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## Personal brand authenticity and social media. The top 5 football players' case

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**Abstract:** The authenticity is a key factor which attracts the interest of young consumers in the more and more dominant virtual world full of "fake news", "fake images", and "fake impressions". The celebrity authenticity is also important when it comes to gain the positive attitude of the audience and the success in the long term. The unique talent is crucial for all stars. According to football stars, the authenticity of their personal brands next to the extreme talent also brings greater financial success to the player due to the cooperation with media and advertising industry. The aim of the presented study is to explore the antecedents of the personal brand authenticity of the TOP5 most valuable football celebrities in the social media. To do it, the authors conducted a study among 496 Polish social media users. The presented study is the first sector analysis which assesses the authenticity of football celebrities' brands. The data have been analyzed by the structural equation modeling method (SEM). The findings suggest that consistency and candidness are the factors which to the greatest extent determine the authenticity of football celebrities in the social media.

**Keywords:** personal branding, Sentione, sentiment analysis, relational capital, social media, brand authenticity

### Introduction

The football achieved 3 500 000 000 fans worldwide, as it was stated by Statistic Brain Research Institute in April 2017. According to their findings, football is the most popular sport ever. It does not surprise that top football players are perceived as global stars. Their personal brands achieve spectacular values. For example, No 1 Neymar brand value, according to Transfermarkt.com is 150,00 mln €, No 2 Lionel Messi value: 120,00 mln € and Cristiano Ronaldo: 100,00 mln €.

A personal brand is a personal intangible asset defined as a name of a real person combined with all the notions intended to identify this person and to differentiate him/her from others (Kucharska, 2017). The authenticity of a personal brand in the more and more dominant virtual world full of "fake news", "fake images", and "fake impressions" has become a great value today. A celebrity's authenticity, in reference to Moulard et al. (2015), is defined as "the perception that a celebrity behaves according to his or her true self." Moulard et al. (2014) pointed out that the perception of artists' brand authenticity strongly affects the positive attitude towards them. Fritz et al. (2017) stressed that brand authenticity positively affects brand relationship quality. When it comes to football celebrities, we assume that the authenticity results in a positive attitude towards the players and, as a result, to the financial success connected with the presence in the social and advertising media.

Endorsement, considered as a brand alliance, where meanings and values are transferred from either partner to the other (Halonen-Knight and Hurmerinta, 2010), strictly requires for the transferred meanings and values to be perceived as authentic by the target group. Credible endorsement makes consumer self-brand connection also more credible (Dwivedi et al., 2015; Choi and Rifon, 2012). Thus, from the celebrity's point of view, it is very important to understand which factors influence the consumer perception of a celebrity brand and are helpful to achieve the status of an icon (Bishop, 2011). Effective management of celebrity brands can increase their owners' incomes. Moulard et al. (2015) identified antecedents to celebrity brand authenticity based on a cross-sectional survey. Their findings suggest that "stability" composed of consistency, candidness, and



morality have a stronger influence on brand authenticity identification than "rarity" constructs, such as talent, discretion, and originality.

Following these findings, the question is: How does each of these constructs affect celebrity authenticity directly without grouping them in "rarity" and "stability" sets? The second question is: How is the power of influence presented for one specific industry, i.e. sport and specifically football celebrities? Therefore, the aim of the presented study is to explore the antecedents to the authenticity of the TOP5 football celebrity personal brands in the social media environment. Referring to Labrecque et al. (2011), social media are broadly utilized to create personal brands today. Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016) claim, that this innovation in the technology has enabled celebrities to take over their images control and allowed to communicate directly with fans through social media platforms. Green (2016) based on rugby players sample concluded that 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.

Football celebrities performance, similarity to rugby players is reflected in their market value. Personal market value of football players is to a great degree a result of their efficacy, which is easily measurable by a set of statistics related to the players' everyday performance on a football field (Kucharska, 2018), and the strong, easily identifiable, authentic image is the key to the financial success in the media industry. The analysis of football celebrities' brand authenticity in the context of social media usage is a new and empirically unexplored research area. As it was pointed out by Thomson (2006), authenticity may have a positive effect on celebrity attachment and positive response. This study is the first which directly assesses the antecedents of the social media celebrity authenticity in the social media of the TOP football players.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The aim of the presented study is to explore the direct influence of personal brand authenticity antecedents of the TOP5 most valuable football celebrities in the social media context.

The conceptual framework of the study is closely related to the one of Moulard et al. (2015) methodology and has been modified by the elimination of "rarity" and "stability" order constructs. The "rarity" consists of talent, discretion and originality but "stability" is composed of constancy, candidness and morality. The sub-dimensions of rarity and stability has been eliminated to check the direct influence of each of this variables separately on the authenticity.

In reference to the Moulard et al. (2015) mentioned study, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

H1: Talent has a positive effect on brand authenticity.

H2: Discretion has a positive effect on brand authenticity.

H3: Originality has a positive effect on brand authenticity.

H4: Consistency has a positive effect on brand authenticity.

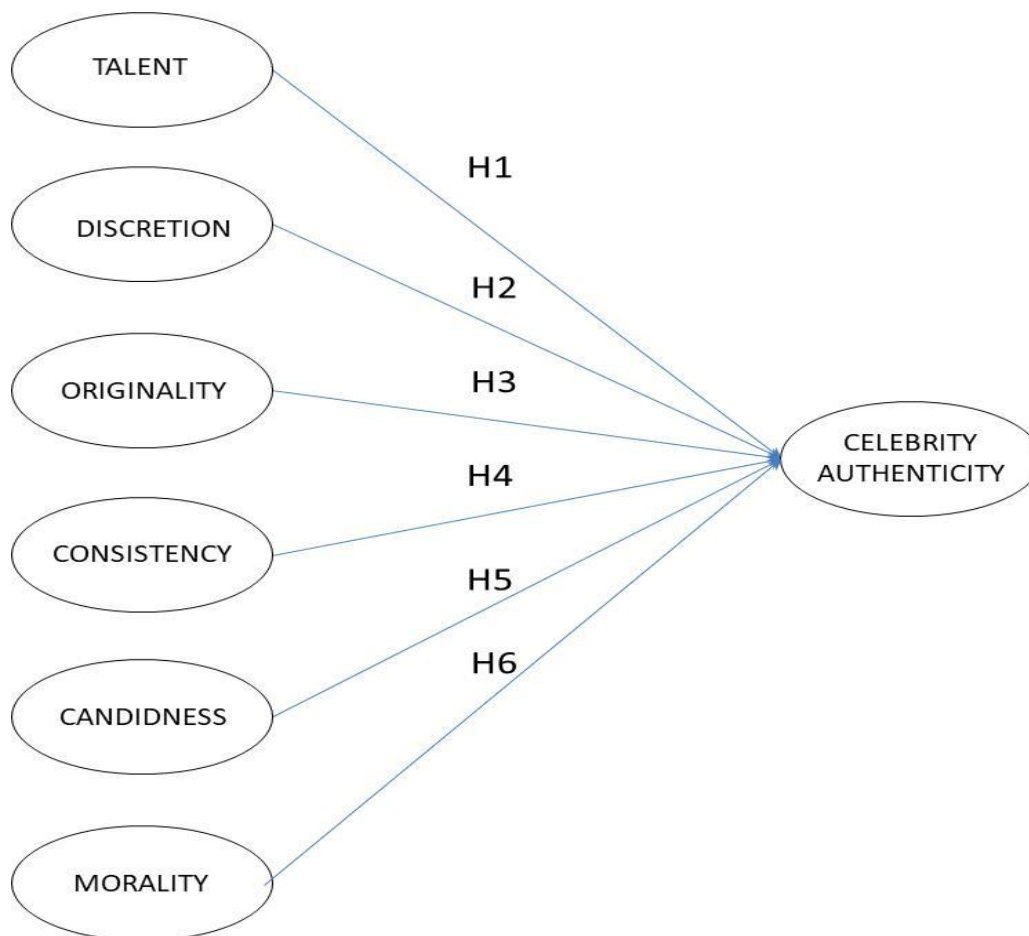
H5: Candidness has a positive effect on brand authenticity.

H6: Morality has a positive effect on brand authenticity.

According to the formulated hypotheses and in reference to the source of Moulard et al. (2015), talent is defined as a perception that the celebrity demonstrates natural skills in a particular field; in other words, he or she possesses abilities that enable him/her to earn fame due to being outstanding gifted. Discretion is defined as a perception that the celebrity is modest, in other words, his or her public appearance is focused on their professional, not private life. Originality reflects an outstanding level based on celebrities thinking and acting in an independent, individual and creative way. Consistency is understood in the presented context as a perception that the personality and characteristics do not change and, in fact, the image of this person is constant and easy to recognize. Consistent celebrities exhibit permanence over time. Candidness is defined as a perception that what the celebrity states and does is consistent with how the celebrity feels, whereas morality is described by Moulard et al. (2015) as a perception that the celebrity demonstrates strong values and principles.

In other words, the authentic star does not blunder from his or her fundamental standards. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of the study adapted from Moulard et al. (2015).

Figure 1: Conceptual framework.



Source: authors' own study adapted from Moulard et al. (2015).

### Methodology

The study was conducted based on the data originally collected among young Polish users of the social media with a questionnaire whose design was based on measurement scales and whose sources are presented in Appendix 1. The TOP5 football players were selected with help of the Transfermarkt.com. The respondents reacted to statements based on a 7-point Likert scale. The first qualifying question directly referred to each of the TOP5 football players' familiarity and next to the social media usage. Respondents assessed brand authenticity for each football player separately. As a result, the research sample included 960 cases which had been gathered between October and November 2017 among Polish students of the Gdańsk University of Technology, their families, and friends who voluntarily participated in the presented survey. 496 complete cases were accepted for the final analysis. The data were gathered electronically, using the "snowball method." Such a low rate of fully completed cases is caused by a high level of expertise required to answer questions regarding all five most valuable football players. It means that the market value level of a particular football player is not the same as his popularity level. The qualified sample structure is presented in Appendix 2. The list of the TOP5 most valuable football players according to Transfermarkt.com is presented in Appendix 3.

The analysis was conducted using the structural equation modeling method (SEM). A measurement and later a structural Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) models had been developed for the theoretical model presented in Figure 1. The model was then estimated and assessed. Estimation

was conducted according to a maximum likelihood method (ML). The evaluation of the model quality was conducted based on tests such as Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), CMIN/DF, and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) with the use of the MPlus software. Based on the readings, CFA model presented in Figure 1 may be considered as well fit in relation to the data. Model reliability level 4.00 can be viewed as good with the reference  $\leq 5$  (Wheaton, 1977). Model fit with the data based on approximation average error RMSEA at 0.078 also meets the reference values below 0.08, referring to Stieger and Lind (1980). Measurements of the goodness of fit: CFI and TLI came close to 1 (Bollen, 1986, 1989), which confirms the mentioned above quality. AVE results for all constructs (Average of Variance Extracted) are higher than 0.50 which is accepted (Fornell and Larcker 1981). CR (Composite Reliability) is higher than 0.74 and it is higher than the required 0.6 (for more details please go to Appendix 1). The positive evaluation of the SEM model and methodology presentation allows us to proceed with the presentation of results.

## Results

All constructs achieved statistically significant results and most of the formulated hypotheses, with the exception of one, have been positively verified. The study shows that the morality of football celebrities negatively influences their perceived authenticity, whereas the positive influence was hypothesized. It is worth highlighting that the achieved  $\beta$  coefficient for morality and brand authenticity is very close to 0 and equals - 0.07. It means that the influence of direction (positive or negative) is not clear, especially that the significance level  $p < 0.01$ , whereas in other cases  $p < 0.001$ . It means that morality is not very significant for the football stars personal brand authenticity perception.

The strongest influence is observed for consistency ( $\beta = 0.83$ ) and candidness ( $\beta = 0.70$ ). These two variables seem to be most influenced by the need of the cognitive homogeneity (opposite to the cognitive dissonance). Discretion ( $\beta = 0.59$ ), originality ( $\beta = 0.48$ ), and talent ( $\beta = 0.43$ ) results confirm the significance of modesty, uniqueness, and being skilled and naturally gifted for recognition as authentic football star.

Table 1 below presents details connected with the verification of the hypothesis. Figure 2 illustrates results achieved for the structural model.

Table 1: Hypothesis verification

Hypothesis	$\beta$	C.R	p-value	verification
<b>H1:</b> Talent has a positive effect on brand authenticity.	0.432	8.97	0.000	accepted
<b>H2:</b> Discretion has a positive effect on brand authenticity.	0.589	13.19	0.000	accepted
<b>H3:</b> Originality has a positive effect on brand authenticity.	0.479	10.238	0.000	accepted
<b>H4:</b> Consistency has a positive effect on brand authenticity.	0.828	21.24	0.000	accepted
<b>H5:</b> Candidness has a positive effect on brand authenticity.	0.700	15.47	0.000	accepted
<b>H6:</b> Morality has a positive effect on brand authenticity.	-0.070	-2.55	0.011	rejected

Source: author's own study achieved with MPlus.

Figure 2: Structural model results



Notes for the model: Chi-square=509.537, df=127, Cmin/df=4.00  $p < 0.001$ , CFI=0.933 TLI=0.92 RMSEA=0.078 (0.071; 0.085), ML, standardized results

### Discussion

The presented study expands our knowledge on the authenticity of celebrities by validation of the Moulard et al. (2015) model for the specific group of celebrities, i.e. football stars, and by examination of the direct influence of all antecedents of brand authenticity identified by them, as well as by conducting this study in the social media environment. The main difference identified by the comparison of the results achieved in the course of the study to the Moulard et al. (2015) results is that morality as a football celebrity authenticity influencer is verified negatively. It may be caused by two reasons. Firstly, the comparatively young age of the respondent group. As Moulard et al. (2015) claimed, celebrity authenticity is moderated by age. It is also possible that younger generations are not as strict when it comes to morality as older generations are. Secondly, by the specific image associated with the top football players. They may not be perceived as immoral, however, the lack of morality is not a huge surprise when considering this group. Perhaps this is a reason why the morality result is contrary to what was expected.

Another difference worth pointing out and discussing is the result achieved for the talent antecedent. Moulard et al. identified it as the strongest "rarity" factor which influences celebrity authenticity (0.97,  $p < 0.001$ ). In our study, the direct impact of talent on football celebrity authenticity is not as impressive (0.43,  $p < 0.001$ ). It surprises when we take into account the fact that personal market value of a football player is a result of their efficacy and their everyday performance

on the football field. We could argue that when considering the top 5 football players, an exclusive group composed of the most talented players, their fundamental "professional competencies" (talents) are undisputed and they do not shape the authenticity of a personal brand as much as "social skills" such as consistency and candidness. For example, the talent in the case of another celebrity group such as artists is not as precisely defined and statistically measured as the talent of football players.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the study conducted among a group of Polish young men, we can conclude that the crucial antecedents to the authenticity of a football celebrity are consistency and candidness. The morality of the player in the context of authenticity is seen as negligible for this group. Moreover, although talent is important, all the TOP5 football players are regarded as talented, it does not influence the perceived authenticity as much as candidness, consistency, discretion, and originality. The top 5 football players are the exclusive group composed of the most talented football players worldwide. Their fundamental "professional competencies" (talents) are undisputed and they do not shape the authenticity of a personal brand as much as "social skills" such as consistency and candidness. The sector analysis of top football players let identified the most influenced antecedents of the personal brand authenticity in case to be more and more authentic brand against the background of this exclusive group.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

Moulard et al. (2015) observed that not only the age of respondents but also the age of celebrities matters for the assessment of brand authenticity as it determines the "knowing" of the celebrity. New stars are assessed only on the basis of "the first impression". In the presented survey, the ages of respondents and players are homogenous and consequently, the results are not burdened with the age factor. However, another important question arises: How long has the respondent been interested in football and this particular player and how deep is the respondent's interest in the field? Future research should take these two factors into account.

The main limitation of the presented survey is the fact that the sample group is not random. It presents a point of view of young people and it is limited to one country only. It could be interesting to expand the survey and include other countries in it. Despite the fact that football is not so popular outside of Europe and the culture of European countries is quite consistent, especially that football fans form a specific supranational sub-culture, it could prove interesting to compare the way football players' authenticity is perceived across Europe.

### **Practical Implications**

The results obtained during the course of the study lead to interesting managerial implications for football celebrities. Based on the presented findings, the most important factors contributing to being perceived as authentic are consistency and candidness. Namely, if you are a football player, first, deeply consider the self-image you have created and next, keep it constant by engagement in public actions only when they support this self-image and make it easy to recognize. Behavior patterns need to support the image very closely. Originality draws the attention. Modesty leads to affection, especially when it is mixed with impressive results and professional self-confidence. The fact that candidness, consistency, discretion, and originality have achieved such significant results means that to be perceived as an authentic football celebrity it is important not only to have professional skills but also to present an outstanding behavioral pattern off the football field. This is a task for professional personal branders and professional managers of the TOP football players, to help them create and sustain this consistent image of authenticity.



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## Appendixes

### Appendix 1: Constructs measurement sources and validity

Talent Adapted from Moulard et al. (2015)	Lewy is very good at football.	AVE=0,89	CR=0,96
	He is skilled at football.		
	He demonstrates a natural ability to play football.		
Discretion Adapted from Moulard et al. (2015)	He prefers to stay out of the spotlight when not working.	AVE=0,73	CR=0,89
	He tries to keep his private life "private".		
	He does not expose much information about his personal relationships.		
Originality Adapted from Moulard et al. (2015)	Lewandowski is a unique player.	AVE=0,71	CR=0,88
	He has a distinctive characteristic.		
	He has something about him that makes him outstanding.		
Consistency Adapted from Moulard et al. (2015)	He stayed the same for years.	AVE=0,59	CR=0,81
	He looks the same every time I see him.		
	He hasn't changed much.		
Candidness Adapted from Moulard et al. (2015)	He is known for being straightforward.	AVE=0,50	CR=0,74
	He is known for being honest.		
	He is candid.		
Morality Adapted from Moulard et al. (2015)	Robert sometimes has troubles.	AVE=0,78	CR=0,90
	He demonstrated bad in his personal life.		
	He is controversial.		

Source: authors' own study, using MPlus

### Appendix 2: Sample structure

GENDER	[%]	AGE	[%]
		18- 25	65%
F	16%	26-35	32%
M	84%	36-45	3%

Source: authors' own study

### Appendix 3: The TOP5 most valuable football players

No	Player	Value [mln €]
1	Neymar	150,00
2	Lionel Messi	120,00
3	Cristiano Ronaldo	100,00
4	Kylian Mbappe	90,00
5	Luis Suarez	90,00

Source: Transfermarkt.com [18.12.2017]