The impact of social networks in the development of a personal sports brand

Green, M R

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The Impact of Social Networks in the Development of a Personal Sports Brand

ABSTRACT

Purpose – Over the last two decades the subject and growth of social media has been exponential, along with its relevance to the sport marketing industry. The objective of this research was to investigate the strategic usage of social networking websites to develop the concept of a personal brand by international rugby union players.

Design/methodology/approach – This study was embedded within an interpretivist paradigm that allowed the qualitative examination of the way international rugby players use social networking sites. The primary data collection method involved 10 semi-structured interviews and was triangulated with secondary sources which involved visiting the 3 social networking sites utilised by all the players (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram).

Findings – The research analysis revealed personal branding themes that can be classified according to the following mnemonic: 'PERFECT' Personality, Exposure, Response, Follow, Endorse, Consistent, and Target Audience.

Research Limitations/Implications – This study has focused entirely upon international rugby union players; therefore no claim is made for generalisability to other contexts. A potential area for future research lies in replicating this study in different sport settings in order to identify whether the identified contextual factors also play a role outside of international rugby union and for different gender, playing level or social media categories.

Practical implications – This study has reinforced that, within 'real-life' social networking contexts, the development of an online profile can help create differentiation for players in a highly competitive market, especially if they share similar 'sporting' characteristics with colleagues or other athletes. This research highlights that the utilisation of social networks by sports athletes has to become part of a strategic marketing strategy.

Originality/value – The authors draw attention to the theoretical position based on the PERFECT mnemonic offering sports athletes a framework to develop a successful online branding strategy. The central premise is based on emphasising uniqueness and distinction to offer a competitive advantage by delivering added value throughout various communications.

Keywords – Personal Branding, Athlete Brand Development, Social Networking, Co-branding, Rugby Union

Paper type: Research paper

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The past two decades has seen a fundamental shift in relation to the tools and strategies used by sports properties to communicate with customers and fans through the emergence of a phenomenon known as social media (Hoffman and Novak, 2012). This 'new' media describes a variety of online sources that are created, initiated, circulated and used by individual's intent on educating each other about various products, brands, services, sporting celebrities, and emerging issues (Barker *et al*., 2012). Social media encompasses a wide range of online, word-of-mouth forums including blogs, discussion boards and chat rooms, consumer-to-consumer e-mail, consumer product or service ratings websites, moblogs (sites containing digital audio, images, movies, or photographs), and social networking websites (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). As a result, the 21st century is witnessing an explosion of internet-based messages transmitted through these media which have become a major factor in influencing various aspects of consumer behaviour including awareness, information acquisition, opinions, attitudes, purchase intention, and post-purchase evaluation. Consequently, sporting athletes who utilise this new media effectively have found the development of individual brand value can help influence marketability, popularity, and commercial opportunities.

The specifics of what content will help to increase followers and develop fan engagement through the concept of building personal brands has yet to be fully considered within the academic community and forms the basis for this research. There is no such thing as 'the perfect online profile', however the research objectives intend to create a framework based on the unique factors sports athletes will need to consider. More specifically, this study will investigate the strategic usage of social networking websites to develop the concept of a personal brand by international rugby union players. The distinctive nature of this research is evidenced through a simultaneous examination of both personal and professional online relationships in the months preceding the 2015 Rugby World Cup.

There is a transparency in the sports industry that creates unparalleled opportunity for personal brand development and social networking sites are being used more frequently by athletes as a tool to communicate with fans (Pedersen *et al.,* 2007). For example, Facebook is used to provide longer pieces of content, post pictures and promote upcoming events. YouTube has been used to share videos with fans, whereas Twitter is a 'conversational' source of information which is more appropriate for fan engagement through its live nature (Kietzmann *et al.,* 2011). The growth of Twitter has been noticed in the sport industry, it is now commonplace to hear about athletes who "tweet" or upload photos related to hobbies, eating habits or even providing support for a political cause. Cristiano Ronaldo (global initiatives), Kobe Bryant (personal photos), Rafael Nadal (emotional experiences) and Russell Wilson (underprivileged children) have all used social networks to connect with fans and develop effective personal branding. In addition, developments with mobile phones and tablets have allowed social media to flourish and now football stadiums such as Liverpool's (Anfield) and Manchester City's (The Etihad), offer fans free Wi-Fi, enabling not only more interactions at live events but more commercial activity too (Cave and Miller, 2015).

The growth and influence of social media within sport management practice is further evidenced by the recent work of Filo, Lock and Karg (2015). They reviewed 70 research articles investigating how new media technologies interact and allow co-creation linked to the development and sharing of user-generated content between brands and individuals. Specific papers have documented how international athletes have used social media to develop aspects of a personal brand e.g. (Butts, 2008; Clavio and Eagleman, 2011; Frederick *et al.,* 2014, 2012; Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2015; Hambrick *et al.,* 2013, 2010; Hambrick and Mahoney, 2011; Hull, 2014; Kassing and Sanderson, 2010; Lebel and Danylchuk, 2014, 2012; McEnnis, 2013; Pegoraro, 2010; Pegoraro and Jinnah, 2012). The central concepts emerging from the research involve image development, self-presentation, fan interaction, promotional strategies and exclusive content, however the application of theory within the investigations was relatively limited. Consequently, from a practical perspective, identifying the specific and unique factors from player accounts can improve our understanding of how individuals develop strategic co-branding initiatives, and open additional commercial streams with national governing bodies, leagues, individual teams or sponsorship companies.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Growth and Significance of Social Media

Social media has been defined as "Media for social interaction using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques to transform and broadcast online dialogues" (Brown, 2003). Active participation can be a powerful tool, the variety of platforms are global, open, transparent, non-hierarchical, interactive and real-time creating a positive change in consumer behaviour and enabling strategies for the development of personal sports brands. Since 2004, Kassing and Sanderson (2010) suggest the growth in this area has been near exponential. Back then, Facebook was arguably the most mature of the social networks but only had about 1 million users, whilst today it has evolved to register more than 1 billion (Nielsen, 2012). Although Facebook remains the most popular site, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter and LinkedIn have seen significant utilisation increases between 2012 and 2014. Recent figures show Instagram (400 million) has surpassed Twitter (304 million) for the first time from a user base perspective due to development within advertising operations and significant growth within South America and Asia (Sky News, 2015). Furthermore, multi-platform use is on the rise: 52% of online adults now use two or more social media sites, a significant increase from 2013, when it stood at 42% (Pew Research Centre, 2015). Increasingly, new age consumers are utilising multiple platforms to create, modify, share, and discuss content which can significantly impact athlete reputation, endorsement opportunities, and even survival.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations of Social Networks

Through the traditional communications paradigm, elements of the promotional mix are coordinated to develop an integrated marketing strategy, with the content, frequency, timing, and medium of communications dictated by the organisation or athlete in collaboration with paid agents (advertising agencies, sports agents, or public relations consultants) (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). The flow of information outside the boundaries of the paradigm has generally been confined to face to face, word-of-mouth communications among individual consumers or fans, which has minimal impact on the dynamics of the marketplace due to its limited dissemination (Mayzlin, 2006). However, in the era of new media, control over the content, timing, and frequency of information is being severely eroded. In a new paradigm (see Figure 1), presented by Mangold and Faulds (2009), information now also originates in the marketplace based on the experiences and interactions of sports consumers and is directed through various online platforms, magnifying the ability of individuals to communicate with each other. This 'groundswell' (Li and Bernhoff, 2008) has profoundly affected the concept of a global sports market and has bestowed consumers, fans and spectators with power they have not previously experienced. Within the new paradigm athletes need to recognise the power and critical nature of the discussions emanating through their social networking sites. The impact of these interactions has led Mangold and Faulds (2009) to illustrate that fans are now turning away from traditional forms of communication, and social networks have become a mass media vehicle for user generated content, information searches and post-purchase evaluations.
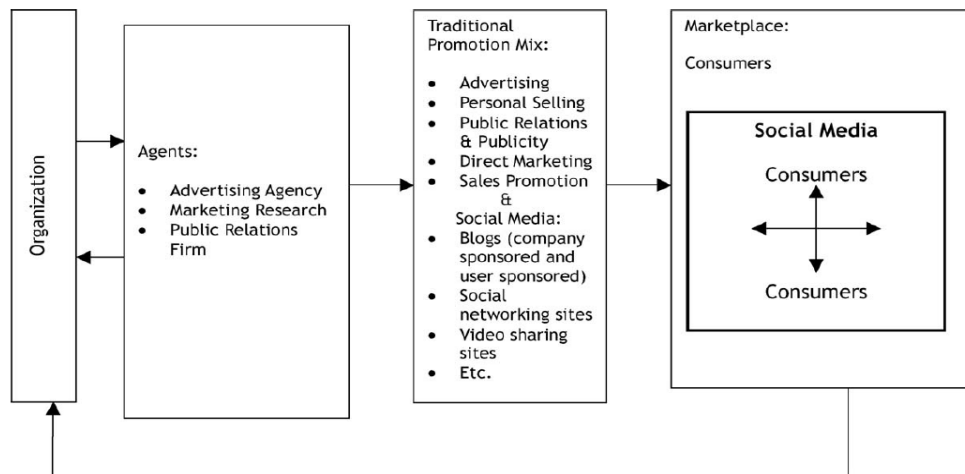
Figure 1: The new communications paradigm
Source: Mangold and Faulds (2009)

In response, Kietzmann *et al.,* (2011) developed a framework that defines social networks by using seven functional building blocks (Identity, Conversations, Sharing, Presence, Relationships, Reputation, and Groups). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) explain a user's **'Identity'** can often happen through the conscious or unconscious 'self-disclosure' of subjective information such as thoughts, feelings, likes, and dislikes. **'Conversations'** emerge so individuals can meet new like-minded people, to build their self-esteem, or to be on the cutting edge of new ideas or trending topics. In many cases the conversational 'velocity' which is based on rate and direction of the exchange (McCarthy *et al.,* 2010) can have major implications for how sports properties can make sense of the potential impact. **'Sharing'** represents the extent to which users discuss, distribute, and receive content however, Kietzmann *et al.,* (2011) contend that although sharing can lead users to converse and build relationships the success can ultimately depend on the functional objective of the platform or individual. **'Presence'** is the extent to which users are accessible to which Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) suggest that individuals should recognise how social network presence is influenced by the intimacy and immediacy of the relationship medium, and that higher levels of 'social' presence are likely to make conversations more influential. **'Relationships'** are based on the association that leads individuals to converse, share objects of sociality, meet up, or simply just list each other as a friend or fan. According to Safko (2010) the 'multiplexity' of this dimension exists when users are connected by more than one type of relationship such as sibling and business partner. In most cases **'Reputation'** is a matter of trust which refers to people but also their content and the **'Groups'** through which they form communities and sub-communities. Ultimately, Safko (2010) promotes the more 'social' a network becomes, the more reputable the group of friends, followers, and contacts.

2.3 Relationship Marketing and Social Networks

Relationship marketing is not a new concept to the sport industry as many sport properties utilise its core functions within strategic marketing operations (Harris and Ogbonna, 2009; Lapio and Speter, 2000; Stavros, Pope, and Winzar, 2008). The potential benefits of social

networking can be linked to relationship marketing via Grönroos (2004) who focused conceptually on communication, interaction, and value. The primary purpose behind the approach is to build long-term relationships offering athletes the opportunity to meet their personal branding goals and more significantly, offer support to consumers and organisations as they become active contributors to the construction of a brand profile (Williams and Chinn, 2010). In addition, Stavros, Pope, and Winzar (2008) suggest that as a facet of customer relationship management, relationship marketing contributes stronger customer connections to a brand, increased understanding, and enhanced loyalty. Consequently, the use of social networks in relationship marketing can develop the process of identifying, establishing, maintaining, enhancing, and when necessary, terminating emotional customer connections with supporters and other stakeholders, so that "the objectives of all parties are met" (Grönroos, 2004).

According to Grönroos (2004), there are many dimensions to relationship marketing with social networking providing the opportunity to focus on two core components, communication and interaction. Williams and Chinn (2010) suggest relationship marketing relies on planned messages and can be achieved through two-way or multi-way communication. Within social networks athletes have direct contact with the end users, providing them with the opportunity to generate planned advertising or sales promotions. However, Duncan and Moriarty (1997) also suggest that the unplanned messages could provide the most significant impact in developing interactions from both 'consumer to consumer' and 'consumer to the athletes'. According to Holmlund (1997) such interactions could occur by following an athlete, and interrelated interactions through conversations, sharing of information, or endorsements will combine to create a long term relationship.

The strategic utilisation of social media to develop relationship marketing in sport has been addressed by (Abreza *et al.,* 2013; Garcia, 2011; Hambrick and Kang, 2014; Hopkins, 2013; McCarthy *et al.,* 2014; Pronschinske, Groza and Walker, 2012; Waters *et al.,* 2011; Williams and Chinn, 2010). Essential findings include enhanced customer knowledge, 'live' interaction and engagement, improved efficiency, authenticity and new content (Filo, Lock and Karg, 2015). Furthermore, Garcia (2011) suggests that the alignment of communication among social media, traditional websites and other marketing tools is the key to effective relationship marketing whilst McCarthy *et al.,* (2014) found social media can be effective for brands to promote consumer relationships as well as build consumer communities in UK football clubs. However, concerns have been expressed throughout these studies that the concept of 'true' customers, resource allocation, generating revenue through social media and maintaining brand control is challenging. Consequently, O'Shea and Alonso (2011) highlight that sport organisations must constantly adapt to technological innovations and consider policy developments (Sanderson, 2011) to fully appreciate the implications this has for relationship marketing. Until recently, the communications between brands and consumers has largely been one way, however the Internet and associated technologies are seen as catalysts in changing this traditional dynamic (Meadows-Klue, 2008). These new online marketing platforms provide organisations with the prospect of connecting with their fans at a level far beyond the reach of traditional marketing. Sport organisations failing to adhere to

these changes, risk losing not only sports fans but also the opportunities that social media provides (Thompson *et al.,* 2014).

2.4 Social Networks and the Sports Market

Previous research by Witkemper, Lim, and Waldburger (2012) has been used to ascertain the reasons why individuals adopt social networks as a medium to follow their favourite athletes or teams, looking at both fan motivations and constraints. Concepts of motivation include; Entertainment (Gantz, 1981; Sloan, 1989; Zillman, Bryant, and Sapolsky, 1989); Affiliation to a team (fanship) or technical knowledge of the sport (James and Ridinger, 2002; Trail, Fink and Anderson, 2003); Connection with other fans (Branscombe and Wann, 1991; Guttman, 1986; McPherson, 1975; Sloan 1989; Smith 1988; Wenner and Gantz, 1989); Information (Korgaonkar and Wolin, 1999); Escapism (Korgaonkar and Wolin, 1999; Rubin, 1981); Economic (Korgaonkar and Wolin, 1999; Wolfradt and Doll, 2001); Personal communication (Wolfradt and Doll, 2001); Passing time (Rubin, 1981); and Content (James and Ridinger, 2002; Rubin, 1981). In addition, Seo and Green (2008) point out that in connection with the growing subculture of 'Fandom' supporters often want to express their opinions and talk about their favourite teams with others, consequently the use of social networks is becoming a new medium for this type of interaction.

Demographically, Clavio (2008, 2011) and Ozsoy (2011) revealed that social media users among sports fans are predominantly male, highly educated, affluent, and older whilst younger fans displayed significant use of Facebook and YouTube, but reduced involvement on Twitter. In addition, Clavio, Walsh and Coyle (2013) and Clavio and Kian (2010) identified that female followers were more likely to be motivated by information, commercial functions and social opportunities, while male followers were more likely to be motivated by physical attractiveness. Furthermore, the motives for engaging via social media have been examined by Mahan (2011) who demonstrated that the enjoyment factor of using platforms contributed to a positive response to sport organisations who also use social media whilst Clavio and Walsh (2013) and Ozsoy (2011) found that Facebook and Twitter are used by sport fans for interactivity and information-gathering. Through content analysis of Facebook pages for NBA teams, Stavros *et al.,* (2013) found that the influence of social media is due to the fact consumers are motivated to engage through passion, hope, fandom/esteem and camaraderie (Filo, Lock and Karg, 2015).

Suh *et al.,* (2010) suggest that sports athletes must embrace the concept to engage with an array of contacts including businesses and fans both internal and external to their associated club. This can help strengthen and leverage relationships, endorse causes, sponsors or products, or demonstrate a capacity for reflection instead of just action (Suh *et al.,* 2010). They further highlight how such open and clear communication can positively influence support, improve public image, and players can learn of emerging trends and issues. However, caution is offered by Sanderson (2014) who notes that the capacity to monitor athlete behaviour via social media represents a new service provided to sport organisations through developing technologies which Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) recognise as an important concept given the very public stage for miscommunication. Conceptually, the use

of social networks can be defined in the literature as an activity that brings enjoyment, freedom of choice, relaxation, and intrinsic motivation. However, the risks of using the various sites include managing both individual and social capital (Havard *et al.,* 2012) to ensure that friends, colleagues or teammates do not post comments or pictures that could damage professional reputations (Cummings, Butler and Kraut, 2002). In addition, managing intellectual capital must be considered in relation to the subject content and the potential impact in regards to race, religion, and sport regulations. According to Nie (2001) athletes have a responsibility to manage their progress through the quality and authenticity of the messages being sent.

2.5 Personal Branding in Sport

Burton and Chadwick (2008) contend that sport celebrities can have certain characteristics and embody particular unique features that distinguish them as being different to other athletes. This has led to the conceptualisation of the term 'Personal Brands', a term that implicitly asserts that such individuals are no longer just 'on-field' performers, they are also valuable 'off-field' commodities. Interestingly, within the modern sports landscape individuals have become such high profile commercial properties, other products and services regularly compete for association through strategic co-branding initiatives. Such alliances enabled Park *et al.,* (1996) to compare co-branding to the notion of "conceptual combinations" allowing Simonin and Ruth (1998) to promote the fact that consumer attitudes towards a brand alliance could influence subsequent impressions depending on factors such as product "fit" or image congruity. However, unlike other products and brands, individual human beings offer unique brand intangibles (Keller and Lehmann, 2006) which Burton and Chadwick (2008) highlight as **T**eam, **O**ff-Field, **P**hysical Characteristics, **S**uccess, **T**ransferability, **A**ge and **R**eputation through their development of the mnemonic 'TOPSTAR'. A brand is normally signified by a name (Coca-Cola), a design (Apple) or a symbol (Nike). Some corporations additionally use colours (e.g. Google) as part of their brand, while a number of brands (e.g. Mercedes-Benz) are currently thought to be working on brand smells. The reason is based on three key factors; (1) instant recognition for customers; (2) persuade and create reassurance of product quality and to differentiate from competitors; (3) create rival product offerings (Keller, 2003). The central premise offered by Keller and Lehmann (2003) being that these brands become automatic purchase choices within key target markets.

In addition, Aaker (1996) highlights how the concept of a brand is an important component of the tangible product, both from a functional or psychological perspective whilst also comprising a vital element of the product 'intangibles', in other words the part of the product that is difficult to specifically identify, see or touch. In the case of Apple, this could be the sense of brand identity or 'status' someone might derive from being seen to consume a product that other people know and like. Consequently, Aaker and Keller (1990) suggest that a particular brand will foster awareness and become instantly recognisable to consumers, create a stimulus, image or expectation in their minds, and help create a sense of trust to facilitate consumer purchase decisions. However, unlike the brands identified above that enjoy significant longevity, individuals within many sports have a relatively short 'shelf-life'.

The destiny of these young people is therefore foretold through a participation life-cycle and by nature of their 'performance', interestingly though, what happens with these talented people within their commercial lives is, in the main, unplanned.

Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) identified that the traditional outlets for self-presentation can be linked to Goffman's (1959) conceptual dimensions of 'front stage' and 'back stage' performances. Through the development of social media, athletes can now introduce followers to increasingly intimate elements or perspectives of their everyday lives. Previous research (Frederick *et al.,* 2014; Hull, 2014; Pegoraro and Jinnah, 2012; Kassing and Sanderson 2010; Pegoraro 2010) suggests that athletes discuss their personal (back stage) rather than professional (front stage) lives through interaction, offering behind the scenes access and differentiating a personal brand through direct communication with fans. Interestingly, Hambrick *et al.,* (2010) found that a low proportion of athlete tweets could be classed as explicit sponsor promotion and from a gender perspective female athletes have been found to be more brand and image conscious when using social media (Butts, 2008; Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012). To date, the research suggests that while personal brand management and promotion are inherent to social media use, a less explicit focus on this may be a more effective way of engaging consumers (Filo, Lock and Karg, 2015).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employed an exploratory design (Berg, 2001) with the purpose of the research to gain familiarity with a distinct phenomenon and acquire new insight which may formulate a platform for future studies. At present, there is a shortage of literature related to social networks in professional sport so the study was embedded within an interpretivist paradigm (Patton, 2002) that allowed the qualitative examination of the way international rugby player's use selected new media sites. The aim was to provide a 'practical understanding' of how their actions can help to create and develop a personal sports brand. To pursue an enquiry of this kind, a selection of current players within UK based international rugby union squads were conceived. It is worth noting the choice of sport was strategic with the investigation taking place approximately one year from the start of the Rugby World Cup 2015. The notion being that a global event provides a distinct focus for the participants and additional opportunities linked to brand development through social networks, especially with tournament being held in the UK.

3.1 Data Collection

To explore the perceptions and social networking activity of the players, the primary data collection method involved semi-structured interviews which are well suited to the exploration of attitudes, values, beliefs and motives. The decision to interview implies a value on personal language as data, and face-to-face interviewing provided an appropriate approach given the research focused on gaining insight and 'in-depth' understanding of social networking utilisation (Gillham 2000, page 11; Ritchie and Lewis 2003, p.138). Furthermore, this approach provided the opportunity to evaluate the validity of the answers by observing non-verbal indicators, which is particularly useful when discussing sensitive issues such as commercial endorsements as additional income streams. It is also worth noting that the interview data was triangulated (Denzin, 1978) with secondary sources which involved visiting popular social networking sites. For the participants this included Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as the only three utilised by all the players. A total of 1,034 publicly available posts by all players across these platforms were collated and categorised to examine how each player used the sites to communicate with supporters, players, sponsors and other organisations / individuals.

3.2 Sample Procedures

The interviews took place during the rugby union pre-season training period in July 2014 commencing at the respective team headquarters of each individual player and respondents were selected based on Patton's (2002) purposeful-criterion sampling technique. In relation to these guidelines the participants had to meet three key criteria: have national representative honours; consistent engagement with a minimum of two social networking sites; and a willingness to take part in the study. A total of n=10 interviews was conducted with players between the ages of (20-30 years) and the interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Due to confidentiality restrictions the identity of the players must remain anonymous and

consequently names were removed from the final transcripts replaced with labels ranging from Player A to Player J.

The analysis of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram was conducted firstly in September 2014 reviewing all posts during July and August 2014, and was then repeated in February 2015 covering all posts throughout December 2014 and January 2015 to support patterns of behaviour that emerged during the interviews. The 1,034 posts were categorised within three distinct groups linked to the development of a personal brand (1) Social Activities, (2) Sporting Environment, (3) Commercial Endorsement.

Although this sample size may invite criticism from quantitative researchers with reference to its ability to generalise to a larger population, Patton (1990) highlights that sample sizes in qualitative research are dependent upon what the data needs to show and the purpose of the inquiry. In addition, Flyvbjerg (2006) supports individual 'case-based' knowledge, suggesting the generalisability of small samples can be increased by the strategic selection of participants when the objective is to achieve the greatest possible amount of information on a given problem or phenomenon. He also argues that small studies can make a contribution to knowledge and the overall theoretical relevance, given the quality of such an inquiry tends to be enhanced if existing theories are carefully integrated in the work and the researcher aims to make a substantial contribution to the wider theoretical field. As the present study was an exploration into a new research area, the researcher believed targeting this elite population provided consistency whilst offering unparalleled social networking utilisation that would present high calibre insights into the motivations behind personal brand building activities.

3.3 Data Analysis

At the conclusion of the data collection, the interviews were manually coded and analysed in line with the interpretivist paradigm that underpinned this research, themes were not predefined, but rather emerged during the data collection and the analysis process in conjunction with a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). All interviews were electronically recorded with participant consent, and transcriptions were analysed thematically as the researcher searched for implicit and explicit patterns of similar meaning within the data (Guest and MacQueen 2008). Themes were allowed to emerge in an inductive manner, selected based upon their relevance to the research aims and also their relevance to each other (Saunders *et al.,* 2009).

Creating codes or categories of qualitative data facilitates the creation of a conceptual scheme specifically suitable to the data set (Basit, 2003). In this study, Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory analysis was utilised beginning with an 'open' coding approach involving the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualising, and categorising data followed by the allocation of tentative labels. The next stage included 'axial' coding, which involved refining the initial open codes so more specific labels could be allocated based on connections in the data. Finally, 'selective' coding identified the core categories through systematically validating the relationships via various matrix configurations and tables (Neuman, 2003).

The use of secondary data enabled methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978) as the social media posts facilitated validation of the qualitative data through cross verification and relevance to the selected primary codes. A full breakdown of the number of posts by each participant across the three social media platforms and the percentage relationship between the 3 categories is shown in table 1 below.

Table 1: Participant Posts by Social Media Platform

	Facebook		Twitter		Instagram	
	Jul/Aug	Dec/Jan	Jul/Aug	Dec/Jan	Jul/Aug	Dec/Jan
Participant A	7	14	38	25	24	20
Participant B	16	8	27	20	17	32
Participant C	8	11	18	30	16	27
Participant D	14	12	22	18	23	20
Participant E	7	6	30	22	15	16
Participant F	8	15	17	21	10	18
Participant G	10	6	20	18	17	15
Participant H	8	9	18	15	19	14
Participant I	15	10	20	22	19	18
Participant J	17	16	25	20	14	17
Total	**110**	**107**	**235**	**211**	**174**	**197**
Social	51%	63%	58%	49%	56%	55%
Sporting	29%	21%	26%	31%	32%	27%
Commercial	20%	16%	16%	20%	12%	18%

4.0 RESULTS

The themes established from the primary and secondary sources of data provided essential information in relation to the experiences of ten international rugby union players. The research analysis revealed the following themes which appear to encapsulate a large number of characteristics that can be classified according to the following mnemonic: 'PERFECT' **P**ersonality, **E**xposure, **R**esponse, **F**ollow, **E**ndorse, **C**reative, and **T**arget Audience. The following sections provide a detailed overview of the thematic analysis along with supplemental quotes from the interview transcripts and examples of social media utilisation.

Personality

The personality dimension relates to the portfolio of human characteristics attributable to a player which supporters and organisations can connect with. A salient view among all the players was the notion that social networks provide a significant platform to establish and reinforce 'normal' life behaviours. The opportunity exists to display personality traits outside of their traditional rugby commitments through the promotion of additional hobbies and interests. This ability to create richness or texture within a personal identity helps to guide the communication effort which Player A emphasised as the ability to offer 'meaningful insights' into other associated attributes. He stated "After a while I realised that revealing my favourite video games or TV shows had a significant impact on the number of fan responses". This notion was supported through a tweet that read "Massive thanks to @EATripleA for the new games looking forward to playing them all" generating comments, likes and retweets. Interestingly, Player D highlighted that the very nature of the rugby profession creates an image of 'masculinity' with players considered as athletic, sporty or tough. Consequently, he was conscious of the need to display additional layers to his personality and found social networks useful in being able to promote himself as family, community and charity orientated. The secondary data revealed personality based posts (social activities) as the most popular dimension with (Facebook 51% and 63%; Twitter 58% and 49%; Instagram 56% and 59%) accounting for unique insights into a players life outside of rugby.

Exposure

The concept of exposure is linked to an athletes need to develop their online presence and visibility through the use of exclusive material in relation to their professional rugby schedules and the performance environment. Player B suggested that creating 'valuable content' was possibly the most important way to create engagement and enrichment for his followers across social networks. This notion was supported by both Player C and F who stated that behind-the-scenes footage in relation to training approaches, diet and match day preparation were a few of the areas that offered "added value" to supporters. The mere presence of such unique material could help activate a new identity (hard working, dedication, and sacrifice), transferring cultural value into the personal brand. Player C reinforced this through Instagram with a picture of training and a message stating "Great session today on posture and power application". Consequently, this could mean exposure is

inexorably linked with the affective experience even though in this instance the 'brand' itself is not being used or consumed in a traditional sense. The social media analysis highlighted the sporting environment as the second most popular dimension and offered consistency across the three platforms with (Facebook 25% and 21%; Twitter 26% and 31%; Instagram 32% and 24%) providing exclusive rugby orientated posts.

Response

The response dimension is based on the concept that social networks allow individuals to be a part of the conversation offering players an 'instant' ability to influence their personal branding. Listening to followers was suggested as "one half of the equation", however engaging with fans was highlighted as significant by all the participants. Player F suggested that timing counts and most of the people who post a comment on your sites expect a response within 24 hours. This was supported by Player A who suggested that responding quickly and with value to your audience was just as important as listening. For him, new followers occur if people see that you take the time to consider the views of existing fans. Player E concurred by stating "responding is an important part of interacting and engaging with your audience, while also 'humanising' you and improving fan loyalty". Twitter was the number one platform utilised by the players accounting for 43% of the total posts and further analysis of each tweet highlighted that 97% of player responses to fans occurred within a 24 hour time frame. The issue of responding also proved quite emotive as Player J subtly noted that, "by not participating you can allow some individuals to control your image in a way that could be negative". He mentioned that on occasion he had felt obliged to correct inaccurate (media) and abusive (rival fans) posts although all participants were reflective of their duty to 'set an example' as role models and avoid 'trivial' online arguments.

Follow

The decision of 'who' to follow was included as a central function linked to the development of an online profile with participants expressing a need to monitor "key influencers" within the world of rugby union. Interestingly, it was revealed that all players receive media training for club and country and 'connections' are at the forefront of their minds when using social networks. Participant H offered that, engaging with individuals and organisations that have a mass following on social networks can create opportunities to share content or start conversations which ultimately widen potential exposure and bring additional networks closer. Accordingly, analysis of the social networking sites revealed strategies to follow major sports brands (Nike), commercial sponsors (Land Rover), elite athletes within rugby union (Richie McCaw) and other high profile sports (Roger Federer), journalists (Sonja McLaughan), actresses (Emma Watson), and charity organisations (Help for Heroes). Consequently, all participants believed this approach can facilitate a sense of organic growth and a shared view existed that they all enjoyed keeping 'up to date' with news from across the sport. However, Participants C and J did express concern in regards to "finding the right presence" between private and public audiences. A solution to this was provided by

Participant B who utilises the closed group functionality on Facebook for personal information allowing him to tactfully decline requests.

Endorse

The endorsement concept was viewed as a strategic element aimed at building and developing relationships from both an internal and external perspective. Participant E explained that 'retweeting' positive messages can initiate interactions with fans and sponsors where possible. According to Twitter, his support of a national independence day generated over three thousand retweets and over one thousand likes. All participants made reference to the fact that they have contract commitments to endorse club and international sponsors although Participant A did highlight the need for players to remain "authentic" in their promotions. In addition, it is also important to mention that only three of the participants made reference to the fact they have a management team who are responsible for creating commercial opportunities outside of rugby. Participant I said "obviously rugby commitments come first, but if my online profile allows other positive endorsement opportunities then great". This was supported by Participant D who stated that recently he has been asked by his agent to endorse product launches and special events following the creation of strategic partnerships. Although investigation into the various social media profiles highlighted endorsing brands such as Nando's, Barbour, Aspinal of London, Adidas and Zeus Events, commercially orientated posts was the lowest category with (Facebook 20% and 16%, Twitter 16% and 20%, Instagram 12% and 18%).

Creative

The concept of creativity is linked to the need for players to develop distinctive, innovative and interesting social networking sites based on the business principle of 'added-value'. Fan enrichment is crucial and the key message from the players was the need to creatively entice followers into the conversation. Participant B suggested the best way to do this was through "posing questions" and went on to say that he used Twitter to lead conversations in diverse topic areas such as fashion, travel, and food and drink. In addition, Participant G had used score predictor polls whilst Participant E had posted links to articles intended to provoke engagement. He said "I was able to promote a council petition designed to regulate a notorious accident blackspot through my social media accounts". Crucially, Participant A believed that online creativity helped build fan interactions and contributed to an increase in followers. He mentioned "Competitions linked to sports memorabilia seemed to attract lots of interest" which was supported by his Facebook page and Twitter account offering multiple opportunities to win match day tickets and signed team shirts.

Target Audience

Understanding your target audience is related to the view that players should not be sending mixed messages and information across different social networking sites. It is important that both tone and image are consistent throughout, specifically in relation to the kinds of ideas

and principles that players wish to espouse. Participant G offered that this can be achieved by the strategic utilisation of sites which includes uploading personal photos on Facebook sites for close friends and family, posting rugby images and news on Instagram for fans and spectators, and highlighting endorsements or promotional information on Twitter. Essentially, understanding your target audience and choosing specific sites to develop a consistent brand voice was seen as important for the players which Participant I referred to as a 'platform identity'. An interesting point was raised by Participant E who said "unfortunately the problem with social media is it allows people to create 'parody' or 'spoof' accounts so consistency is very important" the premise being that this can allow your fans to verify the authenticity of your communications. From an ideological perspective the philosophy of platform identity offers conceptual understanding however, analysis of the social media sites did not provide support through practical application. All the participants in this study utilised Facebook, Twitter and Instagram interchangeably for social, sporting and commercial related communication.

5.0 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the potential for social network utilisation to develop a personal sports brand centred on the notion that today, mobile technologies and online profiles are transforming sports and sports businesses. The findings suggest that building an online personality can create distinction and offer enduring qualities attractive to commercial and public organisations whilst opening additional communication topics with supporters who share similar interests. The sharing of personal lives and the provision of behind the scenes access (Armstrong *et al.,* 2014; Frederick *et al.,* 2014, 2012; Hull, 2014; Kassing and Sanderson, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010) reflects efforts by athletes to engage and cultivate relationships with fans (Vivek *et al.,* 2010). Hambrick, Frederick and Sanderson (2013) concur by highlighting that through digital technologies, athletes assert more control of their public presentation and introduce media narratives that may engage key target audiences. Secondary data analysis revealed social activity related posts as the most popular with 567 (55%) emanating from the three platforms showcasing the participants as conversationalists, behind-the-scenes reporters and informers (Lebel and Danylchuk, 2014). This supports the work by Pegoraro (2010) who found content pertaining to personal life (29%) and fan interaction (46%) accounted for the majority of professional golfer posts. Furthermore, the proposition from Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2015) suggests that, by not posting photos of themselves engaged in their sport, athletes might be missing out on opportunities to promote fan engagement and build a more successful brand via visual self-presentation. The participants in this study utilised Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to provide 289 (28%) posts, however this contradicts research by Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) and Sanderson (2010) who recognised sport insider related communication as the most salient athlete strategy.

Aaker (1997) explains that personality traits are built over a period of time and Sanderson and Hambrick (2012) note that now, communication, relationship development and promotion are fostered through the posting and sharing of content with consumers allowing individuals to form impressions of 'what to expect' adding pressure to the development of an online profile. In the context of social networking, the instantaneous and live features offer useful insights and in-depth understanding into both the consumer perception or supporter response towards player personality facilitated through exchange and interaction (Eagleman, 2013; McCarthy *et al.,* 2014; Pronschinske, Groza and Walker, 2012). Both Keller (2003) and Aaker (1996) highlight that brands are complex, multidimensional constructs with varied constellations of cultural meaning so brand exposure effects are likely not constrained to linear and unidimensional routes of expression and may serve cross purposes on various metrics. The participants made reference of the need to "take ownership" and "control" content across the various platforms, however Lebel and Danylchuk, (2014) caution that gaffes and blunders by athletes are painfully compounded by the current popularity of social media, and the scrutiny to which public figures are subjected. For the athletes in this study the frequent emergence of posts (Browning and Sanderson, 2012; Hambrick *et al.,* 2010; Kassing and Sanderson, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010) translates through the utilisation of images, handles

and designs across social networking pages placing a significant emphasis on the development of a personal brand.

This study has created a theoretical position based on the PERFECT mnemonic offering sports athletes a framework to develop a successful online branding strategy and suggests engagement with Facebook, Instagram and Twitter can facilitate meaningful relationships among communities of consumers (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). The central premise contradicts the idea to focus solely on building brand loyalty (Holland and Baker, 2001), but to foster relationships based on emphasising uniqueness and distinction. Collectively, the importance placed on using social media to build relationships demonstrates that these platforms are critical tools for mutual exchange (Grönroos, 2004). This, as Brodie *et al.,* (2013) profess will allow athletes to create competitive advantage through interactive and meaningful exposure and establish an emotional connection with supporters and companies by delivering added value throughout various communications. This symbolic approach to branding reinforces the concept of developing customer-based brand equity (Keller, 1993) which in this study occurs when fans and organisations are familiar with the brand and hold favourable, strong, and unique associations. The more exclusivity in the material offered by players will help to develop knowledge and a shared identity to drive positive sentiment and brand affinity (Richelieu, Lopez and Desbordes, 2008) complimenting the work by Armstrong *et al.,* (2014) who found that teams were able to nurture a unique identity through their creative and human approach to social networking.

The conceptual approach also connects with the work of Brodie *et al.,* (2013) by suggesting that value provided through co-creation to those who engage in online social communities with meaningful information will help to form a personal connection, trust and improved market perception. In addition, the findings suggest that by responding quickly, endorsing authentically, and strategically following key influencers from the shared sporting environment will encourage brand recall (Wyer and Srull 1989) and improve exposure in an increasingly competitive and often cluttered sports marketplace. Furthermore, Kwak *et al.,* (2010) found that consumer-generated content plays an important role in engaging individuals with lower identification levels and although Pegoraro (2014) portrayed Twitter as a disruptive innovation, the use of social media to create fan movements can lead to other positive outcomes such as increased consumption, sponsorship opportunities, and brand awareness (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2015). However, the commercial category offered the lowest total with only 175 (17%) posts from the participants confirming the work of Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) who also found publicist strategies were the least important to the development of an athlete's image.

A collection of motives including interactivity, information gathering, entertainment, fandom and camaraderie influence social media use and Clavio, Walsh and Coyle (2013) offer that gender and other demographic variables explain variation in these motives. For players it is important to remember that the reason they have a loyal fan base in the first place is likely linked to personality characteristics, quality of sporting performance, team affiliations and the way that they use additional associations to develop their brand (Arai *et al.,* 2014). While

further research on social media related audiences is necessary to determine perceived brand image, it is possible that athletes could target a broader and potentially more engaged audience by adopting the techniques which have evolved from this study. By doing so, Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2015) and Mahan (2011) suggest that athletes will attract followers with varying interests. The central function of creativity is fundamental in determining the extent of retrieval in an individual's memory and provides a significant contribution to the development of an online personal brand. This is one of the reasons brand recall is so powerful in shaping attitude and opinion (Till and Baack, 2005) within today's online social sphere and why fans are more engaged when athletes post a wide variety of content (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2015). To conclude, according to the research, athletes who are able to cultivate their social network presentation within the framework provided and cater content specifically to the sport fan experience will enjoy loyal followings and have the potential to develop and grow their personal brands.

5.1 Practical Implications

This study has reinforced that, within 'real-life' social networking contexts, the development of an online profile can help create differentiation for players in a highly competitive market, especially if they share similar 'sporting' characteristics with colleagues or other athletes. This study contributes to our understanding of how organisations who are looking to utilise sponsorship endorsements might find distinctive social profiles which offer synergy with their own brand characteristics. The results support the theoretical propositions that social networks can help to create individual brand based equity allowing players to develop long-term, powerful relationships which consequently become an integral part of the self-expression. In essence, the communication of a multi-layered individual could develop a self-identity that global brands may also wish to be associated with, especially in a contemporary society captivated by the emotion, passion, excitement and loyalty which are all central to the sporting environment. For sports athletes it is essential that they take the time to engage with fans and followers by providing unique and timely content and replying to messages on each platform. This research highlights that the utilisation of social networks by sports athletes should be part of a strategic marketing approach.

5.2. Limitations of the Study and Areas for Future Research

This study has focused entirely upon international rugby union players; therefore no claim is made for generalisability to other contexts, such as individuals in sports such as cricket and football. The unique characteristics of male and international level players in terms of patterns of behaviour, existing profile level and current brand associations may have impacted on the results obtained in this study; therefore no claim is made of generalisability to other players operating below the international level. Nonetheless, given the interest levels and value offered by international players in the UK, this group was deemed important to investigate. However, having identified an appropriate evaluation methodology, a potential area for future research lies in replicating this study in different sport settings in order to identify whether the identified contextual factors also play a role outside of international

rugby union and for different gender/playing level categories. A further limitation of this study was the use of non-random samples; also, the sample size was limited by the research resources and player availability. Therefore, a further area of future research is to replicate the study with larger samples and in connection with alternative social media / networking sites which could offer exposure to other marketing communications activity.

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