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# The authenticity in social media. Club and football players' relations

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**Abstract:**

The authenticity in social media is one of the crucial factors of brands success. In the era of fake news, illusions, manipulations or other artificial attributes of the virtuality and reality today it is a real source of value. The presented study aims to verify how football club and football players' brands' authenticity influence attitudinal loyalty in social media. Findings proved that the authenticity is something social media users appreciate. The more authentic football's brands are the higher level of attitudinal loyalty towards general football as sports category is observed. The football brands authenticity is important for the whole football industry success. Scientific implications suggest that club and football players relations are more complex and require deeper theoretical studies to present the full picture of brands' authenticity relations in social media.

**Keywords:** personal brand authenticity, football club brand authenticity, football, attitudinal loyalty, structural equation modeling, mediation, social media

## Introduction

The authenticity today pays. In the era of fake news, illusions, manipulations or other artificial attributes of the virtuality and reality today it is a real source of value. The authenticity is something people looking for. Therefore, a sport which delivers real emotions significantly develop sports' communication, sponsorship, and associated media industry. The football seems to be one of the most successful and profitable sports disciplines which affects the largest audience than any other worldwide. According to Nielsen (2018), more than 40% of people 16 or older in major population centers around the world reckon themselves interested or very interested in the football, more so than in any other sport. According to these statistics, 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 Kylian Mbappe and No 2 Neymar brand values, according to Transfermarkt.com (2019) are 180, 00 mln € and No 2 Neymar brand value is 162,00 mln € and, eg. No 16: Cristiano Ronaldo brand value is 90,00 mln € and as Morrow (1996) stated football players are the key assets of football clubs. These spectacular amounts are closely connected with the authenticity of this stars as it is claimed by Kucharska and Firgolska (2018) and Kucharska et al. (2018). A celebrity's authenticity, in reference to Moulard et al. (2015, p. 175 ), 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 the general brand's relationships quality. Moulard et al. (2016) noted that brands perceived as authentic are evaluated more positively. Bruhn et al. (2012) conceptualize authenticity as continuity (e.g. lasting over time), originality, naturalness

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(e.g. honesty), and reliability (e.g. keeping promises). Schallehn et al. (2014) identified that brand continuity, consistency and individuality are the key predictors for brand authenticity. When it comes to football celebrities, it has been assumed that their individual, personal authenticity of their human brands leads to their financial successes understood not only as a value of their professional contracts but also as a whole amount of money they can earn by endorsement. The power of the authentic personal football brand can be measured in a million dollars including all media contracts. Bearing in mind all above the aim of the study is to examine the influence power of personal brand authenticity of top football stars to the attitudinal loyalty towards the general football discipline.

The current study starts with the theoretical, conceptual framework presentation based on the literature review. Next, the methodology and achieved results are presented. Finally, conclusions and all implications are formulated based on the discussed findings in the broader football industry context.

**Conceptual framework**

Rein et al. (1987, p. 15) define a celebrity as an individual "whose name has attention-getting, interest-riveting, and profit-generating value." They are human brands created using mass communication. Sports celebrities are perceived by consumers as human brands with exceptional personalities (Carlson and Donavan, 2013). Their unique set of passion and professional skills attract spectators. The authenticity and emotional affection are the key motives to follow celebrities (Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016). As Audrezet et al. (2018) pointed the authentic human brands are driven by their inner desires and passions more than by commercial goals. Therefore authentic proficiency and real passion attract more than any other commercially created image. In the reference to the social identity theory of Tajfel and Turner (1985), they pointed out that consumers identify with famous athletes motivated by the reference groups of loyal followers associated in clubs who look for the transference of personal attributes associated with the favorite player to support their own self-identity. As it was stressed by Thomson (2006), authenticity influence strongly on celebrity affection. Doyle et al. (2013) stressed that fans of high market share sports brands present higher levels of attitudinal loyalty. Following these theories, it is assumed that the positive attitude towards the extremely popular football is the stronger the more authentic is the personal brand of the particular football celebrity. Baring in mind all above the hypothesis has been developed:

*H1 The authenticity of a football player personal brand positively influence on the attitudinal loyalty towards football.*
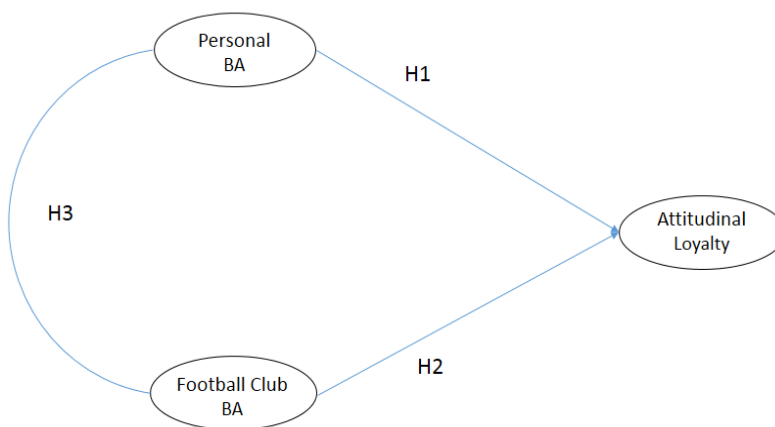
Calero and Corral (2014) proved that the assistance that some football clubs offer their players has a positive effect on the whole perceived quality of them, what point out the strong influence of club on the player. The very interesting issue is the relation between the identification of a club brand and the player personal brand. In the case of young players is easy to assume that the club brand supports stronger the player brand than the player club, but for the top football stars this relation can be the opposite. Castro-Martinez and Jackson (2015) highlighted the importance of balance between the long-term strategic football club vision and the short-term objectives of winning each match impossible without talented players who represent 67 percent of club revenues (Gibson, 2013) and cement the club's community.

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Carlson and Donavan (2013) study confirm that consumers identified with the famous football players were more emotionally attached to the particular athlete's club and team. It's worth to point out that club and the team are perceived as the one by being the same name branded (e.g. like FC Barcelona, Manchester United, Bayern Munich etc.). What's more, they proved that the consumer identification with the football celebrity is a strong predictor for retail spending and the number of games watched. It is worth to stress, that top player's management is one of the critical issues of the football club brand position. The big names guarantee the club recognition and identification. On the other hand, when a leading player is transferred to another team (e.g., Cristiano Ronaldo 2018 transfer from Real Madrid to Juventus Turin). Brand's equity depreciation seems to be inevitable (Strategic Directions, 2017). Sutton (1997) stressed that the identification with the player makes the relationship with the club more intensive and personal. Santin (2014) proved the football players contribution to aggregate results throughout a football club's history by introducing the super-efficiency scale based on Real Madrid club performance within years. For traditional football fans club, team, players and fans are the ones, for modern not. But referring to Richelieu (2012, p.23) authenticity, next to generosity, closeness, teamwork, and performance is one of the key values of the football club brand. Following the theory that brand authenticity influence on brand identification and bearing in mind Keaton's et al. (2015) findings that consumers often individualize the affection between the team/club and the individual sportsmen, the following hypotheses have been developed:

*H2 The authenticity of a football club brand positively influence on the attitudinal loyalty towards football.*

*H3 The football club authenticity and football player personal brand authenticity influence on each other.*

**Figure 1** illustrates all above described conceptual framework of the study.

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**Methodology and Results**

To achieve the aim of the study— to examine the influence power of personal brand authenticity of top football stars to the loyalty towards the general football discipline. —only respondents who pointed following the social media fan-page of their favorite football player and his club were qualified to participate in the survey. Data were gathered using the questionnaire. The respondents' reacted to statements adapted from the validated measurement scales of all constructs included in the theoretical model using a 7-point Likert scale. The sources of these scales and of the statements used are presented in Appendix 1.

The final study was preceded by a pilot study involving 34 respondents. This made it possible to improve statements that respondents perceived as unclear (Hair et al., 2010). Data collection was performed electronically via Facebook. The questionnaire distribution was targeted to all who interest in football living in Poland. Respondents answered voluntarily. This convenient method of sampling reduced the risk of too small sample size. Data were collected from May 2018 to July 2018. The final sample size, after the elimination of invalid or incomplete questionnaires, included 411 respondents. The majority of them were men (86%), aged 18–24 (80%). After a positive assessment of normality, data were analyzed using structural equation modeling method (SEM).

Based on the theoretical model presented in Figure 1, a measurement and a structural confirmatory factor analysis model were developed. The model estimation then proceeded through employing the maximum-likelihood method. The evaluation of the measurement model quality was conducted using a set of tests, including root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) (Stieger and Lind, 1980) using the reference value ≤ 0.08, CMIN/DF (Wheaton, 1977) using the reference value ≤ 5, and comparative fit index (CFI) (McDonald and Marsh, 1990) using the reference value close to 1 using SPSS AMOS 25 software. Table 1 presents the whole obtained empirical results of the models including the goodness of fit tests and hypotheses verification.

Based on these results, the model was considered a good fit in relation to the data. A model reliability level of 3.4 can be viewed as positive, using the reference value ≤ 5. Based on the approximation average error RMSEA, the model fit the data at 0.077 and also met the reference values. Measurements of the goodness of fit were close to 1, which confirmed that the model was of the expected quality. AVE exceeded 0.51 for all constructs, which was acceptable. Hair et al. (2010) suggested that an AVE of 0.5 or higher indicates adequate convergence of the used scales. Cronbach's alpha was used to confirm the consistency of the measurement model. The alpha coefficient was higher than 0.68 for all constructs, which was correct (Francis, 2001). The CR was higher than 0.76 for all loadings, which was more than the required minimum of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2010), indicating internal consistency.

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**Table 1:** Results

| Hypothesis | β | t-value | p-value | Hypothesis verification |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| H1 | 0.32 | 4.37 | *** | YES |
| H2 | 0.28 | 6.20 | *** | YES |
| H3 | 0.94 | 1.47 | 0.14 | N0 |
| Chi-square = 57,970     CMIN/df = 3.41     RMSEA=0.077     CFI=9.61     TLI=9.36, p<0.001 (***), ML | | | | |

**Figure 2:** Empirical model
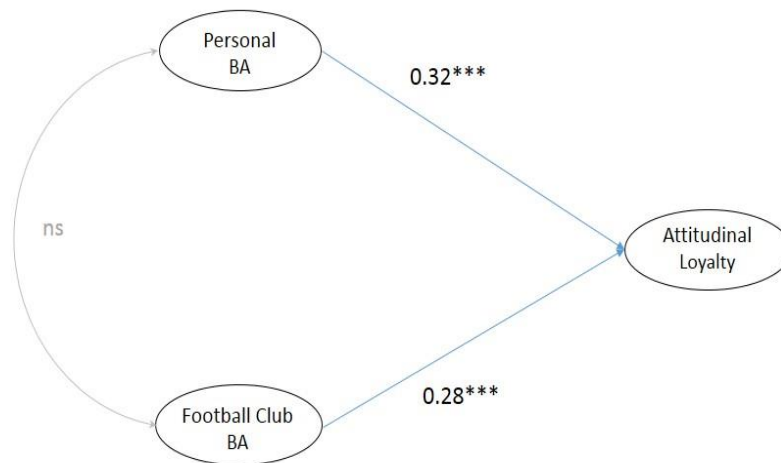


note: Chi-square = 57,970   CMIN/df = 3.41  RMSEA=0.077 CFI=9.61  TLI=9.36,  p<0.001 (***),
ML , ns- not significant result

Table 1 and Figure 2 presents that football celebrity authenticity and club authenticity influence on attitudinal loyalty towards football in social media but surprisingly the club and player brand authenticity are not correlated. $R^2$ achieved for attitudinal loyalty is 0.19, it means that presented relations of player and club brands authenticity explain the attitudinal loyalty towards football in social media only in 19%.

**Discussion and Implications**

The most surprising finding is that the player and his club brands authenticity are not influenced on each other in social media. This situation may suggest that the influence between them is not mutual but one of them influence stronger on another. This hypothesis post-hoc should be verified first, by deeper theoretical study and next, by the empirical research. The same the fact that presented model explains the attitudinal loyalty only in 19 % suggests that this phenomenon is more complex and require deeper theoretical studies to present the full picture of a football club and top players' brands' authenticity relations in social media. The next interesting question which requires further research to find the answer

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is: how this situation looks in reality? How the structure of sports brands authenticity is perceived by football fans in the real, not virtual world if there is any difference.

The practical implications based on the presented findings are that brand authenticity is a significant factor in brands presence in social media. Both, top player brand authenticity and club brand authenticity strongly influence on attitudinal loyalty towards football. As it was mentioned in the introduction section the authenticity is one of the crucial factors of brands success in the era of fake news, illusions, manipulations or other artificial attributes of the virtuality and reality today. As it was proved the authenticity is something social media users appreciate. The more authentic football's brands are the higher level of attitudinal loyalty towards general football as sports category is observed. The football brands authenticity is important for the whole football industry success.

## Limitations and Conclusion

In summary, this study has been the first assessed the simple model of club ant top players brands authenticity relations to attitudinal loyalty, next identified new directions of the further studies. The main limitation of the presented study is non-random sample but the positive normality assessment justified the sample usage. What is more, the current research was focused on attitudinal loyalty and did not consider behavioral loyalty what is important to have the full picture of the presented relations for the football industry. The key conclusion is that authenticity is one of the crucial factors of brands success in social media. The football brands authenticity is important for the whole football industry success. Scientific implications suggest that clubs' and football players' relations are more complex and require deeper theoretical studies to present the full picture of brands' authenticity relations not only in social media but in the reality as well.

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**Appendix 1**

| Construct | Scale | Reliability |
|---|---|---|
| Personal Brand Authenticity adapted from Moulard et al. (2015) | This football celebrity is genuine<br>This football celebrity seems real to me<br>This football celebrity is authentic | **AVE =** 0.592<br>**Cronbach alpha =**0.679<br>**CR =**0.765 |
| Football Club Brand Authenticity adapted from Moulard et al. (2015) | This football club brand is genuine<br>This football club brand reflects all values important to me<br>This football club is authentic | **AVE=** 0.643<br>**Cronbach alpha =**0.84<br>**CR =**0.844 |
| Attitudinal loyalty<br><br>Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) | I am committed to football.<br>I intend to keep interest to football.<br>Changing my beliefs about football would be difficult. | **AVE=**0.760<br>**Cronbach alpha =**0.769<br>**CR =**0.904 |