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Celebrities' personal brand authenticity in social media: an application in the context of football top-players. The Robert Lewandowski case

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Abstract: The aim of the study is to explore personal brand authenticity in social media through sentiment analysis. A survey has been conducted in the context of football players with respect to Robert Lewandowski – the most valuable Polish football-celebrity brand. Authors first assess antecedents of his brand authenticity basing on an international sample of social media users, made of 219 cases from 22 countries (intentionally excluding Poland), adopting the structural equation modelling method (SEM) for the data analysis. Next, the results obtained with the sentiment analysis at the same time are compared. This study is the first assessing the authenticity of a football star. Findings lead to interesting implications for the authentic personal brands' creation of football celebrities online.

Keywords: human brand, personal branding, brand authenticity, sentiment analysis, Sentione, social media, football

Introduction

Statistic Brain Research Institute pronounced that in April 2017 football achieved 3.500.000.000 fans worldwide and designated football as the most popular sport ever. It is not surprising, then, that top football players are perceived as celebrities. Their personal brands achieve spectacular values. According to Transfermarkt.com (2017), the value of Robert Lewandowski – no. 9 in the list of the most valuable football players – is 80 mln €; no. 1 brand Neymar is valued 150 mln €. A personal brand is a personal intangible asset defined as a particular real person name connected with every notion able to identify this person and to differentiate him from others (Kucharska, 2017). In the era of "fake news", "fake images" and "fake impressions" the personal brand authenticity is a highly valuable asset. Following Moulard et. al (2015), celebrity authenticity is defined as 'the perception that a celebrity behaves according to his or her true self'. With respect to football celebrities, authenticity leads to greater financial success than the lack of it. It is commonly believed that football players' personal market value is a result of their efficacy, which is easily measurable by a set of statistics related to their everyday performance on the pitch; a recognizable, strong and favourable image is a key to their personal financial success thanks to media presence, endorsement, self-brand connection and advertising activities (Dwivedi et al., 2015).

Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016) claimed that social media has enabled celebrities to take control over their images and allowed them to communicate directly with fans through social media platforms. Personal branding through social media significantly fosters their potential for fame and celebrity. Compelling narratives, pictures and videos can attract and broaden the audience due to their inspirational and motivational power. Moreover, trans-media narratives effectively foster the



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celebrity's branding by sustaining consistency and distinctiveness when posting. What's more, the brand gets consolidated as the audience embeds it within its own media flow through likes, shares and comments. Collaborative communication with fans enables celebrities to achieve social and economic benefits (Khamis et al. 2017).

Sentiment analysis is one of the prominent tools of data mining that deals with the identification and analysis of emotional contents generally available in the social media domain (Dhaoui et al., 2017). Sentiment analysis is a part of appraisal theory, which is focused on automatically identifying text topics to understand "positive", "negative" or "neutral" sentiment polarity (Khoo et al., 2012). It could be performed using a lexicon of weighted words (Taboada et al., 2011). It is an approach widely used for meaningful research by the marketing community (Bolat and O'Sullivan, 2017) as it does not require any pre-processing or training of the classifier. It is important to highlight that each social media platform has a specific set of forms which enable to express sentiment, e.g., emoticons, emojis, hashtags, abbreviations, slang language, etc. Moreover, semantic analysis based on verbal texts makes it possible to study sentiment directly from the text (comments) by analysing not only the meaning of words but also the context of the single comment. These methods require careful validation of each language separately before being used by marketers on the social media data. A good example of a professional tool for sentiment analysis is Sentione, which was successfully validated and enables monitoring and analyzing online brand mentions in more than 26 languages. As a matter of fact, this makes it easy to detect the sentiment of any brand globally available.

Personal brand authenticity in the context of social media usage is a new and empirically unexplored area of research. This study is the first assessing the authenticity of a football star online and comparing such result with the sentiment flowing during the same period of time.

Conceptual framework

The aim of this study is to explore the concept of personal brand authenticity in the social media context, with respect in particular to a football celebrity. The conceptual framework of the study is closely related to Moulard et al. (2015) definition of celebrity authenticity. Personal brand authenticity is composed of stability and rarity constructs. The "rarity" construct consists of talent, discretion and originality, while the "stability" one is composed of constancy, candidness and morality. Rarity is defined as the degree to which the celebrity is seen as uncommon, meant as possessing unique characteristics, difficult to imitate. It is the ability to set apart from other stars. Rarity influences personal brand authenticity since expressing one's true self is often difficult due to social pressures. "Going against the grain" is not easy. Psychologists Caspi et al. (2005) proved that this ability usually comes with age. Stability is defined as the degree to which the celebrity is perceived as unshaken. It is consistent with Schlegel et al. (2012) theory that true self is static and forges the fundamental characteristics of any person. Celebrities who are high in stability are firm and inflexible in their words, actions, principles and their mental and physical characteristics. They are straightforward and demonstrate strong, uncompromising values and this is perceived as corresponding with the true-self of them. Based on Moulard et al. (2015) mentioned study, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

H1: Rarity has a positive effect on celebrity authenticity.

H2: Stability has a positive effect on celebrity authenticity.

H3: Talent has a positive effect on rarity.

H4: Discretion has a positive effect on rarity.



H5: Originality has a positive effect on rarity.

H6: Consistency has a positive effect on stability.

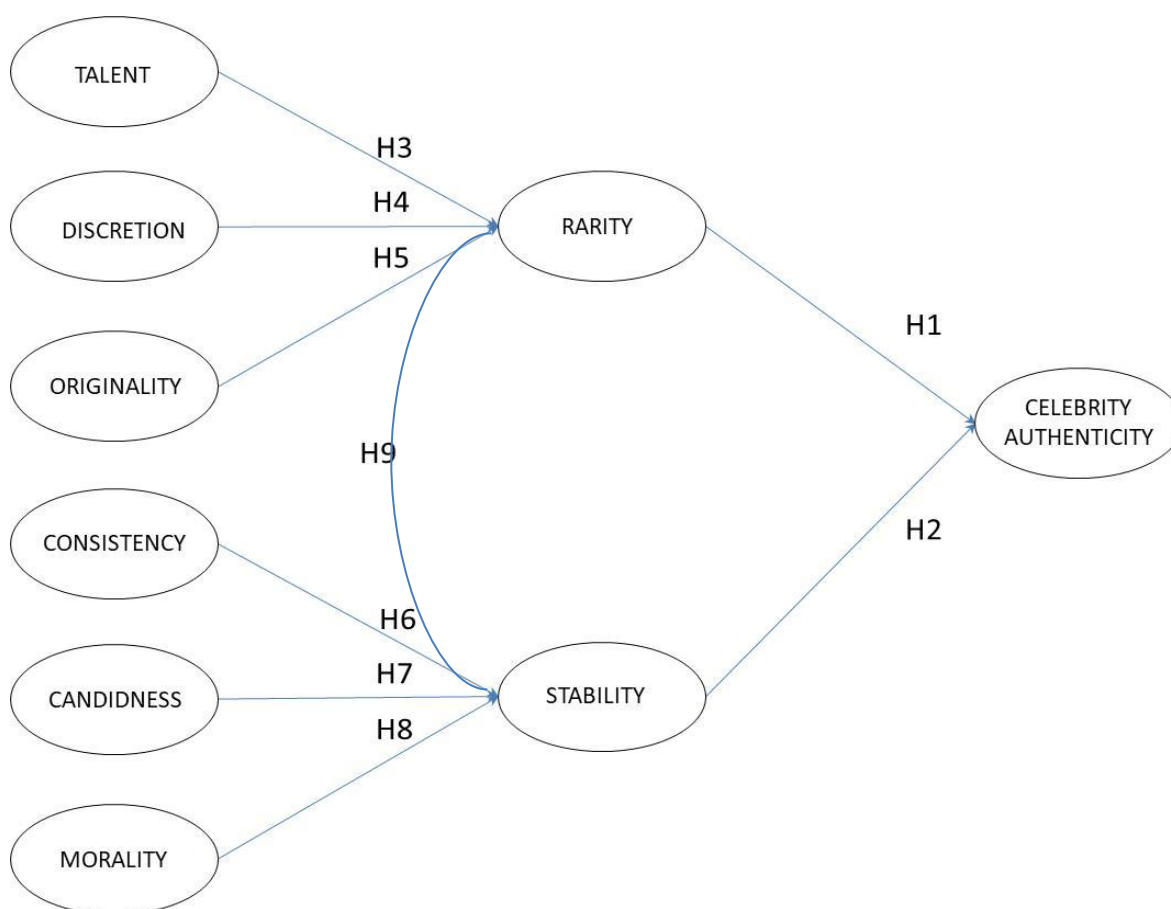
H7: Candidness has a positive effect on stability

H8: Morality has a positive effect on stability

H9: Rarity and Stability positively influence one on another

According to 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 extraordinarily gifted. Discretion is defined as a perception that the celebrity is modest; in other words, his or her public appearance is focused on his/her professional role, not on private life. Originality reflects an outstanding level of thinking and acting in an independent, individual and creative way. Consistency is understood 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, authentic star do not blunder from his or her fundamental standards.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework



Source: Moulard et al. (2015)

Methodology

Since the aim of this research is to explore the authenticity of a football top player brand in the social media domain, we first assess the Robert Lewandowski brand authenticity, and then conduct a sentiment analysis, both in the empirical context of the social media.

The brand authenticity study was conducted collecting original data among international users of the social media via a purposefully designed questionnaire. The questionnaire's design was based on measurement scales validated in the literature and the related sources are presented in Appendix 1. The respondents reacted to statements choosing among options based on a 7-point Likert scale. The first qualifying question directly referred to the familiarity with Robert Lewandowski and next to the social media usage. Research sample was made of 279 cases gathered from October to November 2017 among international students of Gdańsk University of Technology, University of Verona and Masaryk University; their relatives and friends voluntary participated in the survey. Polish users have been intentionally excluded to avoid the potential unreliability of results due to common fascination about Robert Lewandowski in Poland. Finally 219 complete cases has been accepted. Data collection took place by paper version of questionnaire, using mainly the "convenience method" of sampling. Qualified sample structure is presented in Appendix 2.

The data analysis was conducted using the structural equation modelling method. For the theoretical model presented in Figure 1, a measurement and later a structural Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) models have been developed. 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, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) with the use of MPlus software. Based on the readings, CFA model presented in Figure 2 may be considered as well fit in relation to the data. Model reliability level 1,53 can be viewed as very good with the reference ≤ 5 (Wheaton, 1977). Model fit to the data based on approximation average error RMSEA at 0.050 also meets the reference values below 0.08, referring to Stieger and Lind (1980). Measurements of 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) is higher than 0.49 which is accepted (Fornell and Larcker 1981). CR (Composite Reliability) is higher than 0.74 and it is higher than 0.6 what is required (for more details please go to Appendix1).

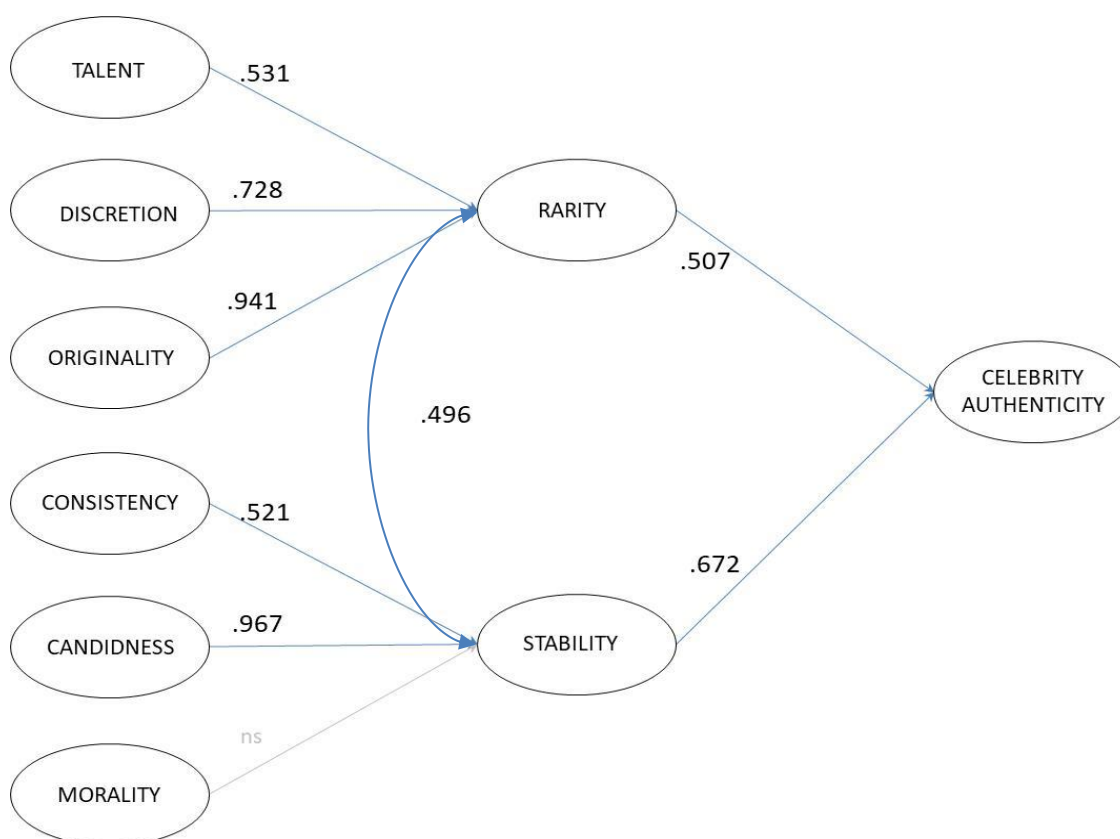
Sentiment analysis has been conducted through Sentione (<https://sentione.com/>). Data were collected from the 8th of November to the 12th of December 2017. This part of the research, based on semantic analysis, was carried out first of all by determining the keywords and the context and next by specifying the rule, area, and scope for the search. The context of analysis has been defined by selecting 30 keywords related to the football industry with the use of subject-oriented websites devoted to football. Next, the defined research context was translated into 26 languages. The search rule included name, surname, and nickname of a football player, and was designed in such a way to exclude the search of a player in a context different than the defined one. The search results showed the footballer's and his club's official websites as first. Next, the search included other categories such as blogs, microblogs, portals, forums, and photo & video sharing websites available over the entire Internet. Facebook was selected to represent social network platforms.

Having explained the methodology and after the positive evaluation of the SEM model, it is possible to present the results, first with respect to the assessment of the Robert Lewandowski personal brand authenticity and then with respect to the sentiment towards him flowing in the social media.

Results

All constructs achieved statistically significant results and all 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. The stronger influence is observed for stability rather than for rarity constructs. Originality influences most the perception of rarity, whereas candidness is the strongest determinant of stability. Figure 2 illustrates the results achieved for the structural model, while Table 1 below presents the detailed measures connected with the verification of the hypothesis.

Figure 2: Structural model of brand authenticity results



Notes for the model: Chi-square=276.183, df=180, Cmin/df=1,53 $p \leq 0.001$, CFI=0.95 TLI=0.947 RMSEA=0.05 (0.038;0.061), ML, standardised results

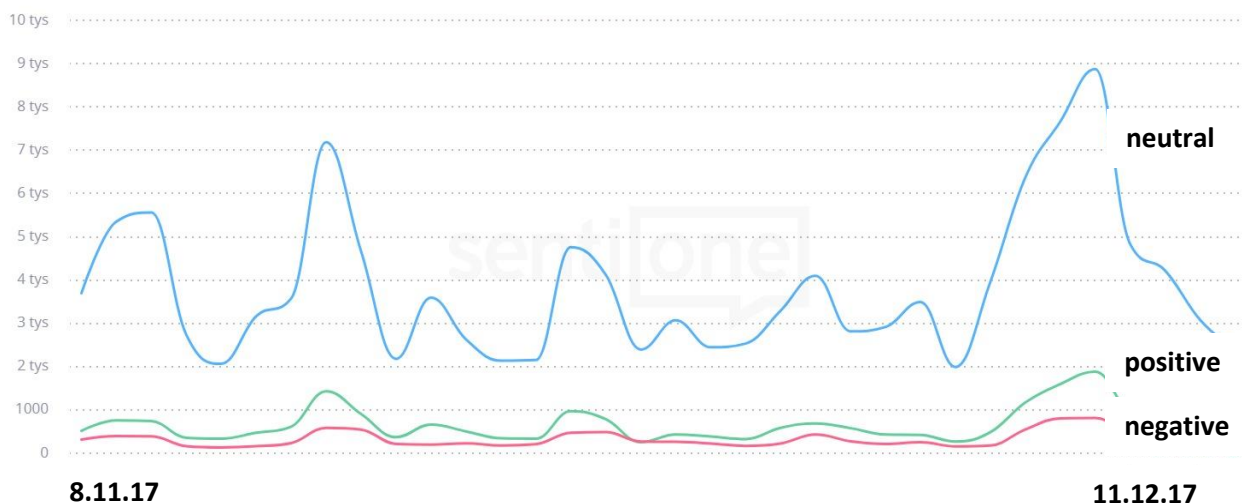
Table 1: Hypothesis verification

Hypothesis	β	C.R	p-value	verification
H1: Rarity positively influence on celebrity authenticity.	0.507	7.44	0.000	accepted
H2: Stability positively influence on celebrity authenticity.	0.672	8.551	0.000	accepted
H3: Talent has a positive effect on rarity.	0.685	12.69	0.000	accepted
H4: Discretion has a positive effect on rarity.	0.278	3.43	0.001	accepted
H5: Originality has a positive effect on rarity.	0.941	16.53	0.000	accepted
H6: Consistency has a positive effect on stability.	0.521	7.32	0.000	accepted
H7: Candidness has a positive effect on stability	0.967	11.44	0.000	accepted
H8: Morality has a positive effect on stability	0.078	0.89	0.369	rejected
H9: Rarity and Stability positively influence one on another	0.496	4.52	0.000	accepted

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According to the sentiment analysis conducted for notions observed at the same time, the neutral sentiment is by far dominant. At a much lower level, the number of negative entries is minor compared with the positive ones. It means that the general sentiment observed is definitely neutral, yet with a slightly higher number of positive over negative mentions.

Figure 3: Sentiment dynamics

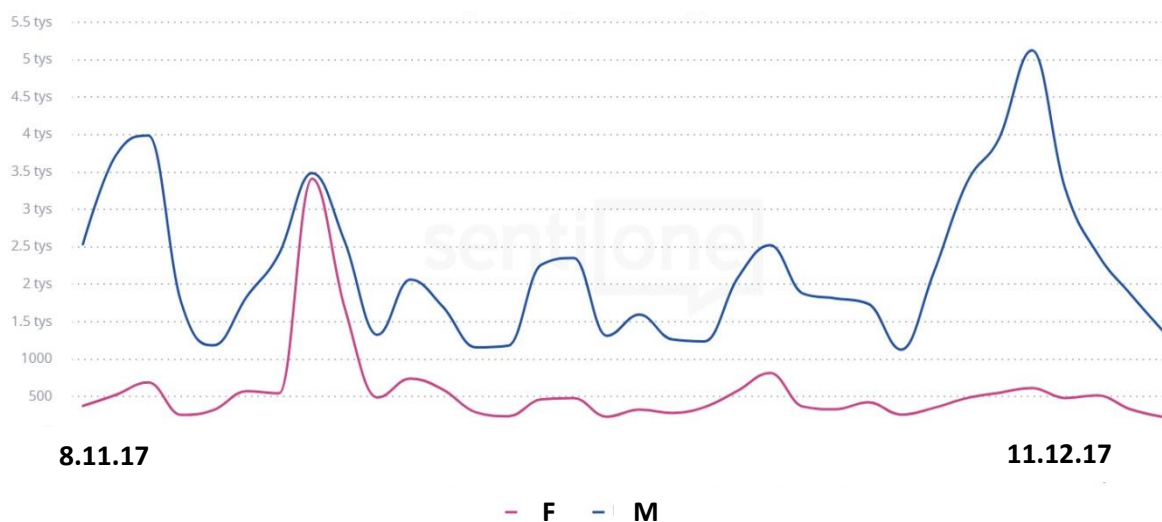


Source: authors' own study using Sentione

The highest peak, observed both in Figure 3 and 4, occurs on the 6th of December, date of match when the Polish forward shot his 50th hit in UEFA competitions. The peak dated on the 10th of November is the result of the information that Robert Lewandowski would have not taken part in Polish National Team matches with Uruguay and Mexico.

When analysing the gender influence (Figure 4) on the number of mentions, men engagement is generally much stronger than women, except on 15th of November 2017. This extraordinary result can be explained as an effect of the Robert Lewandowski's new hairstyle presentation on the Instagram platform. A picture showing him in a new hair colour has been liked 330 thousand times within first one hour from posting.

Figure 4: Mentions dynamics by gender



Source: authors' own study using Sentione

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Based on the presented sentiment analysis it's visible that the biggest increase of mentions amount is observed for events connected rather with rarity than stability constructs.

Discussion

This research essentially provides confirmation for Moulard et al. (2015) definition of celebrity authenticity, which was drawn with respect to celebrities coming not only from sports, but from diverse fields, such as movies, music, politics and more.

The higher importance of stability over rarity is also confirmed, highlighting that, to be considered authentic, a celebrity should take care more of his or her consistency, candidness and morality than of talent, discretion and originality. In our findings, only morality, as a sub-dimension of stability, was not confirmed, and this points more to a larger investigation than to a possible refinement of the model.

As for the sentiment analysis, the finding that the general sentiment is rather neutral with predominant numbers of positive than negative emotions is consistent with Kucharska (2018), which was achieved basing on a sample of 100 most valuable football players according to Transfermarkt.com.

However, such results are of a kind of surprise in two ways. First, one would expect a larger gap between positive and negative mentions which, on the contrary, is rather small. Since Robert Lewandowski cannot be considered a controversial football player – as oftentimes they are – this finding deserves a deeper investigation. Second, the high number of neutral entries is not that obvious. In the behaviour of social media users, information circulation seems to prevail over active engagement. Again, one would expect that in social media – and in the hot context of passionate football fans – stronger sentiments, either positive or negative, would emerge. Perhaps differently from what is commonly believed, social media users of our sample prefer simply to share information rather than to express strong opinions. Whatever the possible explanation, this result deserves careful consideration and further investigation is needed.

The sentiment analysis compared to brand authenticity assessment reflects that talent and originality – rarity constructs – let the football media star gain the attention of the social media audience. Stability, defined as the degree to which the celebrity is perceived as unshaken, requires longer and more detailed observations to be detected in sentiment analysis.

All in all, ours is the first research about human brand authenticity specifically devoted to the football realm and this seems worth value for two reasons. First, because football undoubtedly is one of the most relevant industries worldwide both from an economic and a social point of view. Second, and probably more important from a theoretical standpoint, because the actual performances of football players are easily measurable and such a circumstance makes it very interesting to compare the celebrity brand behaviour on the pitch with the dynamics of his personal brand in terms of awareness, image, equity, authenticity and so on. In other words, since football is a sport, objective results can be observed and this allows to investigate correlations between sport performances and their effects on the sportsman brand.

Our study delivers some implications for those interested in managing the personal brand of a football top player too. Knowing what the sources of authenticity of a celebrity brand are is in fact very helpful to define the most adequate policy and to make the most correct decisions in the virtual environment. Knowing the sentiment flowing in the online context is as well extremely important in order to find the proper way the celebrity should behave both online and offline. Despite knowledge and measurement are at the very base of any management action, however, a caveat should be made about this. Dealing with authenticity, in fact, requires not to overmanage the celebrity's conduct, otherwise the risk becomes to fall into a paradox. The more the celebrity strives to indulge the online fans, the less close to his or her true self it will get, i.e. it will become less authentic.



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Conclusion

Our work is of course not without limitations with respect to several choices either intentional or inescapable made along the research.

Key limitation of the Robert Lewandowski brand authenticity assessment is the relatively small sample (219 cases), composed mostly of young respondents and collected on the base of convenience.

Beyond the limitations related to the sample, one more limitation lies in the number of celebrities considered. This research focussed actually on just one football player, but no need to say that a higher number of celebrities considered would increase both the reliability and the comparability of results.

More, a key limitation of the sentiment analysis is the subjective selection of keywords in the process of defining the semantic analysis context. A different choice of keywords might lead to different results, since it obviously has a direct influence on final results and conclusions.

Authors obviously intend to overcome such limitations in future research, administering the authenticity questionnaire to a statistically significant sample, enlarging the number of players involved and the scope of sports considered (both team and individual sports) and finally refining the selection of keywords used in the sentiment analysis.

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Appendix 1: Constructs measurement sources and validity

Celebrity Authenticity	He is genuine.	AVE=0,64	CR=0,84
	He seems real to me.		
	He is authentic.		
RARITY CONSTRUCTS			
Talent	Lewy is very good at football.	AVE=0,75	CR=0,90
	He is skilled at football.		
	He demonstrates a natural ability to play football.		
Discretion	He prefers to stay out of the spotlight when not working	AVE=0,56	CR=0,79
	He tries to keep his private life "private".		
	He does not expose much information about his personal relationships.		
Originality	Lewandowski is a unique player.	AVE=0,64	CR=0,84
	He has a distinctive characteristic.		
	He has something about him that makes him outstanding.		
STABILITYCONSTRUCTS			
Consistency	He stayed the same over years.	AVE=0,62	CR=0,83
	He looks the same every time I see him.		
	He hasn't changed much.		
Candidness	He is known as being straightforward.	AVE=0,49	CR=0,74
	He is known for being honest.		
	He is candid.		
Morality	Robert has trouble sometimes.	AVE=0,64	CR=0,84
	He demonstrated bad in his personal life.		
	He is controversial.		

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Appendix 2: Sample structure

NATIONALITY	[%]
Biellarus	0,5%
China	16,0%
Czech Republic	3,7%
Finland	0,5%
France	3,7%
Germany	10,0%
Hungary	8,2%
India	1,8%
Iran	0,5%
Israel	0,5%
Italy	14,6%
Lithuania	5,0%
New Zealand	0,5%
Norway	0,5%
Portugal	0,9%
Russia	1,4%
Serbia	0,5%
Slovakia	0,9%
Slovenia	1,4%
Spain	16,0%
Turkey	4,6%
UK	8,7%

AGE	[%]
18-24	60%
25-30	32%
31-35	5%
36-40	1%
50-55	2%

GENDER	[%]
female	37%
male	63%

