics, a 7-point Likert scale was used to measure the "fit" of the brand personality characteristics. The survey evaluated different levels of Twitter consumers, athlete and team identification, prestige, and distinctiveness.

Each athlete in this study had different athlete brand personality characteristics they were trying to portray. A content analysis revealed the athletes most salient brand personality characteristics. The survey revealed varied results for low, moderate, and highly identified fans for both athlete identification and team identification with each brand personality item and each athlete. For Granderson, significant differences existed between athlete identification and five brand personality items. For Eric Decker, significant differences were found between team identification levels and eight brand personality items. No significant differences were found between Jason Heyward, identification levels (athlete or team) and the athlete brand personality characteristics. However, Heyward had significant differences with the athlete Twitter brand personality items and Twitter usage levels. In terms of prestige and distinctiveness, significant differences were found between low, moderate, and high levels of athlete and team identification and Twitter usage and distinctiveness, but not prestige.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Professional athletes have the ability to connect directly with their consumer easier than ever before (Clavio & Kian, 2010). Social media has given athletes a platform to illuminate their personality characteristics, interact with fans, and have their own interactive space. Two mediums primarily used by athletes, Facebook and Twitter, have given fans unprecedented access to any professional athlete (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Sanderson, 2008). Fans can use such platforms to forge a social, one-way relationship with athletes to feel that they connect on a similar level (Frederick et al., 2012). On the other hand, athletes can use the mediums for self-presentation (Sanderson, 2008) and to express dissent (Sanderson, 2009). It is estimated that half of all professional athletes have a presence on Twitter (Wertheim, 2011). Through social media, athletes have the ability to promote and market themselves in unique ways in order to better connect with their fans. As noted by Hambrick and Mahoney (2011), "Athletes use their Twitter messages, or tweets, to promote corporate sponsors, charitable organizations, and events," (p. 162). Because of the increased usage of social media by athletes it is important to understand the impact of their social media use.

Unlike traditional media, social media provides a platform for instant connection between an athlete, team or organization, and their consumers that has never been seen before (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Frederick et al., 2012; Sanderson, 2009). Social media can be defined as all of the interactions between people online – all the ways they participate in and share information and knowledge, and opinions while using web-based applications to communicate (Safko & Brake, 2009). Furthermore, Newman, Peck, Harris, and Wilhide (2013) note that "Social media enables us to watch and share videos and photos, read and write blogs, post on social networking sites, and have online

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conversations" (p. 3). Social media blends the real-time conversation and the 24/7 news cycle society lives in today. As suggested by Newman et al. (2013) social media platforms are broken into three types of social media: publishing services (e.g. blogs, forums, wikis), media sharing services (e.g. Spotify, YouTube, Stumbleupon), and network services (e.g. Facebook and Twitter). While athletes can use all these spaces, network services, specifically Twitter, are areas where each athlete can craft their page into who they are.

One unique platform that has been frequently used by athletes is Twitter. Twitter is a microblogging site that is designed to send short 140-character messages. These messages include all letters, numbers, spacing, and punctuation. Users are allowed to send "tweets" and read "tweets" from other Twitter users. The users develop a group of "followers" who become part of their community (Clavio & Kian, 2010). Twitter users are also able to follow whoever they want, including athletes. Athletes can use Twitter to send pictures or links as part of their tweet, or just send a generic tweet that could share information, or possibly interact with fans. As stated by Browning and Sanderson (2012), "Twitter appears to be the dominant social-media platform, and its trajectory of influence will only continue to escalate" (p.515).

Twitter is considered the largest real-time social platform in the world (Newman et al., 2013). With that being said, Twitter has given athletes an opportunity to interact directly with their consumers. Twitter allows an athlete to disseminate quick bursts of information about their personal lives, relay team information, or give opinion on a given topic (Clavio & Kian, 2010). Athletes have recognized the possibilities of Twitter as a communication tool and have developed ways to interact with their followers. For

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example, Brandon Phillips of the Cincinnati Reds is considered one of the best at marketing himself on Twitter. He realizes that Twitter is a platform to market himself and believes it is a great medium to "make someone's day" (Penn, 2013). His Twitter posts consist of him taking pictures, interacting with fans, going to kids' (baseball) games, and information about fan giveaways. He notes that doing normal, everyday things that people can relate to, is why people gravitate towards following him (Penn, 2013). Twitter provides an excellent forum for athletes to create a presence and illuminate a side of themselves that may never have been seen before the evolution of social media. Prior to Twitter, fans often only heard from athletes through a press conference or one-on-one interviews on ESPN's Sportscenter, which can often be mediated by the public relations staff. As stated by Gregory (2009), Twitter "peels back the curtain on an athlete's existence, showcasing personality layers never seen at press conferences" (p. 1). Twitter has developed into a crucial medium for all parties that are part of the sport enterprise. As such, Twitter research, specifically in sport, has become a critical area to research because of the impact it has had on the sport world.

Over the last decade, social media sites have become a part of the media landscape. Sport communication scholars have begun to highlight Twitter usage patterns by athletes (Pegoraro, 2010; Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011; Hambrick et al., 2010, Hull, 2014), Twitter followers' (Clavio & Kian, 2010) and events (Blaszka et al, 2012; Reichart-Smith & Smith, 2012). Because most of the social media research in sport has focused on usage patterns, an avenue that needs examination is how social media may impact an athlete's brand personality. In addition, Clavio and Kian (2010) note that sport communication scholars need to begin to examine the relationship between sport

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personalities and the sport consumer on Twitter. This study examined brand personality

characteristics of an athlete, from a list of athlete brand personality items and the

perception of their consumers, using the social media tool Twitter. To date, sport brand

personality research has had only one known inquiry measuring an athlete's brand

personality (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). This will be the first study to measure athlete

brand personality on a social media platform, specifically Twitter.

Brand personality is a relatively new concept that has been begun to find inroads

in sport research over the last 15 years. Brand personality can be defined as the set of

human characteristics associated with a given brand (Aaker, 1997). A distinctive brand

personality can help create a set of unique and favorable associations in a consumer's

memory, and thus build brand equity (Keller, 1993). To date, sport brand personality

research has focused on sponsorship (Braunstein & Ross, 2010; Lee & Cho, 2009, 2012;

Walsh & Ross, 2007), events (Caslavova & Petrackova, 2011; Deane, Smith, & Adams,

2003; Walsh et al., 2013), team sport (Heere, 2010; Ross, 2008; Smith, Graetz, &

Westbrook, 2006), and more recently, athletes (Carlson & Donovan, 2013).

Brand personality can include characteristics such as gender, age, or

socioeconomic status, and can also highlight human personality traits such as fun, crazy,

and sentimental (Aaker, 1996; Aaker 1997). For example, Aaron Rodgers of the Green

Bay Packers is a male who is young and could be considered tough, exciting, and unique.

An athlete could use these brand personality characteristics on Twitter to not only market

themselves, but highlight their specific personality traits that are unique to them, giving

them a sense of closeness to the fans. While only one study to date has examined athlete

brand personality (Carlson & Donovan, 2013), no study has explored an athlete's unique

brand personality characteristics, as well as the identification of those characteristics by consumers.

This study will use athlete identification and social identity theory to understand the attachment between the athlete and the consumer. Identification can be described as "oneness with or belongingness with an entity where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the entity to which he or she is a member" (Mael & Ashford, 1992, p. 104). Tajfel (1978) defines social identity as the portion of an individual's self-perception that arises from membership in a particular group or groups, as well as the emotional significance and value attached to the membership, thus dealing primarily with group memberships. Both identification and social identity theory have been examined together in sport through sport identification (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008), team identification (Carlson, Donovan, Cumisky, 2009; Donovan, Carlson, & Zimmerman, 2005; Fink, Parker, Brett & Higgens, 2009; Kwon, Trail, & James, 2007; Madrigal & Chen, 2008), and athletes (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). Twitter has provided a platform for fans and athletes to connect and identify with each other (Frederick et al., 2012). Within identification literature, two variables often predict identification: prestige (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995; Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Carlson et al., 2009) and distinctiveness (Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Carlson et al., 2009; Mael & Ashford, 1992). Prestige can be defined as the exclusivity, respect, and status of the entity, while distinctiveness would relate to the differences in the entity compared to all other competitors. As Carlson et al. (2009) note, prestige and distinctiveness of a sport team can be an influential factor of various brand personality attributes.

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Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine an athlete's brand personality, through the 22 uncovered brand personality characteristics as well as consumer's perception of those characteristics, utilizing the communication tool Twitter. Utilizing a list of athlete brand personality characteristics generated and created by the researcher as well as conducting a thematic analysis for additional items, this study will note the similarities and differences between what the athlete is portraying and the perception of the followers (consumers) of the athlete's brand personality on Twitter. Each athlete that is participating in this study will have their tweets analyzed for the most salient items. While all 22 brand personality characteristics will be analyzed, the most salient items will be used to see if the perception of the consumer is identifying with the tweets being disbursed by the athlete. To compare athletes in this study, the athlete brand personality characteristics that would be associated with previous brand personality research (i.e. Aaker, 1997; Braustein & Ross, 2010; Carlson & Donovan, 2013) were created by the researcher and affirmed by an expert panel who have done extensive research within brand personality.

To measure the brand personality characteristics, two different types of brand personality characteristics will be used. One, a pretest was conducted to generate the most salient brand personality terms as it relates to how an athlete portrays themselves on Twitter. The pretest highlighted 16 brand personality characteristics that could be used by any athlete on Twitter. Second, a thematic analysis was conducted to examine athlete tweets for more brand personality characteristics. An additional six characteristics were found during this analysis. Once both lists were complete, the brand personality items were listed in an online survey. The survey was disseminated through team bloggers

Twitter feeds from that athlete's specific team to assess the athlete brand personality characteristics of an athlete. The 22 athlete brand personality items that apply to athletes will be compared between the athletes in the study. In addition to exploring brand personality characteristics of an athlete from a consumers' point of view, the study will also explore consumers' identification levels with the athlete and the team to determine if those constructs impact how consumers perceive the brand personality of athletes on Twitter. Also, consumers will compare the prestige and distinctiveness as it relates to the participant's Twitter usage. In doing so, athlete identification and social identity theory will be used as the theoretical framework to highlight the levels of identification with the athlete. The similarities and differences that were examined were athlete identification as well as team identification To date, social media research has focused on messaging from athletes, organizations and events, but has had few inquiries conducted from an athlete's perspective. Research has yet to focus on an athlete and their social media brand, specifically examining an athlete's brand personality characteristics on Twitter. Brand personality research within sport is developing and focused primarily on team sport (Carlson et al., 2009; Heere, 2010; Ross, 2008), events (Caslavova & Petrackova, 2011; Walsh, et al., 2013), and sponsorship (Lee & Cho, 2009, 2012; Walsh & Ross, 2007) with little attention being paid to an athlete's brand personality (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). This study provided an explanation of the connection between an athlete's brand personality and their Twitter followers.

Significance of Study

Many athletes have achieved the status of celebrity amongst their fans (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). Athletes such as Lebron James, Kobe Bryant, and Aaron Rodgers, have

become their own brand, or human brand, which drives the sale of product that is associated with their name and image. As noted by Carlson and Donovan (2013), "Marketers who want to associate their products with a sports team should consider the human brands that comprise the team, as evaluations of the team are influenced by evaluations of individual athletes" (p. 204).

One arena that could help be a vehicle for development of the human brand is social media. Professional athletes have the ability to use social media to connect directly with the consumer easier than ever before (Clavio & Kian, 2010). Twitter, one of many social media platforms, has provided a platform to develop relationships between athletes and their constituents. Fans are able to use Twitter to forge a social, one-way relationship with athletes, to feel that they connect on a similar level (Frederick et al., 2012). Through Twitter, athletes have the ability to promote and market themselves in unique ways to better connect with their fans. Furthermore, athletes can use Twitter to craft their tweets in accordance with their specific personality characteristics, which potentially may have an impact on their individual brand as an athlete. Consumers may be able to identify with an athlete on Twitter through those characteristics. This dissertation will explore athletes as having a brand personality on Twitter and the evaluation of those characteristics by their Twitter followers.

This study is significant for multiple reasons. One, this is the first known attempt to combine brand personality research and the social media platform Twitter. A previous connection between brand personality and social media was conducted through Facebook. Walsh et al. (2013) examined an NCAA event's brand personality utilizing the social media platform Facebook. Second, this will be the first known attempt to examine

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