Investigating the Differences in Twitter Content and Effectiveness Between Individual and Team Sport Athletes

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Abstract

While the existing literature has categorized Twitter conversations and examined gender differences in professional athletes' online self-presentation initiatives, researchers have neglected to examine the differences in Twitter presentation between individual and team sport athletes. This study examined the differences in self-promotional content and effectiveness of Twitter activity between individual and team sport athletes. The authors utilized content analysis to categorize Twitter activity while a comparison not only between different types of athletes but also within categories was conducted by analyzing composite variables. While the findings confirmed the existence of content contrasts in the promotional category, no significant differences were observed in the remaining tweet categories. The analysis of fan perceptions identified team athlete tweets as more effective aside from the promotional category. Independently, the professional category was found to be most effective amongst team athlete tweets, while the athlete exchange category was deemed most effective amongst individual athlete tweets. The current study contributed to the understanding of self-promotional tactics utilized by two categories of athletes (i.e., individual and team) through the investigation of content of tweets and fan perception analysis. Key implications for the academic field and the sport marketing industry and recommendations for future research were discussed.

Keywords: social media, athlete brand, fan engagement, sport communication, self-presentation

1. Introduction

The resurgence of new communication technologies has virtually transformed the sport industry (Hutchins, 2011; Sanderson, 2011). Specifically, the traditional methods of production and consumption of media have been augmented by versatile online social media channels, which allow athletes to connect directly with a wider audience of followers and introduce the fans to a unique method for interacting with their favorite athletes (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010).

Williams and Chinn (2010) define social media as the tools, platforms, and applications that enable consumers to connect, communicate, and collaborate with others. Online communication technologies have been redefining the context of the fan-athlete interaction (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010) and professional sport teams have been the beneficiary of the trend by repositioning their marketing strategies to reach nascent market segments and supplementing their television broadcasting resources with social media instruments (Pronschiske, Groza, & Walker, 2012; Sanderson, 2011). Further, sport marketers can now better understand the intricacies of their brand communities by deciphering the real-time conversations on social media (Stavros, Meng, & Westberg, 2013).

Twitter is the platform that is perhaps most capable of delivering the content regarding the personal and social lives of professional athletes to fans (Hambrick et al., 2010), allowing sport organizations to promote their teams and increase fan engagement (Williams, Chinn, & Suleiman, 2014) and engaging athletes in direct conversations about their lives (Pegoraro, 2010). A variety of studies have concentrated on investigating athlete communication patterns on Twitter. For example, some scholars attempted to categorize athletes' tweets concluding that a minimal number of tweets were classified as promotional (Clavio, 2008; Hambrick et al., 2010; Seo & Green, 2008). Other researchers analyzed gender differences and how they influence athletes' self-presentational initiatives on Twitter (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). It was observed that female athletes dedicated a significant time managing their brand, whereas their male counterparts spent more time in the role of sport fan (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). Another investigation took a case study approach to examining how Twitter followers experienced a major sporting event and showed Twitter served to

increase immediacy between athletes and their followers (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Although the previous studies have examined professional athletes as a singular group, limited research has looked at differences that are present within each unique sport setting such as individual and team sports.

Whereas the categories of tweets, gender differences in the context of one sport, and content of Twitter conversations have received significant attention in the existing literature, no attention has been given to deciphering the differences in self-branding activities in the context of two distinctly different sport settings. Moreover, there is a lack of research on how fans perceive and consequently consume Twitter conversations initiated by these two groups of players. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to categorize and investigate differences in the content of social media activity between team sport athletes and individual sport athletes. Restated, this study furthered our understanding of the complexities associated with the athletes' self-promotional activities on the online social media network Twitter in the context of individual and team sport environments. Further, this study also examined the effectiveness of different categories of social media activity as well as the difference between the two different types of athletes (i.e., individual vs. team sport athletes) from the perspective of the sport consumer. A thorough understanding of the fan perception element will be beneficial to athletes and their brand managers in crafting the most effective promotional messages and solidifying their presence within the online fan community.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Athlete Branding

In the realm of sport marketing, a brand is defined as "a name, design, symbol, or any combination that a sports organization uses to differentiate its products from the competition" (Shank, 2001, p. 265). Keller (2008) asserted that a branded product may be a person such as David Beckham and Arai, Ko, & Ross (2014) echoed the point by suggesting that all individual athletes can be classified as brands because every athlete can be characterized based on their name, distinctive appearance, and a personality. Gilchrist (2005) took this notion a step further by urging to view the modern athletes as cultural objects that can be utilized as a brand. Gilchrist (2005) further explained that this trend has allowed major companies to exploit sport as a vehicle for tapping into dormant and emerging markets and therefore differentiating themselves from the competition. Michael Jordan was a pioneer in redefining the "player as product" concept and while some athletes are capable of representing a brand themselves like Michael Jordan, very few can hope to combine the skills, the championship results, and the engaging persona of Jordan's caliber (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2000).

It is becoming common practice to rely on talent management services of organizations such as IMG, which assist athletes with career and brand management to remain marketable (Arai et al., 2014; IMG, n.d.). Relationship effort involves an athlete's interactions with fans, and it is one of the dimensions of the marketable life style measurement within the model of athlete brand image (MABI) (Arai et al., 2014). In other words, athletes' interactions with the fan community can serve as an indicator of an athlete's value and personality (Arai et al., 2014).

Well-branded athletes are more appealing to companies seeking trustworthy endorsers because of their reliable engagement with the fan community. Athletes' careers are relatively unstable due to high injury proneness, which creates a need for caution and recognition of the significance of their actions and behaviors (Arai et al., 2014; Gilchrist, 2005). Given the importance of fan engagement and proliferation of social media content, athlete brand managers should recognize how these factors impact brand image of superstar athletes.

2.2 Categories of Tweet Content

Clavio (2008) identified uses of gratifications among internet collegiate sport message board users and yielded four primary dimensions of gratification, which included interactivity, information gathering, diversion, and argumentation. Seo and Green (2008) also developed a motivation scale for sport online consumption that included 10 dimensions that were consistent with past research and included the following: information, entertainment, interpersonal communication, escape, pass time, fanship, team support, fan expression, economic, and technical knowledge. Hambrick et al. (2010) examined Twitter use among professional athletes by investigating the content of 1,962 tweets and placing them into six categories that derived from studies conducted by Seo and Green (2008) and Clavio (2008). The categories used were interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content, fanship, and promotional.

Beyond just categorizing tweets, it was discovered that athletes' tweets tend to be more direct, unlike most impersonal communications filtered through a team's public relations department (Hambrick et al., 2010). Interestingly, the findings of Hambrick et al. (2010) indicate that only five percent of tweets fell under the promotional category. Considering the fact that the athletes did not release many promotional tweets in this study, Hambrick et al. (2010) still emphasize that Twitter users may find promotional tweets a useful information source, which sport organizations

should take advantage of. Furthermore, Hambrick et al. (2010) revealed similar findings that athletes use Twitter primarily for interactivity among friends and fans, but also through diversion, or non-sport-related communication, as well as information sharing of insights directly related to the athlete's team or sport. These categories made up 77 percent, or 1,514 of the 1,962 tweets analyzed (Hambrick et al., 2010).

In a similar case study, Pegoraro (2010) identified tweet content of the top five Twitter accounts for athletes in various sports using six different categories including relating to personal life, relating to business life, relating to their sport, other sport or athlete reference, responding to fans, or pop culture or landmark reference. The highest overall category result was responding to fans; however, it is interesting to note that only a few athletes, including Venus and Serena Williams of tennis, talked about their business affairs. Pegoraro (2010) concluded that few athletes have recognized the marketing potential of Twitter as the rest made little to no mention of their business affairs or products they endorse.

2.3 Tweet Effectiveness

Similarly, the effectiveness of such social media strategies has been studied. In a case study on a National Sport Organization in New Zealand, Thompson, Martin, Gee, and Eagleman (2014) were able to determine the effectiveness of social media strategies for the organization and concluded the following:

> Creative online strategies using technologies must be employed, monitored, and evaluated to ensure they continue to meet the needs and expectations of all stakeholders. Such strategies include the use of promotions, 'behind-the-scenes' material, and constant engagement and conversation with fans and followers. (p. 42)

Organizations must understand the needs and expectations of their fan base in terms of social media usage and how it aligns with the organization, how to develop, manage, and implement a social media strategic plan across various channels, and how to maintain clear guidelines for how success and effectiveness will be measured (Thompson et al., 2014). Furthermore, Campos, Anagnostopoulos, and Chadwick (2013), conducted a content analysis of tweets from nine different national sport governing bodies in England. Based on the number of replies and frequency of retweets, the evidence suggests that the content of tweets was essential for gaining and involving the followers and having them engage with the social media content (Campos et al., 2013).

The purpose of the present study was to identify the differences in content tweeted by team sport athletes versus individual sport athletes on their self-branding and identifying which content categories have the most impact on consumers as it relates to athlete branding. In order to further understand athletes' self-promotional activities on the online social media network Twitter in the context of individual and team sport environments, the following research questions were asked:

> RQ1: What are the differences in tweet content for individual sport athletes versus team sport athletes?
>
> RQ2: How does the tweet content differ in the promotional category between individual sport versus team sport athletes?
>
> RQ3: Which content categories do sport consumers perceive as most effective?

3. Methodology

3.1 Content Analysis

Content analysis was used to analyze and categorize the tweets. Content analysis is a research technique defined as "any qualitative and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings" (Patton, 2002, p. 453). In other words, content analysis is used in evaluating, interpreting and coding textual material into valid data. Content analysis was used in several studies that examined Twitter content to measure athlete-fan interaction (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010), the value of Twitter for sports fans (Williams et al., 2014), athlete endorsements and branding (Carlson & Donovan, 2008; Smith & Sanderson, 2015), uses and gratifications (Clavio, 2008), and athlete communication (Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010; Seo & Green, 2008). The abundance of studies in this area and the use of the content analysis technique for research in sports show the effective use of this technique to develop beneficial contributions.

3.2 Categories of Tweet Content

The subjects included team and individual sport professional players with verified Twitter accounts. Specifically, the Twitter activity of five players from each chosen sport were investigated. The authors independently coded tweets, utilized the data to conduct content analysis, generated new categories or sub-categories, and determined the most effective categories to reach consumers. Each tweet was coded by the authors and placed into the predetermined, corresponding categories. The existing categories have been developed through the research of Clavio (2008) and Seo

and Green (2008) and have been utilized in several past Twitter athlete content analysis studies (Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). The following categories were developed by Hambrick et al. (2010) from two past studies examining motivations for using sports websites (Seo & Green, 2008) and intercollegiate athletics message boards (Clavio, 2008). The current study borrowed the content frames from the existing studies and modified the labels while preserving the content of each category outlined in past literature. Moreover, our results revealed the existence of substantial Twitter content related to athlete training sessions and competition, which led to an independent professional category similar to the information sharing category originally highlighted in Hamrick et al. (2010). The labels were modified to the context of the current study due to the broad nature of the existing categories including information sharing and content specific in the existing literature (Hambrick et al., 2010). These categories include diversion, personal, athlete exchange, and promotional and are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Content categories and descriptions

Content Category	Description	Source
Diversion	Defined as "non-sports related elements of message boards, including politics, religion, staying in touch with old classmates, and non-athletic news about the user's alma mater" (p. viii). In the current study, this applied to tweets not related to sports, but did not include tweets associated with family or friends.	Clavio (2008)
Personal	Developed as part of diversion; however, in this study, personal was separated into its own category in order to gain a clearer understanding of the content of tweets, the use of personal interests in self-branding, and the contexts they are used in. This included messages about personal or social life through family, friends or other personal interests.	Clavio (2008) Hambrick et al. (2010)
Athlete Exchange	Combined the fanship motive of "reason that one considers oneself a huge fan of particular sports and teams" (p. 86) with argumentation category of "engaging in 'smack talk' and arguments with other users and observing the comments of fans of rival teams" (p. ix). This category included tweets about teams or players other than their own and can be both positive or negative.	Seo and Green (2008) Clavio (2008)
Promotional	Derived from economic motive, which is defined as the "motive to get promotional incentives that a team provides" (p. 86). This category will include tweets regarding athlete sponsorship, upcoming game promotions, tickets, giveaways, and self-promotional activities.	Seo and Green (2008)
Professional	Our results revealed the existence of substantial twitter content related to athlete training sessions and competition, which led to an independent professional category. Modified from Hambrick et al.'s (2010) information sharing category, the professional category includes content specifically related to athletes' practice sessions, games, and other events.	Modified from Information Sharing category (Hambrick et al, 2010)

In order to examine the content team sport athletes and individual athletes are tweeting about and to study differences in content, this study collected data from Twitter dating back a 30-day period from October 1st to October 31st, 2016. In similar studies, data was collected over a 7-day period (Pegoraro, 2010), 3-week period (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010) and 30-day period (Waters & Jamal, 2011). Through examination of the overall research study, it was determined that based on past research a 30-day period would be most effective in analyzing the most Twitter data and providing greater reliability in tweet content category placement.

In order to begin the study and data collection, the sports and athletes of interest were selected. The team sports identified were five professional sports in the United States including: basketball, American football, baseball, hockey, and soccer. The five individual professional sports included: golf, tennis, swimming, mixed martial arts, and extreme sports. These sports were chosen based on the Twitter activity of athletes found in these sports. Athletes of these sports were found to have the greatest number of followers, which was beneficial in the overall study.

3.3 Athlete Subjects

Once the sports were identified, the top five athletes by the number of followers from each sport were used in the sample as determined by fanpagelist.com's Top Athletes on Twitter. The top five athletes were chosen because while compiling the list, there has shown to be a significant dropoff in the number of followers after the fifth most followed athlete in each sport. This was most prevalent with NBA athletes in which there was a greater than one million follower differences between the fifth most followed athlete, Stephen Curry, and the sixth most followed athlete, Dwight Howard. The number of followers was used because it is an indication that athletes with the most followers are most effective in marketing and personal branding. Additionally, only active, not retired athletes were used in the context of this study due to the content discrepancies that may arise with the use of retired athletes not currently involved in their respective sports. Team sport athletes included athletes from various leagues: NBA, NFL, MLB, NHL, MLS and National Women's Soccer League (NWSL). Individual sport athletes included athletes from: Professional Golf Association (PGA), Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP), Women's Tennis Association (WTA), USA Swimming, Ultimate Fighting Championships (UFC), International Ski Federation (ISF), and International Skateboarding Federation (ISF). The total sample size was 50 (N = 50). Table 2 and Table 3 show both team sport and individual sport athletes chosen, respectively.

Table 2. Team sport athlete followers

Athlete Name	Sport/League	Number of Followers (as of 9/29/16)	Twitter Name
LeBron James	NBA	33,157,387	@KingJames
Ricardo Kaka	Soccer (MLS)	25,415,128	@KAKA
Kevin Durant	NBA	15,048,883	@KDTrey5
Carmelo Anthony	NBA	8,356,479	@carmeloanthony
Stephen Curry	NBA	7,100,260	@StephenCurry30
Dwight Howard	NBA	6,550,344	@DwightHoward
Reggie Bush	NFL	3,086,662	@ReggieBush
JJ Watt	NFL	2,909,133	@JJWatt
Alex Morgan	Soccer (NWSL)	2,711,325	@alexmorgan13
Aaron Rodgers	NFL	2,662,158	@AaronRodgers12
Drew Brees	NFL	2,506,634	@drewbrees
Larry Fitzgerald	NFL	2,270,391	@LarryFitzgerald
Mike Trout	MLB	2,040,000	@MikeTrout
Nick Swisher	MLB	1,732,063	@NickSwisher
Alex Ovechkin	NHL	1,520,000	@ovi8
Landon Donovan	Soccer (MLS)	1,243,001	@landondonovan
Evgeni Malkin	NHL	1,170,000	@malkin17_
Jose Bautista	MLB	1,150,000	@JoeyBats19
David Ortiz	MLB	1,120,000	@davidortiz
Hope Solo	Soccer (NWSL)	1,100,109	@hopesolo
Jozy Altidore	Soccer (MLS)	946,748	@JozyAltidore
Justin Verlander	MLB	906,000	@JustinVerlander
Patrick Kane	NHL	756,000	@88PKane
P.K. Subban	NHL	693,000	@PKSubban1
Henrik Lundqvist	NHL	544,000	@HLundqvist30

Table 3. Individual sport athlete followers

Athlete Name	Sport/League	Number of Followers (as of 9/29/16)	Twitter Name
Rafael Nadal	Tennis	11,286,594	@RafaelNadal
Anderson Silva	MMA	7,716,114	@SpiderAnderson
Serena Williams	Tennis	7,022,255	@serenawilliams
Novak Djokovic	Tennis	6,598,667	@DjokerNole
Roger Federer	Tennis	6,180,044	@rogerfederer
Tiger Woods	Golf	6,014,197	@TigerWoods
Sania Mirza	Tennis	4,366,946	@MirzaSania
Tony Hawk	Skateboarding	4,117,916	@tonyhawk
Maria Sharapova	Tennis	4,109,548	@MariaSharapova
Rob Dyrdek	Skateboarding	3,664,446	@robdyrdek
Ronda Rousey	MMA	3,190,000	@RondaRousey
Rory McIlroy	Golf	3,048,464	@McIlroyRory
Ryan Sheckler	Skateboarding	2,980,904	@RyanSheckler
CM Punk	MMA	2,636,595	@CMPunk
Ian Poulter	Golf	2,240,232	@IanJamesPoulter
Michael Phelps	Swimming	2,161,843	@MichaelPhelps
Bubba Watson	Golf	1,770,174	@bubbawatson
Shaun White	Snowboarding	1,617,351	@shaunwhite
Vitor Belfort	MMA	1,502,402	@vitorbelfort
Jon Bones Jones	MMA	1,459,904	@JonnyBones
Rickie Fowler	Golf	1,315,834	@RickieFowler
Ryan Lochte	Swimming	1,219,883	@RyanLochte
Lindsey Vonn	Skiing	506,000	@lindseyvonn
Missy Franklin	Swimming	463,289	@missyfranklin
Nathan Adrian	Swimming	187,946	@HLundqvist30

3.4 Tweet Analysis

Tweets for each of these athletes were collected dating back 30-days. Retweets were not used in data collection in order to keep data consistent and organic with what athletes were communicating. Once tweets were collected, tweet data was recorded, organized into a word document and analyzed by the researchers. The authors analyzed the tweets and placed into categories independently to ensure reliability in category placement. Once the tweets were analyzed independently, researchers compared category placements and resolved any differences through discussion. Tweets that were unable to fit into predetermined categories were placed in a separate group or miscellaneous category for the researchers to determine if another category existed. The authors anticipated results to either reveal additional categories or themes within each category. If a new category existed, an additional group of tweet content would be created from the existing tweets. If a new theme existed, sub-categories were created. Sub-categories were defined as a theme within the larger context that shared common differentiating characteristics with its parent category. The independently coded tweet data was compared and a level of agreement percentage was calculated. Once tweets were organized into appropriate categories, the authors determined results in differences of tweet content between team sport athletes and individual sport athletes based on the content within each category.

3.5 Tweet Category Effectiveness

An additional aspect of this research study was to determine which of the content categories are the most effective from the perspective of the sport consumer. A convenience sample of undergraduate sport management students (N = 129) was used to determine the impact of tweets on sports consumers.

3.6 Measurements

Vooris (2015) developed a motivational scale for sport twitter utilization. For the purposes of the current study, the original items (e.g., "I enjoy retweeting MLB teams so that other people can see what they said" or "I enjoy it when my tweets about MLB teams get retweeted by other fans") were extracted and modified to fit into the context of the present study. In addition, to evaluate consumers' attitude toward the content categories of tweets, a tweet effectiveness rating

scale with different descriptive items was utilized to classify the tweets (i.e., interesting, useful, entertaining, engaging, and meaningful). The response format was a 7-point Likert-scale (i.e., 1-least interesting to 7-most interesting). The scale's reliability was deemed to be acceptable with a Cronbach's alpha score (0.88) above the 0.70 threshold (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006).

The tweets used were four randomly chosen tweets from each content category, two from individual sport athletes and two from team sport athletes. Students were unaware of the athlete tweeting and the assigned content categories. Once data were collected, it was then entered into an excel spreadsheet by the authors. Data were then transferred to Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Version 22 (SPSS) for further interpretation through statistical testing. Once the data were analyzed, the authors determined which content category was most favorable for consumers and was able to be utilized by athletes in promoting their self-brand.

Composite variables were generated to attain an understanding of the relative importance of the categories within each setting. The variables were constructed by calculating collective mean scores from confirmed variables for each classification in each tweet category. Additionally, an analysis of the composite variables indicated the relative importance of each category. Furthermore, an investigation of the effectiveness between team and individual athletes in the same tweet category was conducted through a series of paired sample t-tests.

4. Results

4.1 Content Analysis Results

After the tweet content analysis of 918 tweets was conducted, each tweet was coded independently by the authors and placed into an appropriate category. In the present study, individual sport athletes released 559 tweets and team sport athletes posted 359 tweets. Table 4 provides a breakdown of tweet content categories and corresponding percentages.

Table 4. Breakdown of tweet content categories

	Total Tweets	Promotional	Diversion	Professional	Personal	Athlete Exchange
Individual (% of total)	559	146 (26.12%)	208 (37.21%)	107 (19.14%)	49 (8.77%)	49 (8.77%)
Team (% of total)	359	78 (21.73%)	112 (31.20%)	55 (15.32%)	27 (7.52%)	87 (24.23%)

4.2 Promotional

The promotional category included tweets regarding sponsorships, upcoming games, and related promotions (Hambrick et al., 2010). In the present sample, 26.12% of individual athlete Twitter communication were represented by the promotional category, while team sport athletes devoted 21.73% of their total tweets to promotional activities. Table 5 presents the breakdown of promotional content category.

Table 5. Breakdown of promotional content category

	Total Tweets	Promotional
Individual (% of total)	559	146 (26.12%)
Team (% of total)	359	78 (21.73%)

The following section will focus on displaying the differences detected in the content of promotional tweets. The results revealed three themes in which individual sport athletes differed from team sport athletes: promotion of a personal brand, television show appearance, and promotion of own charitable initiatives.

4.2.1 Promotion of a Personal Brand

It was evident that individual sport athletes devoted much effort to promote their own brand. A premium candy brand Sugarpova has been promoted frequently by its owner. Maria Sharapova invited her fans to attend a product demo and autograph session in Boston by saying, "Hi Boston! On Mon, I'll be @Shaws & @Roche_Bros signing autographs & eating more @sugarpova chocolate." By tweeting, "A nice afternoon in Vegas meeting my fans. @Sugarpova sweet

treats now available at all @SweetFactoryCo stores nationwide," Maria Sharapova informed her fans that a specialty candy store (i.e., Sweet Factory) will now be offering the Sugarpova collection at all of their store locations. Ski racing champion Lindsey Vonn spent significant time on Twitter marketing her new book "Strong Is The New Beautiful." To express gratitude to her younger fans, for example, Vonn posted, "Love seeing all of the kids coming out to my book signings! Seeing their smiles makes it all worth it!!"

On the other hand, team sport athletes' Twitter posts were more third-party oriented. LeBron James, for example, recognized Sprite as a longtime supporter by saying, "@Sprite rolled w/ me since day one. Always a pleasure…." Nike was tagged in Kevin Durant's post, which stated, "Exploring" along with four photos of the superstar's sightseeing tour of San Francisco.

4.2.2 Television Show Appearance

Unlike the team sport players, individual sport athletes turned out to be heavy Twitter users who employed the platform to announce their appearances on various television shows. In addition, individual sport athletes were involved with a more diverse selection of television appearances. Tiger Woods, for example, following his appearance on the late show with Stephen Colbert, said, "Had a blast on @colbertlateshow! Thanks for the laughs @StephenAtHome. -TW #LSSC #TWF20." Ryan Lochte spent ample time updating his fans on his preparation for and participation in the Dancing with the Stars competition. By posting the following tweet, the Olympic swimmer encouraged his followers to watch the pairs' dance via the Dancing with the Stars All Access: "@CherylBurke and I are heading to @DWTSAllAccess! Join us here…." A five-time Grand Slam champion Maria Sharapova was interviewed by TODAY's Matt Lauer, and her followers found out about Maria's appearance on the show by receiving the following tweet: "Maria Sharapova on @TODAYshow".

As was mentioned above, team sport athletes did not appear concerned with the lack television show visits. One of the few examples included Carmelo Anthony's announcement about his appearance on Comedy Central's The Daily Show, which stated, "Catch me tonight on @TheDailyShow with @Trevornoah at 11pm EST."

4.2.3 Promotion of Own Charitable Initiatives

The authors' analysis of the content of tweets related to athlete charities, charitable events, and team initiatives revealed the existence of related promotions characteristics originally described in the literature (Hambrick et al., 2010). This, in turn, led to the emergence of the charity sub-category. Consistent with promotional category tweeting trends, individual sport athletes were observed to have tweeted more frequently to promote their own personal charitable initiatives compared to their team sport counterparts. For example, Novak Djokovic tweeted about his foundation, which helps develop early childhood education projects in his native Serbia, saying, "This is such a great initiative! Can't wait to put together my first computer!" Similarly, Ryan Sheckler asked for support of his foundation through his Twitter account by tweeting, "Help guide us where you feel support is needed. A little action, can go a long way #ShecklerFoundation #BeTheChange" with a complimentary link to donate to his organization.

By contrast, team sport athletes endorsed third-party charities. Dwight Howard, for example, tweeted, "Is your child being bullied? #WeSpeakUp Learn how to help with @CartoonNetwork & me http://stopbullyingspeakup.com." Larry Fitzgerald hoped to drive funds for the American Cancer Society by saying "#BirdGang it's not too late to help me raise $ to help @AmericanCancer defeat breast cancer tonight!! http://pledgeit.org/receivinghope #NYJvsAZ #MNF." The "Pls RT - Help UNICEF protect and aid children+families affected by #HurricaneMatthew" tweet was released by David Ortiz asking his followers to retweet his post and to raise awareness of the damages caused by the hurricane.

4.3 Diversion

The diversion category included tweets which were not related to sports or personal life, including family and friends. This category was developed as part of Clavio's (2008) diversion category defined as "non-sports related elements of message boards, including politics, religion, staying in touch with old classmates, and non-athletic news about the user's alma mater" (p. viii). Table 6 shows the breakdown of diversion content category.

Table 6. Breakdown of diversion content category

	Total Tweets	Diversion
Individual	559	208
(% of total)		(37.21%)
Team	359	112
(% of total)		(31.20%)

Tennis player Sania Mirza, for example, updated her fans on a delay of flight by saying, "Not my day clearly. Sitting on my seat, bout to take off and flight delayed indefinitely due to bad weather…." while NFL athlete Reggie Bush expressed a reaction to a presidential debate by tweeting, "Lol Trump just gonna throw Bill Clinton under the Bus like that though." The diversion category included the most tweets of any category by far, accounting for 331 tweets, or 36.06% of the 918 total tweets analyzed. To be exact, 37.21% of tweets posted by individual sport athletes fell into the diversion category compared to 31.20% from team sport athletes, which is presented in Table 6. Despite the diverse content within this category, no evident difference patterns could be detected.

4.4 Professional

The professional category includes content related to athletes' practice sessions, games and other events. The breakdown of professional content category is presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Breakdown of professional content category

	Total Tweets	Professional
Individual	559	107
(% of total)		(19.14%)
Team	359	55
(% of total)		(15.32%)

For example, to inform the fans about his performance at CIMB Classic tournament, Ian Poulter posted the following tweet: "Enjoyed getting back in action on the @PGATour this week. @CIMBMalaysia finished T17th, 5 under par today. Game feels good. Foot feels good." After a hard day of training, women's soccer star Alex Morgan posted this tweet, "You know it's a good week of training when the tops of your feet ache from so many shots…." The authors found that Twitter provided the fans the opportunity to follow behind the scenes commentary in this category, with 19.14% of all individual athlete tweets and 15.32% of all team sport athlete tweets being assigned to this sport category. Although professional was created as a new category based on the tweet content of both individual and team sport athletes, no evident difference patterns could be noticed.

4.5 Personal

The personal category included tweets that contained information about family and friends (Hambrick et al., 2010). In this category, individual sport athletes posted 8.77% of total tweets compared to 7.52% released by their team peers and presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Breakdown of personal content category

	Total Tweets	Personal
Individual	559	49
(% of total)		(8.77%)
Team	359	27
(% of total)		(7.52%)

To illustrate, Rob Dyrdek remembered Dylan Reider by tweeting, "No one has ever skated with the power and soul that he had and no one ever will. Truly once in a lifetime talent." Additionally, New Orleans Saints' quarterback Drew Brees tweeted about his son's birthday celebrations, "Bowen's 6th Bday at school today. Brit and I surprised him with some cupcakes for him and his classmates." This category provided the least amount of Twitter communication. After further investigation, the authors found no significant differences in the tweet content of individual and team sport athletes within the personal category.

4.6 Athlete Exchange

The athlete exchange category included tweets in which the athletes engaged with other athletes through their content. These exchanges included both positive or negative conversations, similar to Clavio's (2008) argumentation category of "engaging in 'smack talk' and arguments with other users and observing the comments of fans of rival teams" (p. ix). This was the only category in which team athletes tweeted at a higher percentage than the individual sport athletes within their respective sport categories (24.23% versus 8.77%, respectively) and is presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Breakdown of athlete exchange content category

	Total Tweets	Athlete Exchange
Individual	559	49
(% of total)		(8.77%)
Team	359	55
(% of total)		(24.23%)

For instance, Jonny Bones wished good luck to NFL linebacker Chandler Jones in his tweet, "Good luck to @chanjones55 and the #Cardinals tonight." Similarly, Tiger Woods and LeBron James tweeted support of their hometown teams by tweeting, "Good luck to my @Lakers tonight.-TW" and "World Series here we come!! Congrats Boyz!! @Indians #RallyTogether," respectively. In this study, athlete exchange content primarily featured positive athlete-athlete and a new subcategory that emerged - athlete-team interactions. The athlete exchange category was originally designed with only athlete-athlete exchanges in mind; however, through further research it was concluded that athlete-team exchange was also a significant portion of tweet content related to this category and led to the separation of the athlete exchange category to two sub-categories - athlete-athlete exchange and athlete-team exchange. This new athlete exchange category was updated with this subcategory to include tweets in which athletes engaged with both athletes and teams other than their own. Although this category was ultimately split into two sub-categories, similar tweet content was observed between individual and team sport athletes.

4.7 Tweet Category Effectiveness Results

In addition to the content analysis, a fan perception survey was conducted and provided results through paired sample t-tests performed. Through an examination of the mean scores of the effectiveness of the tweets in the five categories within the team athlete context, it was found that tweets in the Professional category (M=4.59, SD=1.33) were deemed most effective by the respondents followed by the Diversion category (M=4.50, SD=1.06), Athlete Exchange (M=4.26, SD=1.19), Personal (M=4.12, SD=1.21), and lastly the Promotional category (M=3.54, SD=1.38).

Beyond just examining the highest and lowest mean scores of tweet effectiveness associated with each composite variable category in the team athlete context, paired sample t-tests were performed to determine if the differences in mean scores rose to the level of statistical significance. With the exception of the Team Diversion – Team Professional Categories ($t(126) = -0.632$, $p = 0.529$), all of the other categories were found to be statistically significant from one another ($t(127) = -8.41$ - -2.17; $p < .05$). This means that respondents interpreted each category of tweets more/less effective than the next one, with the exception of Team Professional and Team Diversion categories.

Through an examination of the mean scores of the effectiveness of the tweets in the five individual athlete categories, it was found that tweets in the Athlete Exchange category (M=3.91, SD=1.36) were deemed most effective by the respondents followed by the Professional category (M=3.85, SD=1.13), Promotional (M=3.58, SD=1.15), Personal (M=3.50, SD=1.32), and lastly the Diversion category (M=2.82. SD=1.24).

Beyond just examining the highest and lowest mean scores of tweet effectiveness associated with each composite variable category in the individual athlete context, paired samples t-test were performed to determine if the differences in mean scores rose to the level of statistical significance. With the exception of the Promotional – Personal categories ($t(126) = 0.346$, $p = 0.730$), as well as the Athlete Exchange-Professional categories ($t(123) = 0.746$; $p = 0.457$) all of the other categories were found to be statistically significant from one another ($t(128) = -8.78 – 6.33$; $p < .05$). This means that respondents interpreted each category of tweets more/less effective than the next one, with the exception of Promotional-Personal and Athlete Exchange-Professional categories.

In addition to determining the most effective categories of tweets within the team athlete and individual athlete domains, an analysis of tweet effectiveness of each category was conducted across the team athlete and individual athlete contexts. The goal of this analysis was to compare the effectiveness of tweets in the same category across the individual and team athlete contexts. The composite variables were subjected to a paired sample t-test to determine if there were significant differences in effectiveness between team and individual athletes in the same category. The results indicated that each category had a significant difference in tweet effectiveness except for the Promotional category ($t(128) = 0.033$; $p = .974$). For every other category, it was found that the team athlete tweets were interpreted as significantly more effective than individual athlete tweets ($t(127) = -15.628$ - -3.376; $p < .05$).

5. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the differences in content and effectiveness of Twitter conversations between individual and team sport athletes. Specifically, the authors investigated the complexities of the self-presentation strategies that both groups (i.e., individual and team sport athletes) utilized to symbolize meaning and increase perceived value of the personal brand (Arai et al., 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). Five tweet categories were discussed to help describe athlete interaction patterns on the online social media outlet Twitter.

A number of studies have attempted to categorize athlete tweets as well as investigated the athlete online promotional activity during a specific sporting event (Hambrick et al., 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). However, past literature has failed to assess the effectiveness of professional athlete (both team and individual athletes) Twitter content from the perspective of the sport consumer. Through further investigation of this area, the authors were able to advance academic literature by contributing to the understanding of athlete social media practices and its effectiveness in engaging sport consumers. The current study was the first attempt to capture consumer perception and fan engagement. Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa, and Biscaia (2014) pointed out that thorough fan engagement can not only activate purchase intentions among consumers, but also stimulate repeat purchasing behavior. Therefore, an emergence of specific tweet categories as most effective within each sport classification provides new insights and furthers academic literature through the understanding of the impact of team and individual sport athletes' online conversations. The current study also intended to decipher the intricacies associated with how fans interpret individual tweets that represent five distinct categories. The evidence led the authors to believe that sport marketing practitioners should utilize these findings to craft effective brand value propositions and communicate favorable and unique brand associations.

Athletes are viewed not only as vehicles for product endorsements, but also as cultural objects utilized as a brand (Gilchrist, 2005). The concept of branding has been used more frequently in the professional athlete context making the traditional brand management techniques more universal within the athlete branding field (Arai et al., 2014). The benefits of effective athlete branding techniques can be felt by various individual athletes resulting in salary price premiums and promotions (Gladden & Funk, 2001). As the resurgence of new communication technologies continue to grow, athletes become more versatile in how they connect, communicate, and collaborate with others in promoting their brand. Undoubtedly, as these communication technologies grow and consumers become more familiar with them, athletes will have greater opportunity to enhance their overall promotional strategies and utilize these technologies, including Twitter, in a way they have never been utilized. Past research has studied athletes in general in promoting their brands; however, limited attention has been given to exploring how individual sport athletes and team sport athletes, as two diverse sport settings, differ in their promotion of personal brands through social media. Through our emphasis on analysis of the individual versus team sport environment influence on self-branding and promotion, the results of this study serve to highlight the implications of athlete branding on Twitter.

Not only did individual sport athletes tweet more frequently in the promotional category, but they also shared tweets that were tailored to a personal brand. With respect to appearances on various television shows, the results demonstrated that team sport athletes, within our sample, seemed to appear less frequently on television shows compared to their individual sport counterparts. This observation suggests that individual sport athletes may be more inclined to seek alternative opportunities for public appearance to solidify their personal brand's image.

Interestingly, the largest portion of content that was discovered stemming from the promotional category was in regards to charity, whether it was the athlete's personal foundation or related initiatives. As was the case with Novak Djokovic, Ryan Sheckler, and Henrik Lundqvist, Twitter was used as an opportunity to extend their brand image outside of their respected sport with their own personal charitable efforts. Pegoraro (2010) concluded that few athletes have recognized the marketing potential of Twitter as the rest made little to no mention of their business affairs; however, six years later, the marketing potential was frequently utilized as part of the charity sub-category to draw attention to these initiatives and to promote ticket sales of associated events.

The professional category highlighted the content related to athletes' practice time and competition days. Based on the findings, individual sports players devoted more time to keeping their followers up to date on the preparation for upcoming game days. To be exact, 19.14% of practice-related tweets were posted by athletes, who represented individual sports. Although no significant differences were noticed in terms of content, the athletes' willingness to converse with the fans confirmed the aforementioned tendency among individual sport athletes to communicate about their lifestyle more frequently. Tweets that included family and friend-related content were coded as personal (Hambrick et al., 2010). Likewise, the results showed that individual sport athletes had a higher number (49, 8.77%) of tweets compared to team sport players, who posted 27 (7.52%) tweets in this category. The pattern observed in other

categories remained consistent in terms of individual athletes' Twitter usage. Coakley (2007) cogently explained that, "a few athletes in individual sports make good money, whereas most others struggle to cover expenses" (p. 395). The evidence seems to suggest that individual sport athletes can utilize the Twitter platform to solidify their public status and deliver most relevant benefits to fans in order to create a positive overall personal brand attitude (Arai et al., 2014; Keller, 1993).

Athlete exchange provided the only category in which team sport athletes tweeted more than individual sport athletes. To be specific, team sport athletes tweeted 87 times (24.23%) while individual sport athletes tweeted 49 times (8.77%). This suggests that team sport athletes are in an environment where they have a greater opportunity to interact with other players and coaches due to the nature of their sports. Individual sport athletes, on the other hand, are limited to their social interactions outside of their respective sports due to the perception of their fellow individual athletes as competition. By analyzing differences within the content of these tweets, athlete exchange was ultimately separated into athlete-athlete exchange and athlete-team exchange categories. Through athlete exchange, players showed a greater trend towards positive interactions rather than negative interactions. Of the 136 athlete exchange tweets analyzed, none of them provided a negative interaction between athletes. The athlete exchange category was originally stemmed as part of Clavio's (2008) argumentation category of "engaging in 'smack talk' and arguments with other users and observing the comments of fans of rival teams" (p. ix); however, there was no evidence of this within the content analysis conducted. This suggests that Smith and Sanderson's (2015) idea that the escalating popularity of the social media market has created the environment in which athletes can exert more control over their self-representation has been utilized as a tool for more positive self-representation based on the content tweeted about within the athlete exchange category.

The diversion category produced the greatest output in terms of frequency of tweets, producing 320 tweets (34.86% of total tweets). This was consistent with Hambrick et al.'s (2010) findings that revealed diversion, or non-sport-related communication, was one of three categories that made up 77 percent, or 1,514 of the 1,962 tweets analyzed (Hambrick et al., 2010). Furthermore, Sanderson (2013) noted that athletes use Twitter as an extension of self, outside of the locker room and playing field by tweeting about stories, daily life, popular culture and even asking fans for recommendations or answers to questions. This description is consistent with the content that was tweeted within this category.

Fan perception results revealed a conflicting report on tweet effectiveness between individual sport athletes versus team sport athletes. Overall, each category analyzed among the two unique groups displayed team athlete tweets as significantly more effective than individual athlete tweets aside from the promotional category. Independently, the professional category was found to be most effective amongst team athlete tweets, while the athlete exchange category was deemed most effective amongst individual athlete tweets. The analysis of fan perception on tweet effectiveness results can help guide athletes and their managers to a greater understanding of their fan base's needs while helping to align strategic social media plans to maintain success and effectiveness in promoting the athlete's brand (Thompson et al., 2014). Furthermore, these results provide implications for athletes attempting to create extrarole engagement opportunities with their fans by promoting fan-to-fan social interactions through effective tweeting (Yoshida et al., 2014). Identifying which content categories have the most impact on consumers helps further the understanding of athletes' self-promotional activities.

6. Limitations and Areas for Future Research

This study was not without limitations. Although the sample size was adequate for the scope of the current study, a more representative sample would have provided a deeper insight into the mechanisms for self-promoting practices implemented by the two distinct groups (i.e., individual and team) of athletes. The investigation was limited to a 30-day period, and the tweets analyzed may not give the whole picture of Twitter content shared by athletes. Another limitation which was present within the current study was the inconsistencies related to the stages of sports' seasons. In other words, these tweets were not posted by athletes, who were in similar stages of their respective competition seasons. Put differently, the content of the released tweets might have been affected by the specific point of athletes' seasons. The selection of athletes was deemed appropriate in the context of this study; however, an inclusion of additional athletes representing both sport categories would have allowed a more in-depth content analysis. Furthermore, during our analysis it was observed that four individual athletes (i.e., Tony Hawk, Rob Dyrdek, Rory Mcllroy, and CM Punk) and two team athletes (i.e., JJ Watt and Alex Ovechkin) failed to initiate any twitter conversations. Additionally, of the investigated posts it was observed that some tweets could have been coded into multiple sub-categories.

Although we placed the analyzed tweets into four categories, a future study might consider expanding the list of categories by capturing a broader variety of tweets over an extended time period. Another direction that researchers might take in order to examine the characteristics of promotional strategies of a personal brand is to analyze communication habits of athletes with less followers. Furthermore, researchers may be interested in analyzing the differences between male and female athletes in terms of behavior on social media such as Twitter. Other analyses might benefit from concentrating on in-season versus off-season differences in order to decipher the patterns associated with the most productive time for promotional activities through social media outlets.

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