Who's Trending: #NBA vs #NHL

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Introduction

Many professional athletes across a wide spectrum of sport have obtained celebrity status and as a result, have become human brands much greater than themselves (Carlson and Donavan, 2013). With this popularity amongst fans and consumers, several companies have latched their brands onto the success of the athletes with the expectation of a positive transfer of qualities and
attributes (Carlson & Donavan, 2013). Through consumerism and branding efforts, athletes have become commodities to be bought and sold on the celebrity marketplace (Pegoraro and Jinnah, 2012). Sport organizations have desired long-term relationships with their consumers and have turned to social media to establish, maintain, and enhance these relationships (Abeza, O’Reilly, and Reid, 2013). The rise of social media over the past decade has reflected an increase in the use of technology in professional sport and because these networking sites allow the user to be a content producer, many professional teams and leagues have been persuaded to join on many different platforms (Pegraro & Jinnah, 2012; Witkemper, Hoon Lim, and Waldburger, 2012).

However, athletes did not become global icons overnight simply by playing well and being a good person. An athlete’s image and brand has been carefully crafted and molded to fit the values and identification points of the intended consumer (Gibbs, O’Reilly, and Brunette, 2014).

Previous research has analyzed specific cases, individual strategies, and consumer behaviors. However, this study has furthered new knowledge by obtaining a comprehensive description of the differing approaches set in place by the four major sports in North America with regard to branding of individual athletes on Twitter. From this study, the various branding efforts on Twitter across the four major sports in North America are understood.

With regard to the aforementioned studies, only preliminary research has been conducted in understanding what strategies professional sport organizations use to brand individual athletes on Twitter. The purpose of this study was to determine in which ways do different sport leagues contrast in how they brand athletes on Twitter. To what degree does the branding of individual players by a team via Twitter differ between leagues?
The objective of this research was to articulate the measures teams have taken to brand their players and achieve a better understanding of what methods are most commonly used on a broad scale.

**Athlete Endorsements and Branding**

First, branding and marketing of individual athletes to the consumers must be fully understood. The earliest athlete endorsements can be followed back to the start of the 20th century. McGhee (2012) stated at the start, athlete endorsements primarily included the top baseball players of the time, offering just their name and likeness to promote a variety of different products. Due to the growth of other sports, endorsement opportunities became available to athletes outside of baseball, including the Olympics, boxing and football. Brands often affiliated themselves with celebrity endorsers, regardless of whether there existed a sufficient brand fit between the product and the endorser (McGhee, 2012). While this still occasionally occurs in this modern period of marketing, there generally exists a distinct connection between the endorser and the product that is easily communicated to the intended consumer. The findings gathered from this study are used to gain a better understanding of the overall history of athlete endorsements.

To build upon the overarching topic of athlete branding, Carlson and Donavan (2013) analyzed how perceptions of human brands affected consumer’s level of identification by combining social identity theory with brand personality. In order to gather this information, the authors had fans of a prominent American football team answer a questionnaire designed to capture the respondent’s evaluations of brand personality, athlete prestige, team identification, athlete identification, athlete attachment, amount of money spent on merchandise, and number of
games watched (Carlson and Donavan, 2013). The findings of the study revealed that consumers view athletes as human brands with unique and differing personalities. Once consumers identified with the athlete, they were significantly more likely to feel an emotional connection to the athlete, then identify with the athlete’s team, next purchase team-related merchandise, and finally increase their overall team-related viewership (Carlson and Donavan, 2013). These findings build upon previous research on human brands and brand personalities in sport and because of this, marketers used this information to better promote products that are associated with famous athletes, which in turn can increase consumer spending on their products (Carlson and Donavan, 2013).

Building upon the relationship between human brands and identification, consumer values and the relationship they have with purchasing behaviors was studied. Kwon and Hee Kwak (2014) examined the role of multidimensional consumer values in the relationship between team identification, purchase attitude, and purchase intention in the team merchandise context. In an effort to adequately obtain this information, the authors had fans of two different college teams from the Midwest region participate in an online survey (Kwon & Hee Kwak, 2014). The authors found that consumer values such as functional, emotional, and social and team identification influenced purchase attitude (Kwon & Hee Kwak 2014). Additionally, the relationship between team identification and perceived consumer values was significant for hedonic products, while team identification on attitudes toward sport-licensed merchandise was significantly pronounced for utilitarian products (Kwon & Hee Kwak, 2014). This study exposed the specific consumer values that influenced purchase decisions, which marketers used to more effectively sell a variety of products (Kwon & Hee Kwak).
Understanding customer identification and customer values, which are used to encourage purchase behaviors is foundation of social media strategy. Next, it was important to consider the plan and procedures different brands and sponsors needed to implement when the worst occurs. One fitting example of athlete sponsorship that quickly disintegrated due to a public transgression is the case of Tiger Woods. Agyemang (2010) noted that over the years, the importance of athlete branding has become increasingly critical to acquiring sponsorship agreements. These particular agreements allowed Woods to become the world’s first billion-dollar athlete. However, Woods’ unfortunate indiscretions in 2009 led to a quick exit from the public eye and a significant loss of major sponsorships. This example revealed that an athlete could lose longtime, dedicated sponsors with one severe controversy (Agyemang, 2010). The purpose of this research is to determine the best plan of action for athletes that must rejuvenate their brand after a instance of carelessness Agyemang, 2010). Using Tiger Woods as an example to learn from, five critical steps were developed for athletes and brand managers to consider if their athlete’s brand needs to be rejuvenated or if sponsorship agreements need to be reestablished (Agyemang, 2010).

**Athlete Branding and Fan Engagement on Twitter**

After analyzing athlete branding in a general context, Twitter and mobile efforts associated with athlete branding need to be thoughtfully considered. Pegoraro and Jinnah (2012) noted the rise of social media over the past few years that have provided sponsors and endorsers with a new way to engage different sponsorships. Sport teams and athletes joined social media movement very quickly but early research indicated that athletes were not using their online presences to the full potential with regards to their sponsorships (Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012).
Additionally, sponsors were also missing an opportunity to take advantage of the fans following their athlete’s every word. The authors used case studies to examine how some athletes are using Twitter to enhance their personal brands to then increase and capitalize on sponsorship opportunities (Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012). This information was used to help athletes and sponsors of these athletes to more effectively advertise products through Twitter and better understand how consumers react to athletes as endorsers (Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012).

Next it is crucial to analyze the motives and constraints that came along with using Twitter as a fan. Witkemper et al. (2012) examined what motives and constraints influence sport Twitter consumption in regard to following athletes. Additionally, the study attempted to develop a reliable model that researchers could use to measure Twitter consumption motivations and constraints (Witkemper et al., 2012). The model combined four measures of motivation such as information, entertainment, pass time, and fanship and four measures of constraints such as accessibility, economic, skills, and social taking from a sample of 1,124 students at a Midwestern University (Witkemper et al., 2012). The results revealed that sport organizations should focus on using social media as a source of information first, while also providing engaging, athlete-based entertainment (Witkemper et al., 2012). Fans of athletes want to learn as much as possible about the athlete’s personal life meaning organizations should attempt to encourage their athletes who are on social media to communicate with their fans by sharing little bits and pieces about their lives off the field (Witkemper et al., 2012).

Gibbs, O’Reilly, and Brunette (2014) note that most professional sport teams in North America have used social media to communicate with fans, yet a lack of understanding about how users are motivated and gratified through the actual usage of Twitter still persists. Research was initially drawn from a specific sample of Canadian Football League Twitter followers and
was supplemented with semi-structured interviews, a content analysis, and an online survey, which were all used to fully understand the motivations of Twitter followers of professional sport teams (Gibbs et al., 2014). The results of the research improved upon what is known about sport communication by finding four primary gratifications sought out by Twitter users which include interaction, promotion, live game updates, and general news (Gibbs et al., 2014). Professional sport teams can use the findings to increase their fan engagement by understanding how to instill a feeling of gratification within their Twitter followers (Gibbs et al., 2014).

After considering different strategies, constraints, and motives on Twitter, the adjacent media known as mobile applications was examined. In this case study, Watkins and Lewis (2014) examined how professional sports teams used mobile apps as part of their branding and marketing strategies to improve the overall fan experience. By using a quantitative content analysis, professional sports teams’ apps were analyzed to evaluate marketing strategies and different opportunities for fan engagement (Watkins and Lewis, 2014). All major North American sports leagues were included in this study with the exception of Major League Baseball. The branding strategies most frequently seen on the mobile applications included information about the teams and their current performance on the field (Watkins & Lewis, 2014). In terms of marketing strategies, the study found that 32 of the 72 mobile applications allowed fans to purchase team licensed merchandise and 75% of the apps gave fans the opportunity to buy tickets to the actual games (Watkins & Lewis, 2014). Additionally, fan-engagement features that were most frequently seen in mobile applications included check-in features at 40% and fantasy league information at 33%, while almost 90% of the applications incorporated Twitter (Watkins & Lewis, 2014). Individual teams or leagues can use the information gathered from
this case study to analyze what is currently missing from their app and improve engagement with their fans (Watkins & Lewis, 2014).

Abeza, O’Reilly, and Reid (2013) maintain that relationship marketing is about creating mutual satisfaction for the business and their customer. Additionally, the authors state that sport organizations are able to retain customers by establishing and enhancing relationships by engaging and communicating with their customers (Abeza, et al., 2013). However, addressing relationship-marketing goals through social media is currently not fully understood. This study examines current challenges facing sport organizations using social media as a relationship-marketing tool through eight different case studies where organizations were putting on a variety of events (Abeza et al., 2013). Most prevailing challenges seen throughout the eight case studies were effectiveness of the message reaching the end user, difficulties identifying true inline consumers, and setbacks with the allocation of organizational resources (Abeza et al., 2013). By understanding and simply being aware of potential challenges, sport organizations can better prepare themselves and offer a better social media presence.

**Practical Twitter Usage**

With the growth of Twitter usage amongst professional athletes and sport organizations, utilizing the medium as a branding tool has become more and more popular. Because of this growing relationship between Twitter and professional sports, practical implications must be examined to better understand how to properly and efficiently apply the medium to engage Twitter users.

Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, and Walsh (2012) also witnessed the growth of athletes’ and sport organizations’ Twitter usage and engaged in a study to examine the use of a
Twitter hashtag during a major sporting event. For this study the hashtag “#WorldSeries”, which was used during the 2011 World Series was specifically assessed. The study used a content analysis in order to determine who was using the hashtag and how it was being used. 1,450 tweets were used as the sample and the results determined that “#WorldSeries” was mainly used by the general public to express fanship and to interact with MLB and team officials along with other general baseball fans (Blaszka et al., 2012). Examination of this hashtag helps to better understand gratifications that users seek out, which can allow professional sport organizations to better engage their fans during high-profile sporting events (Blaszka et al., 2012).

Moving from understanding the impact of hashtags on Twitter, Reed and Hansen (2013) examined social media’s influence on sports journalists’ perception of gatekeeping through the use of the gatekeeper theory as a conceptual framework. For this study, seventy-seven sports journalists covering professional sports were asked if their definition of “gatekeeper” has changed since the introduction of social media with regard to gathering news. Results found that thirty-six of the participants did not think their definition of gatekeeper had changed, while those who do believe there has been a change, say it has impacted their daily job routines (Reed & Hansen, 2013). From this study, the growing prevalence of social media as information and publishing platform and how print journalists adjust to this change can be better understood (Reed & Hansen, 2013).

Next, corporate sponsorships promoted through Twitter was observed and examined. Cunningham and Bright (2012) witnessed the trend of different professional athletes finding several ways to use social media to promote themselves and brands they value. Previous research on celebrity endorsements revealed several typical characteristics such as source attractiveness, source credibility, and celebrity-product similarity. However, most research has
only been conducted on traditional media outlets such as print, radio, and television. The goal of this research was to determine whether or not athlete endorsements through social media are effective, which is defined as the consumer's attitude towards the advertisement, brand, or athlete (Cunningham & Bright, 2012). Results found that consumers value expertise and trustworthiness more than physical attractiveness, which has helped marketers during the endorser selection process allowing to more effectively reach their intended audience (Cunningham & Bright, 2012).

Almost all professional sports teams in North American currently have a Twitter presence and have a desire to further engage fans to ultimately have them consume more of their product. To most effectively and efficiently do such, sports organizations must fully understand methods of engagement, gratification, and brand fit.

**Cultural Context**

In this modern era of omnipresent advertising, Kotlyar (2013) recognized that consumers have become experts at ignoring and avoiding advertisements whether they tune into a different channel during a break or simply do not listen at all. However, the author did note that athlete endorsers can make products stand out stating, athlete endorsements yield an average 4% increase in sales with social media being the new channel to capitalize upon (Kotlyar, 2013). Additionally Kotlyar (2013) notes the imbalance that exists between athletes and corporate brands with the example of basketball star LeBron James having nearly five times as many followers on Twitter than Nike. Athletes have become a very important marketing tool and the author contends there are five steps needed to maximize athlete endorsements on social media.
including: establishing key performance indicators; ranking your athletes; activating campaigns; measuring performance; and optimizing reach (Kotlyar, 2013).

From a marketing standpoint, today’s sport figures have some of the greatest reach in North America and because of this, a variety of different athletes are used to sell products and brands. As Kotlyar (2013) argues, athletes a more appealing to consumers in social media than the brands they endorse and strategies employed must be examined. Honigman (2012) noted that many brands are employing tried and true sport marketing strategies, but with an updated approach. Champion boxer, Floyd Mayweather has often implemented the strategy of product placement via Twitter to gain as much exposure for the brands he represents (Honigman, 2012). Mayweather does this from his own account, allowing for a personal branded voice, which is more trustworthy and believable (Honigman, 2012). Honigman (2012) notes that a trustworthy tone helps to strengthen the relationship with the consumer and brings the promotion to the next level.

Athletes not named LeBron James or Peyton Manning can also use Twitter in lucrative ways to improve their personal brand and garner more endorsements. Talty (2012) claims that football players usually do not benefit from a significant amount of face time on television because they are underneath helmets and shoulder pads and are generally known only by their jersey number. The author notes that Twitter gives players an ideal opportunity to showcase their personality to thousands of fans (Talty, 2012). Using twin brothers Jason and Devin McCourty as a case study, Talty (2012) contends the most effective way to engage fans through Twitter is by holding contests, giving away autographed items, and creating humors videos that carry a personal touch. Jason and Devin, who are not the most talked about players in the National Football League, were able to acquire an endorsement with Palmer’s, a skin care
company, and the advertising campaign was run nationwide (Talty, 2012). Talty (2012) states that NFL players not only compete against each other on Sundays but also throughout the week on Twitter in an effort to gain more followers with the ultimate goal of achieving more endorsements.

**Conceptual Framework**

Relevant concepts observed throughout this study include individual professional athlete branding and the role of Twitter in branding strategies. For this specific study, individual athlete branding is defined as any occasion in which one or a couple of athletes are targeting in particular by their team’s Twitter account with an attempt to express information relating to the athlete or athletes. The moderating and intervening variables present throughout this research include time of year, number of followers, team brand value, prestige of athlete, recent team success, and the demographics of the audience.

**Methods**

Research Question:

“To what degree does the branding of individual players by a team via Twitter differ between leagues?”

For the purposes of this research, a cross-sectional design was employed to adequately collect data needed. The population that was sampled consisted of Twitter accounts of Major League Baseball and the National Basketball Association teams. The goal was to obtain a diverse sample representing the entire population through examining six teams from both leagues. To access the sample, stratified random sampling was used with the intention of
creating subgroups based on number of followers to accurately represent the greater population. In order to obtain the data, various teams’ online Twitter accounts were studied for secondary and quantitative data. Overall, 500 tweets from each account were analyzed and the questions asked resulted in nominal answers. Examples of questions include: “How often did a team tweet about an individual player?” and “How often did a team tweet about a player performing charitable efforts?” Once the data was collected, it was analyzed via an independent sample t-test.

**Results**

For this study, data was collected from the social media website, Twitter, and the sample examined included 12 verified National Basketball Association (NBA) and National Hockey League (NHL) Twitter accounts. Six verified Twitter accounts were taken from both leagues and varied most significantly based upon the number of followers. In regard to the NBA sample, followers roughly ranged from 1,160,000 to 320,000 people and the NHL sample, 637,000 to 191,000. This sample made up 20% of the overall population and served as an accurate representation of both leagues because it accounted for differences between teams such as the number of followers. All of data that was collected for this study was kept.

The mean percentage of tweets regarding an individual player from a NBA account ($M = .42367, SD = .085139, n = 6, N = 30$) was greater than the percentage of tweets regarding an individual player from an NHL account ($M = .29433, SD = .037490, n = 6, N = 30$).
The mean of the total number of tweets regarding an individual’s performance from an NBA account \( (M = 164.83, SD = 33.403, n = 6, N = 30) \) was greater than the mean of the total number of tweets regarding an individual’s performance from an NHL account \( (M = 119.00, SD = 22.565, n = 6, N = 30) \).

The mean of the total number of tweets regarding an individual’s charitable efforts from an NBA account \( (M = 15.50, SD = 6.950, n = 6, N = 30) \) was greater than the mean of the total number of tweets regarding an individual’s charitable efforts from an NHL account \( (M = 3.67, SD = 2.658, n = 6, N = 30) \).

The mean of the total number of tweets regarding an individual’s personal life from an NBA account \( (M = 12.17, SD = 4.446, n = 6, N = 30) \) was greater than the mean of the total number of tweets regarding an individual’s personal life from an NHL account \( (M = 7.17, SD = 4.997, n = 6, N = 30) \).

The mean of the total number of tweets regarding an individual’s health from an NHL account was greater \( (M = 8.667, SD = 4.4572, n = 6, N = 30) \) was greater the mean of the total number of tweets regarding an individual’s health from an NBA account \( (M = 8.00, SD = 5.6569, n = 6, N = 30) \).

The mean of the total number of retweets of an individual player by a NBA account \( (M = 8.17, SD = 10.534, n = 6, N = 30) \) was greater than the mean of the total number of retweets of an individual player by an NHL account \( (M = 1.33, SD = 1.633, n = 6, N = 30) \).

On average, the mean of the total number of tweets about an individual by an NBA account was greater \( (M = 211.833, SD = 42.5696) \) than the mean of the total number of tweets about an individual by an NHL account \( (M = 147.167, SD = 18.7448) \). The difference was significant \( (t(10) = 3.405, p = .007) \). A 95% confidence level was used.
Conclusion

This study examined to what degree does the branding of individual players by a team via Twitter differ between the National Basketball Association and the National Hockey League. It was determined that NBA maintained a higher degree of focus on individual athletes than the NHL on Twitter. On average, NBA teams’ Twitter accounts tweeted about an individual, an individual’s performance, an individual’s personal life, and an individual’s charitable efforts more often than NHL Twitter accounts.

This study builds of previous literature that focused on athlete branding, consumer identification with human brands, customer values, and social media motivations and constraints. Carlson and Donavan (2013) analyzed how perceptions of human brands affected consumer’s level of identification by combining social identity theory with brand personality and found that consumers view athletes as human brands with unique and differing personalities. This connection led to an increase in purchases of team-related merchandise and an increase in overall team-related viewership. NBA teams, through their Twitter accounts, placed more of an emphasis upon promoting and branding individual players to their followers than NHL teams. This strategy was employed generate a strong connection between the fan and the player.

Witkemper et al. (2012) examined motives and constraints that influenced sport Twitter consumption in regard to following athletes. Results of the study discovered that sport organizations should focus on using social media as a source of information first, while also providing engaging, athlete-based entertainment because fans enjoyed those the most. (Witkemper et al., 2012). Both NBA and NHL Twitter accounts use their social media presence primarily as a tool to inform followers of general information regarding upcoming events, scores
of games, and team achievements. However, NBA accounts attempt to communicate information about players’ personal lives more often than NHL accounts. This greater degree of emphasis on players’ lives outside of the game could lead to an increase in fan engagement.

Reed and Hansen (2013) examined social media’s influence on sports journalists’ perception of gatekeeping through the use of the gatekeeper theory as a conceptual framework. Professional sports teams now have the ability to portray their players in any fashion they like as they now have ownership of a major media outlet. The landscape of a gatekeeper in the sport industry has rapidly changed and NBA accounts, more than NHL accounts, have taken advantage of this alteration in the environment.

The most significant limitation that restricted the study was the inability to retrieve tweets past a certain date. Sport organization tweet very often causing older tweets to be pushed down on the timeline and eventually cannot be retrieved. Because of this, examining Twitter practices in the offseason and preseason became impossible and thus, limited the overall study. Adjusting to this, the decision was made to only use NBA and NHL teams because at the time of the study, both sports were in season and easily comparable.

For further research, tweets from National Football League teams and Major League Baseball teams should be analyzed. Additionally, tweets from the four major North American professional sport leagues spanning from the offseason, preseason, and regular season should be examined for a complete view of the entire situation relating to athlete branding on Twitter.

NBA accounts maintained a significantly higher degree of focus on individual athletes than the NHL on Twitter. Because of this, NBA teams maintain a greater connection between fans and players, communicate more information about players’ personal lives, and have taken advantage of their ability to become the new gatekeeper.
Summary

The branding of individual athletes by their team has been an effective strategy in engaging with fans. In recent years, Twitter has been more widely accepted in the professional sports industry and every single professional sports organization in North America is now on the social media site (Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012). Twitter is an easy to use social media platform that can be utilized by all different athletes regardless of sport or recognition (Talty, 2012). Athletes are bigger than the brands they represent and companies exploit this and transfer the athlete’s image onto their product (Kotlyar, 2013). Sport organizations have desired long-term relationships with their consumers and have turned to social media to establish, maintain, and enhance these relationships through individual athletes (Abeza, O’Reilly, and Reid, 2013).
References


