

A New Approach: Measuring Athlete Brand Personality On Twitter

Matthew Blaszka, Indiana State University
Patrick Walsh, Syracuse University
Galen Clavio, Indiana University
Antonio Williams, Indiana University

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify brand personality characteristics of athletes. Prior to the study, a pretest was conducted to identify athlete-based brand personality items that could apply to any athlete. After conducting the pretest, 16 brand personality characteristics were identified. These items included: athletic, confident, cool, exciting, flashy, fun, happy, hard-working, humorous, leader, lively, masculine, strong, successful, trendy, and tough. In order to ensure the identity of all athlete brand personality characteristics were found, a thematic analysis was conducted which confirmed six additional athlete brand personality characteristics bringing the total number of characteristics to 22. These characteristics were appreciative, corporate, family-man, influential, inspirational, and supportive. Following the identification of the characteristics, a content analysis was conducted on two athletes to see what their most used brand personality characteristics on Twitter. Additional findings and implications will be discussed further in the paper.

Introduction

Over the last decade, athletes have been connecting with the consumer in ways that have changed the media landscape (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Clavio, Walsh, & Vooris, 2013). Social media has given athletes a platform to highlight their personality characteristics, interact with fans, and have their own interactive space. Three mediums primarily used by athletes, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, have given fans unprecedented access to professional athletes (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Sanderson, 2008). Fans are able to use social platforms to forge a one-way relationship with athletes in order to feel that they connect on a similar level (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012). From the athlete's perspective they can use the mediums for self-presentation (Hull, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Sauder & Blaszka, 2017) and to express dissent (Sanderson, 2009). Hambrick and Mahoney (2011) take note that, "Athletes use their Twitter messages, or tweets, to promote corporate sponsors, charitable organizations, and events" (p. 162).

Social media platforms can provide an instant connection between an athlete and their fans (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Frederick et al., 2012; Sanderson, 2009). Twitter has become the poster child for fan and player connection. Twitter has given athletes an opportunity to interact directly with their consumers, and provides an excellent forum for athletes to create a social media presence and illustrate a personal side of them. Prior to Twitter, fans often only heard from athletes through press conferences or one-on-one interviews on platforms such as ESPN's SportsCenter, which can often muzzle or be mediated by the public relations staff.

The media landscape has seen continual change over the last decade. Sport communication scholars made inroads on the impact of Twitter. Scholars have continued to make inroads within athlete social media usage and sport. Specifically, the research has focused on Twitter usage patterns by athletes (Abeza, O'Reilly, Seguin, & Nzindukiyimana, 2017; Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2014; Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Hull, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012, 2014; Pegoraro, 2010; Sauder & Blaszk, 2017), and Instagram usage patterns (Reichart-Smith & Sanderson, 2015). As noted above a majority of athlete and social media research has focused on usage patterns. Additionally researchers (i.e. Abeza et al., 2017; Sauder & Blaszk, 2017) have called for more additional research between the social media product and the consumer.

In addition, an avenue that needs examination is how social media may impact an athlete's brand. As such, this study developed and examined brand personality characteristics portrayed by athletes on Twitter, and in the process also developed a starting point for the definition of what an active Twitter user is (i.e., how often does an athlete need to post to be considered active on Twitter). Athlete brand personality characteristics were developed by examining athletes who are 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). Carlson and Donovan (2013) examined athlete brand personality, but did not use athlete specific brand personality characteristics; rather they used items from Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale. While this study provided important foundational information on athlete brand personality, it is important for research to now examine how various media forums may impact an athlete's brand. Social media has been identified as a key branding platform (Abeza et al., 2017; Green, 2016; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Reichart-Smith & Sanderson, 2015) As noted by Abeza et al. (2017) and Reichart-Smith and Sanderson (2015) athlete's using social media can proliferate their brand strategy. As such, it is important to understand how athletes may be able to use social media in order to influence and their brand personality. Specifically, if athletes understand their own brand personality, and how to portray those items on social media, there are a number of potential positive outcomes for the athlete. For instance, developing unique brand personality traits will act as a point of differentiation (Greenhalgh, Dwyer, & LeCrom, 2017) which may allow the athlete to capitalize on their brand from a business perspective. Specifically, the athlete may be able to identify companies with a similar brand personality to endorse and promote on social media by establishing a fit between their brand and the endorsed brand's personality is, or even develop a strong enough brand which is important should the athlete which to capitalize on their brand by developing brand extensions (Walsh & Williams, 2017). However, prior to an athlete being able to take advantage of their brand in this way research must first determine what type of brand personality characteristics are being portrayed by athletes on social media. As such, this study will be the first to attempt to identify athlete brand personality characteristics on a social media platform by utilizing Twitter.

Literature Review

Communication methods have changed drastically over the last two decades, which have had a major influence on consumption patterns (Ozguven & Mucan, 2013). Social media has provided a new way for the sport celebrity to market to their fans (Abeza et al., 2017; Frederick et al., 2014; Sanderson, 2010). In fact, social media has provided platforms to share information, reinforce relationships, and develop relationships (Hambrick et al., 2010; Sauder & Blaszk, 2017). Additionally, it provides consumers immediate interaction with teams, players, coaches, and beat writers for their favorite team (Sheffer & Shultz, 2010).

Athletes use Twitter as a medium to broadcast news (sport news, personal life, events, etc.) and to be interactive (Frederick et al., 2012; Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). While Twitter can be a great informational and broadcast tool, athletes can often tweet something that may cause a controversy. For example, during the 2016 Men's Golf U.S. Open, where eventual winner Dustin Johnson played the back nine holes not knowing if he would be assessed a one-stroke penalty, other golfers such as Jordan Spieth and Rickie Fowler took to Twitter to blast the United State Golf Association (USGA). Athletes can use the medium to set-the-scene at an event, like Keselowski, or they have the ability to interact with their followers by simply retweeting one of their tweets. Athletes also have the ability to give fans an inside look of their personal life (Hull, 2014; Sauder & Blaszk, 2017). Thus developing a relationship between the fan and athlete which could be either one-sided or two-sided (Frederick et al., 2014). Twitter provides an athlete a unique and dynamic opportunity to illicit who and what they are on Twitter. Some athletes are engaging with their fans and tweet often, while others may just broadcast news and post various links (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hambrick et al., 2010; Hull, 2014; Pegoraro, 2010; Sauder & Blaszk, 2017). Various studies have been conducted to examine athlete usage of Twitter (Abeza et al., 2017; Hambrick et al., 2010; Hull, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010; Sauder & Blaszk, 2017), consumer usage (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Clavio & Kian, 2010; Frederick et al., 2012; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014) and athlete celebrity marketing (Abeza et al., 2017; Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011).

Athlete Usage of Twitter

The early research done by Pegoraro (2010) and Hambrick et al. (2010) laid the groundwork for athlete usage on Twitter. Both studies examined the athletes through the theoretical lens of uses and gratification. Pegoraro (2010) found that most athletes were found not to be tweeting about their products, website, or referencing their brand. Similarly, Hambrick et al. (2010) examined athlete's use of Twitter. Findings highlighted that most tweets were interactive which was consistent with Pegoraro's (2010) findings of direct messages.

Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) examined athlete gender, specifically self-presentation by professional athletes on Twitter. The authors performed a content analysis of professional tennis player's tweets during the 2011 U.S. Open Tennis Championship. After conducting a thematic analysis, the authors found 10 self-presentation themes, including six backstage frames and four front-stage frames. The backstage frames were: conversationalist, the sport insider, the behind-the-scenes reporter, the super fan, the informer, and the analyst. The front stage frames were: fan aficionado, the publicist, the superintendent, and the brand manager.

Findings showed that most of the tweets fell in the "backstage performance" category for both males and females. There were deemed no significant differences through gender on the following variables: publicist, superintendent, fan aficionado, conversationalist, the sport insider, the behind-the-scenes reporter, the informer, and the analyst. However, there were differences in the super-fan frame as men paid greater attention to sports outside of tennis in their self-presentation than women. Also, brand management had a significant difference. Women were employing a greater amount of time to their brand management than males. With the growth of Twitter, brand management could be a critical avenue for athletes to have both a good front and backstage presence. As noted by Lebel and Danylchuk (2012), "Regardless of who actually posts material on a Twitter account, it behooves professional athletes to ensure that they are represented in a positive light, and, ultimately, the onus of this presentation falls on the shoulders of the athlete," (p. 474). Similar to Lebel & Danylchuk (2012), Hull (2014) examined PGA Tour Golfers' Twitter use during the Masters Golf Tournament through the theoretical

framework self-presentation. The most salient front-stage category was the 'engager', which was similar earlier findings by Hambrick et al. (2010) and Pegoraro (2010), while the most salient backstage category was 'the behind-the-scenes reporter'. In a more recent study on self-presentation, Sauder and Blaszk (2017) examined all 23 players on the 2015 U.S. Women's National Soccer Team before, during, and after the 2015 Women's World Cup. As a team, players were generally using backstage communication. This is consistent with both Hull (2014) and Lebel and Danylchuk (2012).

Green (2016) took it a step further by interviewing rugby players who have an online presence. The authors examined the impact of rugby player's personal brands through three different social media mediums (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) through semi-structured interviews. The athlete interviews revealed seven themes that in order to develop a strong online branding strategy the following categories: personality, exposure, response, follow, endorse, consistent, and targeting the audience. These categories provide athletes an opportunity to develop a stronger brand that may be unique to them. In a similar vein, Abeza et al. (2017) examined the 17 highest-paid athletes' and their product endorsements. The study provided a framework into how professional athletes use their own media channels for the specific purpose of endorsing products.

Brand Personality Measurement Development

While research has studied how athletes are interacting with fans on Twitter (Hull, 2014), no studies to date has focused specifically on the impact Twitter may have on the brand attributes of athletes. In particular, as athletes are using Twitter to interact with fans (Hambrick et al., 2010; Hull, 2014; Pegoraro, 2010), it also provides a glimpse into their personal life (Clavio & Kian, 2010), and their promotion of sponsored products (Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011). Twitter has become a prime forum which could influence an athlete's brand personality. Brand personality is a developing concept that has begun to prosper 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 the brand equity (Keller, 1993). In essence, brand personality is adjectives that describe a brand (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). Furthermore, brand personality plays an important role in terms of brand preference and choice (Aaker, 1997). Consumers recognize these characteristics and prefer brands that have favorable personality traits (Freling & Forbes, 2005). Brand personality is a way for consumers to identify and differentiate various brands. Brand personality can include characteristics such as gender, age, and socioeconomic class, and can also highlight human personality traits such as fun, crazy, and sentimental (Aaker, 1996; Aaker, 1997). For example, Bryce Harper of the Washington Nationals is a male who is young and could be considered tough, exciting, rugged, and unique, whereas his equivalent advisory Mike Trout is flashy, quiet, all-around, and smart. With the evolution of Twitter, an athlete could use these brand personality characteristics to market themselves, but highlight their specific personality traits that are unique to them, giving them a sense of closeness to the fans. For example, Derek Holland, a pitcher for the Chicago White Sox, uses Twitter for humor and comical impersonations of celebrities (i.e. Arnold Schwarzenegger) and teammates (i.e. Tood Frazier) as it provides a 'creative outlet' (Benetti, 2017). These are a few examples of how athletes can use Twitter to highlight the characteristics of their brand. 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 displayed through the social media platform Twitter.

The human characteristics of a brand are vital to the image or perception of a brand and are distinctive and enduring (Aaker, 1996). Today, Apple could be considered new, hip, and young while Microsoft is considered more traditional and old. These types of differences are critical for the sport consumer to identify with the product (Braunstein & Ross, 2010). To date, sport brand personality research has focused on sponsorship (Braunstein & Ross, 2010; Lee & Cho, 2009, 2012; Walsh & Ross, 2007; Wang, Zhang, Byon, Baker, & Lu, 2016), events (Caslavova & Petrackova, 2011; Deane, Smith, & Adams, 2003; Walsh et al., 2013), team sport (Greenhalgh, Dwyer, & LeCrom, 2017; Heere, 2010; Ross, 2008; Smith, Graetz, & Westbrook, 2006), and, while limited, athletes (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). As such, little agreement exists in the best way to measure brand personality.

The early measurements of brand personality were used to examine the relationship between the brand and human characteristics. The same personality characteristics used to examine a person were likewise used to describe a brand (Aaker, 1996). Two types of scales were developed: ad hoc scales and ones that are more theoretical. An ad hoc scale is a set of traits usually ranging anywhere from 20 to 300. The traits often are developed haphazardly and lack reliability and validity (Aaker, 1997). The second type of scale is theoretical. The theoretical scale is based on human personality scales that previously were not associated with brands. Aaker (1996) used the same terms you would use to describe a person for a particular brand. "A brand could be described by demographics, lifestyle, or human personality traits" (Aaker, 1996, p. 142). Aaker (1997) created a framework to develop dimensions of brand personality. The goal was to isolate specific and distinct dimensions of brand personality. The proposed scale highlighted five dimensions: (1) sincere (down-to-earth, honest, and cheerful); (2) excited (daring, spirited, and imaginative); (3) competent (reliable, intelligent, and successful); (4) sophisticated (upper class and charming); and (5) ruggedness (outdoorsy and tough). These characteristics are often termed the "Big Five". However, Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) were critical of Aaker's (1997) BPS measurements. The researchers state that the methodology was flawed from the conceptual definition and in the four ways the items of the scale were generated. Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) note that many of the items on the "so-called" list of brand personalities are not actually personality traits, but rather are measuring product performance. The authors suggest that before a valid measurement is set into place a better-developed definition of the constructs is imperative.

While the BPS has been used in many different brand personality studies, criticism of the validity of the instrument has occurred quite often. Validity is often called into question as well as whether brand personality is actually being measured. To date, most research on brand personality has used Aaker's (1997) scale (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). While many have used Aaker's (1997) framework (e.g. Lee & Cho, 2009; Walsh & Ross, 2007), other scholars have developed scales (e.g. Braunstein & Ross, 2010) and used free-thought listing techniques (Heere, 2010).

Braunstein and Ross (2010) aimed to develop a new BPS scale that can be utilized in future research within sport. The study took another look at the BPS by applying unique characteristics as it relates to sport. Braunstein and Ross (2010) examined students affiliated with two different universities. Individuals were asked to list a professional sport team on the top of the survey. They were then asked to rate the 84 unique characteristic type terms that could possibly be used as sport dimensions in brand personality. These items were from previous literature in and outside of sport. While the authors admit this scale is far from perfect, it could be a step in the right direction to finding an accurate scale that can be used in sport to measure brand personality. This scale can be used by sport organizations to see whether the brand personality

characteristics need to be strengthened, augmented, or possibly deemphasized (Braunstein & Ross, 2010).

While previous research in and outside of sport has relied on the BPS and other models, Heere (2010) proposed a new technique. Heere also called into question the validity of Aaker's (1997) model. Heere (2010) confirms this notion by stating, "Brand personality associations are the result of an endless line of experiments performed by marketers to manipulate the consumers' perception of the brand, and any measurement of this perception should start with acknowledging the manipulating ability of marketers." (p. 18).

Heere's (2010) conceptual design was a free-thought listing by the managers of a specific organization who develop the brand personality characteristics. Heere (2010) examined five netball teams that provided a list of personality adjectives that were associated with their team. The managers were then asked to rank the personality traits that were assimilated with their team. Managers were then asked to "free-thought" list the associations. Once all five managers responded, 10 characteristics were used. To ensure validity the list was sent back to the managers for approval.

This methodology articulated a well-rounded method to examine brand personality of a sport team. The study was able to note the perceived brand personality associations. Also, the study was able to take the brand personality adjectives given by the organization and capture the consumers who were surveyed perception of the organization (Heere, 2010). As Heere (2010) states, managers "own" and manipulate the brand personality which, in turn, gives them more insight of what the associations should be. This research fills in the gap between the perceived brand personality by a manager/marketer and the consumer (Heere, 2010).

Heere's (2010) approach has not been widely used to date in research. Outside this study, one other study adapted the approach was a study on social media users and non-users for a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) event (Walsh, Clavio, Lovell, & Blaszk, 2013). Their study yielded similar results. As noted by Heere (2010), the personalities of the brand should be developed by the managers within the organization. As for this study, athletes have their own characteristics and should be the ones who are portraying those characteristics on Twitter.

Greenhalgh et al. (2017) developed a framework that called for both administrators and stakeholders, both fans and non-fans to create team specific team based brand personality items. The goal of the study was to find the most appropriate method to finding brand personality characteristics. The authors uniquely had administrators, fans and non-fans provide identify the adjectives to provide a more holistic view of the brand. This created various points of view in how fans identified the specific team brand. Findings note that administrators are more likely to identify adjectives that are noted by both fans and non-fans.

Carlson and Donovan (2013) examined brand personality characteristics of two specific NFL players, Tony Romo and Terrell Owens. As such, all 15 items of Aaker's (1997) Brand Personality Scale were pretested to assess the relevance to a professional football player. Consistent with Carlson, Donovan, and Cumiskey (2009) findings, the five brand personality attributes were: toughness, charming, wholesome, imaginative, and successful were used to assess brand personality of an athlete. Findings highlighted that consumers view athletes as human brands that have their own unique brand personalities. "The findings underscore and extend the work of Aaker (1997) and Thomson (2006) by demonstrating that intangible human

brands, as well as more traditional tangible brands, have a brand personality” (Carlson & Donovan, 2013, p. 202). These findings laid the groundwork for examining athlete brand personality research. As noted by Carlson and Donovan (2013), “...brand personality of individual athletes may be very important for organizations associated with sport.”

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the brand personality traits athletes possess on Twitter. Utilizing a list of athlete brand personality characteristics generated and created by the researchers as well as conducting a thematic analysis for additional items, this study uncovered athlete Twitter brand personality characteristics. Brand personality research within sport is developing and focused primarily on team sport (Carlson et al., 2009; Greenhalgh et. al., 2017). 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). Additionally, this study continues the building blocks of previous brand personality measurements (Braunstein & Ross; Greenhalgh et al., 2017; Heere; Ross 2008). Likewise, this study builds on previous athlete brand personality research (Carlson & Donovan, 2013), but also provides starting point for generating athlete brand personality items on Twitter.

Many athletes have achieved the status of celebrity amongst their fans (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). Athletes such as Lebron James (i.e. King James), Cam Newton (i.e. Superman), and Yoenis Cespedes (i.e. Yo Knows Beisbol), 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). Athletes are able to use their celebrity to create an economic benefit to them well beyond the playing field.

One arena that could 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. 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 brand personality utilizing brand personality characteristics uncovered specifically for an athlete. This study will add to the growing body of sport communication and marketing research focused on Twitter, as well as adds to the brand personality research. Specifically, this study will expand on athlete brand personality research by developing athlete specific brand personality characteristics.

Method

In order to examine athlete brand personalities on Twitter it was first necessary to develop a list of general brand personality attributes which could be associated with athletes. The researchers conducted a three-stage process to develop athlete brand personality items. First, the researchers set out to identify athlete brand personality characteristics that could be associated with athletes. In order to accomplish this, the researchers examined prior brand personality

literature to identify brand personality characteristics that could be associated with an athlete. The brand personality dimensions were derived from Aaker's (1997) Brand Personality Scale (BPS) as well as other studies who have used Aaker's scale in a sport setting (e.g. Braunstein & Ross, 2010; Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Carlson et al., 2009; Ross, 2008). After examining the aforementioned literature, 88 total items were identified from those studies.

Following the identification stage of the 88 items the next step in the study was the "purification stage" (Lee et al., 2012). The researchers thoroughly went through the 88 items, examining for items that were consistently utilized in the sport brand personality research, overlapping items, items that may be similar, and items that may not be associated with an athlete. After completing the purification stage, the researchers identified 32 potential dimensions that would fit athletes and brand personality items. The 32 items originally selected were considered athlete-specific. The brand personality dimensions that the researcher deemed appropriate for being associated with an athlete were then sent to an expert panel for review. The expert panel derived of three professors (two males and one female) who have done extensive research with brand personality in sport. The panel was asked to examine the characteristics for consistency, overlap, applicability to an athlete, and determine whether dimensions should be added or deleted. The expert panel provided specific word changes that may be a closer match with athletes than other brand personality research. For example, the expert panel suggested changing brand personality characteristic "classic" to "traditional" as the panel felt that would relate more to an athlete. The researcher made the necessary adjustments that were suggested by the panel. After going through the review process, 32 characteristics remained. Those final characteristics are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Brand Personality Characteristics Associated with an Athlete

Brand Personality Characteristics		
Aggressive	Artistic	Arrogant
Athletic	Confident	Cool
Corporate	Creative	Exciting
Feminine	Flashy	Fun
Glamorous	Happy	Hard working
Humorous	Influential	Intelligent
Leader	Lively	Masculine
Original	Rugged	Serious
Strong	Successful	Technical
Traditional	Trendy	Tough
Upper Class	Unique	Wholesome

Following the recommendations from the expert panel, a link to a self-administered web-based survey was sent out via Twitter to two different sport blogger's Twitter followers and the researcher's Twitter feed. These bloggers have their own team blogs and have more than 20,000 followers. Both bloggers sent out the survey four times over the course of two weeks. Prior to beginning the study a qualifying item was asked. The qualifying item asked if the participant follows athletes on Twitter. If they did not, the survey took them to a disqualification page. This was to help identify Twitter users who followed athletes, and as such would be exposed to athlete

posts and their content. The survey included 32 brand personality items which were measured on a 7-point Likert scale. The item asked, "In general, please evaluate the extent to which each of the following items could describe how professional athletes portray themselves on Twitter." The participants were asked to measure using the following anchors: 1 = 'Characteristic Never Portrayed' and 7 = 'Characteristic Always Portrayed'. If the participant believed a characteristic was not included, there was an opportunity for them to note that in the survey.

Analysis

After collecting the data, mean scores of the brand personality characteristics were assessed. In total, 110 surveys were deemed usable. This number was deemed appropriate as previous

brand personality research which has utilized pretests had samples with as little as 51 participants (Lee & Cho, 2012) and as many as 155 participants (Agarwall & McGill, 2012). The participants were mostly male (67.2%) and Caucasian (81.9%) with an average age of 28.4.

Brand personality items that scored above a 4.0 (seen in 50% of athlete tweets) were deemed as acceptable for further analysis. With this being the first study to measure athlete brand personality characteristics on Twitter, the researchers wanted to create an athlete characteristic base that could be used in future studies. If the consumer recognized these characteristics in more than 50% of the tweets (4.0) it would provide a solid foundation 16 characteristics rated above the 4.0 threshold (Table 2). The identified characteristics were athletic, confident, cool, exciting, flashy, fun, happy, hard-working, humorous, leader, lively, masculine, strong, successful, trendy, and tough.

Table 2: *Generic Brand Personality items for an athlete on Twitter*

Brand Personality Characteristics	
Aggressive	2.65
Artistic	2.65
Arrogant	3.09
Athletic	4.72
Confident	5.42
Cool	4.96
Corporate	3.46
Creative	3.29
Exciting	4.33
Flashy	4.12
Fun	4.89
Glamorous	3.49
Happy	5.22
Hard working	5.22
Humorous	4.26
Influential	3.26
Intelligent	3.99
Leader	4.35
Lively	4.59
Masculine	4.56
Original	3.83
Rugged	3.12
Serious	3.62
Strong	4.34
Successful	4.89
Technical	2.69
Traditional	3.23
Trendy	4.20
Tough	4.25
Upper Class	3.46
Unique	3.92
Wholesome	3.66

Prior to selecting possible athletes to test the brand personality characteristics, a social media expert panel was used to define an active Twitter user. The researchers wanted to define an active Twitter user to examine only active Twitter users. The expert panel consisted of four members (three males and one female) from two different countries that have done extensive research on social media and Twitter. The following two questions were asked: 'What defines an active Twitter poster?', and 'Is there a specific amount of tweets, followers, or other variables that makes a person an active Twitter poster?' While various opinions existed, the researchers were able to draw conclusions with the various experts. There are two such types of Twitter users: an active Twitter poster and an active Twitter user. An active Twitter poster is someone who posts at least one to two times per week over the lifetime of their Twitter account. An active Twitter user is someone who is on Twitter but posts less than one time per week. The amount of followers has no bearing on either type of Twitter user. For this study, the researchers identified athletes who are active Twitter posters. The researchers wanted active athletes on Twitter because they were most likely to display their unique brand personality.

To determine the athletes that will be part of the sample, the website, tweetingathletes.com was used to validate an athlete's Twitter account. The athletes selected for the study are from two of the

"Big four" sports, MLB and the NFL (Frederick, et al., 2012; Wenner, 1998). This study used two athletes which is in line with previous literature that utilized two athletes in their examination of athlete brand personality (Carlson & Donovan, 2013) and athletes on Twitter (Frederick et al., 2012, 2014). The two athletes selected for this study were used because they fit the qualifications of an active Twitter poster. The athletes selected were Curtis Granderson of the New York Mets and Eric Decker who was a member of the New York Jets at the time of this

study. The two athletes used in this study were Twitter verified, had over 100,000 followers, and have been tweeting at least one to two times a week during the life of their account.

To ensure all characteristics were captured, a thematic analysis was conducted on two athletes that were not used in the study. Furthermore, this provided the researcher an opportunity to operationalize each brand personality characteristic. The tweets were collected using a data collection program known as NVIVO10. NVIVO10 allows the researcher to collect tweets of specific athletes on Twitter. The tweets were then analyzed through a thematic analysis. Themes were created and revised by researchers during a review of data (Saldana, 2009). Therefore, the researchers analyzed tweets from two different athletes, noting there were six new themes emerging; reaching the theoretical saturation point. The coder examined the tweets from the two athletes and placed them into one of the 16 athlete brand personality categories. If a specific tweet did not fit, it was left to examine further. A thematic analysis has not been used in brand personality research, but has been used in social media sport research (Hambrick, Frederick, & Sanderson, 2015).

A deductive approach was utilized to determine whether each individual tweet fit into the categories. After analyzing 200 tweets from each of the two athletes, all of the 16 athlete brand personality traits were defined. Further, the additional brand personality characteristics were coded and defined. The additional brand personality characteristics that emerged from the thematic analysis were *corporate*, *supportive*, *appreciative*, *family-man*, *inspirational*, and *influential*. With these additions, a total of 22 athlete brand personality characteristics were ultimately identified.

Following the thematic analysis, a content analysis was administered by the researchers. This methodology was utilized to highlight the most salient brand personality items being displayed by each of the athletes used in this study. Content analysis has often been used in social media research (Abeza, 2017; Sauder & Blaszk, 2017; Blaszk et al., 2012; Frederick et al., 2012; Hambrick et al, 2010; Hull, 2014; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010) to examine athlete usage patterns.

Coding/Results

To set a coding protocol for this study, a set of guidelines was set for coding the personality of a tweet. These items were derived from the researcher and the thematic analysis. The codebook provided a definition as well as examples. Two variables were used to code each tweet. The two variables identified the athlete and the personality characteristic of each tweet. Additional variables were collected for each athlete and were identified, such as the number of followers, number of accounts the athlete is following, and number of tweets the athlete tweeted when data was collected.

Three coders were selected to code the brand personality content of each tweet. Coders were selected based on their familiarity with Twitter and their previous understanding of content analysis. Intercoder reliability was established before the data set for all athletes. A *kappa* coefficient of .75 or higher is an acceptable level of intercoder reliability (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Fleiss (1981) notes that *kappa* values over .75 are excellent. After conducting intercoder reliability for this study, all *fleiss' kappa* coefficients were above .75. Specifically all were between .91 and 1.00. With this being an exploratory study, percentage agreement amongst the coders was also calculated. The percentage agreement between the coders was 93.4%. Granderson's tweets were mostly comprised of the brand personality traits of leader (41 tweets),

happy (28), and appreciative (28). Decker's tweets were found to primarily contain the brand personality traits corporate (42 tweets), supportive (30), trendy (29), and family-man (24). Table 3 notes the brand personality characteristics that were found for each athlete in the content analysis.

Table 3: *Twitter Brand Personality Characteristics Highlighted by Athlete (N = 400)*

Characteristic	Curtis Granderson	Eric Decker
Appreciative	28	7
Athletic	12	2
Confident	2	0
Cool	8	5
Corporate	18	42
Exciting	4	19
Family-man	0	24
Flashy	0	0
Fun	8	3
Happy	28	6
Hard-working	5	3
Humorous	11	14
Influential	3	0
Inspirational	0	0
Leader	41	3
Lively	2	1
Masculine	0	2
Strong	0	1
Successful	5	8
Supportive	19	30
Trendy	6	29
Tough	0	1

Theoretical Implications

The results provide a number of theoretical implications. Prior to this study, there was not set definition for what an "active" Twitter poster was. While not the primary purpose of this study, prior to athlete selection it was necessary to define what an active Twitter poster was in order to determine what athletes were deemed suitable for this study. This should not be confused with what an "active" Twitter account is. Twitter defines an active account as any person who has logged onto Twitter within the last three months (Twitter, 2016). While this was determined as a starting point to define what an active Twitter account was, it did not answer the question of an active Twitter poster. Furthermore, logging into Twitter

once in the last three months did not seem to be an appropriate measuring stick of someone who is active. The researcher sought out an expert panel who has previously conducted research on Twitter. While the expert panel had varying time usage estimates and constraints, a common theme emerged. Thus, an active Twitter poster can be defined as, any person who, on average, post at least 1-2 times a week during the life time of their account. This definition can provide a starting point for future research which wishes to examine athletes who are active on Twitter. However, as Twitter and social media in general, continues to evolve future research should reexamine this definition.

Research on social media, specifically Twitter, has begun to move in a consumer need and marketing direction. Early research on Twitter focused on patterns of specific audiences. Kassing and Sanderson (2010) examined professional cyclist tweets during the Giro D'Italia, Hull (2014) examined professional golfers tweets during the Masters tournament, Blaszk et al. (2012) and Reichart-Smith and Smith (2012) examined hashtag usage by different audiences, and Hambrick et al. (2010), Pegoraro (2010), and Frederick et al. (2012) examined various athlete tweets. These studies laid the foundation for Twitter research within in sport. As such, the present study has added to this foundational research by connecting brand personality and the use of Twitter by athletes.

While Carlson & Donovan (2013) provided a great start to examining athlete brand personality, the brand personality items used from Aaker's (1997) scale have been deemed not valid in a sport context (Braunstein & Ross, 2010; Ross, 2008). The researchers utilized a quasi-form of

Heere's (2010) idea of each team has its own "unique" characteristics and applied that idea to athletes by creating a list of characteristics that could be applied to athletes.

The list of characteristics was created using previous brand personality research outside of sport (Aaker, 1997) and within sport (e.g. Braunstein & Ross, 2010; Ross, 2008, Walsh & Ross, 2007) and was sent to an expert panel who had previously done research within sport and brand personality. The 22 characteristics uncovered in this study have laid a foundation for future athlete brand personality research.

Athletes have been able to establish themselves as being their own human brand. Prior to athlete brand personality research conducted by Carlson and Donovan (2013), research on brand personality in sport was limited to teams and events. The results of this study further indicate that brand personality can also be applied to human brands, specifically athletes. With the finding of the new 22 athlete brand personality characteristics, athlete brand personality can now be examined differently than it was in prior research. Aaker's (1997) intent when measuring brand personality was to examine inanimate objects. This study provides further groundwork for examining humans as having brand personality and being their own brand. Twitter provides a vehicle for athletes to influence their brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993, 1998). Brand personality provides an opportunity for the athlete to be different or a unique brand. While athletes may have similar attributes, it is their own brand personality characteristics that will make them more distinct.

With Twitter, athletes are able to establish their own space to create, establish, and reinforce their brand. As such, teams and athletes are sharing the same social media space. While both will have separate brand personality characteristics, the team and athlete need to have some overlap. Some athletes (e.g. David Wright and the New York Mets) will have an easier time cross promoting each other. Athletes who have changed teams (e.g. David Price) multiple times make it more of a challenge to sell each other in the social media space.

This study examined two athlete's brand personality characteristics that were trying to be portrayed on Twitter. Prior to this study, tweets were mainly placed into categories such as 'type of tweet'. However, this study categorized tweets based on personality characteristics. This gave the tweets more "life" than prior categorization methods. Furthermore, as an initial step, each athlete's tweets were examined to see which tweets were the most salient brand personality characteristics. Walsh et al. (2013) examined an NCAA championship event and their Facebook page and noted that the opportunity is there to build a positive impact on a sport organization's brand. Similar to Walsh et al. (2013) and Carlson and Donovan (2013), there is great potential to build community through the brand with social media.

This study provided a first step in analyzing athlete brand personality on Twitter. No other study to date has created specific brand personality characteristics for athletes. It should also be noted that these brand personality items were used to measure brand personality items on Twitter. While social media is a critical component of measuring brand personality for athletes, these findings should not be generalized to non-Twitter brand personality research. Perhaps, the original list of 32 athlete brand personality items can be tested outside of social media research as well to determine their applicability.

Practical Implications

“Brand personality of individual athletes may be very important for organizations associated with sport” (Carlson & Donovan, 2013, p. 204). While the crux of this study was exploratory in nature, some important practical implications emerged as a result of the findings. As stated earlier, the brand personality characteristics examined were unique to this study and are a building block for the development of athlete brand personality research. Athletes today are able to build a brand through traditional media, sponsorship, and social media (e.g. Green, 2016; Reichart-Smith and Sanderson 2015). Creating an athlete brand personality is critical for athletes to develop unique social media strategies. While this study used Twitter as the platform, it should be noted that athletes can use also other social media sites such as Facebook or Instagram to highlight their personal brand personality characteristics (Reichart-Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Building a relationship with their specific followers could be critical in developing their human brand personality (Carlson & Donovan, 2013).

The development of these brand personality characteristics on Twitter could be an important avenue for both the athletes and their audience. For example, Twitter can provide a forum for the athlete to become not just a brand with a unique personality, but rather what Vincent, Hill, and Lee (2009) described as an athlete with a portfolio of brands. That is, Twitter allows the athlete to showcase multiple sides of their life – athlete, spouse, celebrity, parent, etc. It is from these unique personalities that athletes may be able to develop endorsement and business opportunities. For example, athlete endorsements are based on the premise that companies hope to gain from the unique image of an athlete and take on their characteristics as their own (McCracken, 1989). Therefore, athletes may be able to use Twitter to develop some of the unique characteristics found in this study in order to become more desirable for potential companies seeking an athlete to endorse their product. For instance, Noah Syndergaard is well known on Twitter for posting humorous, sarcastic and about his persona as “Thor”. This could allow Syndergaard to become associated with companies such as Marvel who hope to gain from Syndergaard’s image or may just be a logical fit as an endorser as they both share the same image. In addition, athletes are continuing to use their brand image to develop athlete brand products, or brand extensions (Walsh & Williams, 2017). If athlete’s can utilize Twitter to highlight unique brand personality traits, and develop these traits that they are highly associated with the athlete’s individual brand, this may aid in developing brand extensions. Specifically, research would suggest that the image of the athlete is one of the most important factors in determining the success of any brand extension introduced by an athlete (Walsh & Williams, 2017). Twitter may be another forum athletes can use to cultivate this strong brand personality and image. For example, Maria Sharapova has utilized Twitter, and other mediums, to promote her unique brand personality characteristics of being fun and high-class. Developing these characteristics allowed Sharapova to develop her Sugarpova brand extension, which is an expensive, high-end candy product sold primarily in luxury retail outlets.

A large number of sport organizations are using Twitter to share information. These organizations should focus on the team’s players through Twitter by developing a social media marketing plan that shares information about specific players. This would allow the players to enhance their brand personality while at the same time providing the organization with the opportunity to impact their brand through the player’s unique brand personality characteristics. Some organizations have done a good job with this while others have struggled. For example, the Los Angeles Kings are known for having one of the best Twitter presences. However, they lack the promotion of their athletes, and therefore miss out on marketing potential. Conversely, this could help marketers who associate with a specific product. Marketers could examine these

brand personality items to see if athletes “fit” being associated with their product. Specifically, athletes who have certain brand personality characteristics could endorse a particular product.

Consequently, there could be a lack of consistency between the athlete and team. If a team focuses too much on a specific athlete, the consumer may not identify with the team as easily. While teams try to build their specific identification with their fans, players of those specific teams are also creating and developing their own brand personality. Teams need to be aware of how the athlete is using their brand personality characteristics in congruence with their team identification. The overall identification by the consumer of the team could have an impact on the athlete and the team. For example, consumers may be highly identified with a specific team (i.e. New York Mets) and specific players of that team. It is important for teams to identify themselves as well as the players on their roster. Twitter provides an excellent avenue for both parties to exist, but also provide a platform for consumers to identify with the teams and athletes.

Conclusions and Future Research

The continued growth of social media has influenced the way athletes and fans are able to build relationships. Fans of specific athletes are no longer shielded from an athlete’s personal life. Research within social media and sport has found that fans are looking for interaction as well as information sharing that is usually personal. Athletes who are consistent with their messaging on Twitter are able to show what type of personality traits they are trying to forge with their followers. Highlighting specific brand personality characteristics could be critical for any athlete who is looking to create a relationship with their fan base. Many athletes broadcast their sport and daily lives on Twitter, which helps provide a necessary area to research. Therefore, examining athlete brand personality characteristics through Twitter is a worthwhile endeavor. Specifically, sport communication and marketers should focus on brand personality as a critical avenue to understand.

This study is the first known attempt to examine athlete brand personality through Twitter. Further, to better understand athlete brand personality, more academic inquiries are needed using the athlete brand personality items that have been created by this study. This study is only first step in a long line of future research.

While this study provides a good initial examination of athlete brand personality on Twitter, there are some limitations and areas where future research could expand on this study. First, two athletes with two different groups of followers were surveyed. The study only used professional athletes. Using other team-sport athletes or non-team sport athletes could have provided different results. . In addition, the researchers did not use female athletes in this study. Another limitation and future direction for future research would be to examine team sport female athletes (e.g. U.S. Women’s Soccer Team). While the list was created for athletes in general, certain characteristics (e.g. masculine) would need adjusted for female athletes.

The creation of athlete brand personality characteristics was the first step in examining athlete brand personality. While Heere (2010) created his free-thought listing approach to identify specific brand personality characteristics of a particular team, this approach could be used for athletes as well. A future inquiry could identify athletes to participate in the study and develop their own unique brand personality characteristics. While the list of athlete Twitter brand personalities is a good first step, creating the individual characteristics created by the athlete would be the next step in the research. To do this, athletes would need to participate in the

study. As stated earlier by the researcher, each athlete has their own unique brand personality. Using the 22 athlete Twitter brand personality characteristics, as well as the athlete created brand personality characteristics, could provide unique insight into each athlete's personality.

This study only examined team-sport athletes. Since the findings cannot be generalized because of the individualistic qualities of brand personality, examining other types of athletes is another venture. A future inquiry could examine athletes who compete in non-team sport sports from either a mainstream or niche sport. These athletes typically monetize and market strictly through themselves with very little, if any league affiliation. These athletes have the unique niche of being on an individual platform rather than on a team that could be made up of 50 or more players. These athletes also don't have restrictions on Twitter. This could provide more of a "real" view of the athlete.

In terms of communication and Twitter research, this study has taken the next step. To date, many of the Twitter inquiries have focused on what is being said by athletes, teams, and events through content analysis. We now know what different constituents are saying on this medium, now the examination should focus on the consumer. Ultimately, the athlete and sport organization needs to be concerned with getting the Twitter followers into paying consumers. For instance, future research could examine if different types of athlete Twitter brand personality characteristics ultimately influence purchase decisions of merchandise, tickets, etc. This would help not only the athlete, but the sport organization as well.

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