A GAME OF PRESENCE, COMPLEXITY, AND MONEY: AN ANALYSIS OF PROFESSIONAL SOCCER PLAYERS’ TWITTER USE DURING THE 2014 FIFA WORLD CUP

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The purpose of this thesis is to examine the use of Twitter by professional soccer players during the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil. Analysis was primarily qualitative and focused on identities portrayed and managed on personal verified Twitter accounts. The purpose of this research was to take an in-depth look at how professional soccer players, who participated in the 2014 FIFA World Cup, managed their Twitter presence during the event. Study findings included the following major points: 1) Sanderson’s (2013) thematic analysis of using grounded theory methodology was shown to be highly applicable; 2) professional soccer player involvement on Twitter provides a notable opportunity to project one or more professional identities; 3) actual and potential use of Twitter involves considerable complexity; and 4) appropriate and effective uses of Twitter likely facilitate financial opportunities while inappropriate and ineffective uses of the medium are a likely financial threat.
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INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1990s, the Internet has had a tremendous influence on culture and commerce and it continues to develop in size and impact. The Internet continues to be a driving source of information for global society and communication, in the means of social media platforms. Social media is the means by which people create, share, and/or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (p. 61). One of the most popular social media websites is Twitter, which is an online social networking and micro-blogging service that enables users to send and read short 140-character text messages, called “tweets.”

Twitter is often used by public figures, such as celebrities or sports professionals, to build their brand and communicate with fans. It is very common for both professional soccer players and fans to have Twitter accounts, which allows fans to “follow” their favorite players and be kept up-to-date with their daily activities and routines. Sports and social media seem to be a natural fit and there is an impressive dynamic combination between the two areas with sufficient potential for development. This study explores how professional soccer players utilize Twitter during the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil to share, interact, and communicate directly with their fans.
Association football, commonly known as European football or soccer, which is played and watched by millions of people around the world, is the world’s most popular sport. The global governing body of soccer is FIFA (International Federation of Association Football). Every four years, an international soccer competition takes place known as the FIFA World Cup, commonly known as the World Cup, where the senior men’s national teams of the members of FIFA contend in a championship competition since its inauguration in 1930.

The World Cup and professional soccer players receive significant media coverage internationally. Due to the magnitude of this event and the revolution of social media, professional soccer players are able to connect with global audiences in an unprecedented manner. The data for this research consists of all tweets and retweets by twenty professional soccer players active in the 2014 FIFA World Cup who have the most Twitter followers one week prior to the start of the event. Data was collected one week prior to the start of the event until one week after the end of the event.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review examines the concept of identity models and personal branding, the history behind soccer and the World Cup, the historical background on social media, as well as the breakdown of the impact of Twitter and its development over the years. Furthermore, this section provide a clear understanding of how these sub-sections are interrelated and complement each other for the purposes of this research. Identity and personal branding plays an important role in promoting and marketing an image that is created as a set of characteristics and personality traits in which embody someone, especially a public figure. Soccer and its biggest event, the World Cup, are relevant to identity and personal branding as the professional soccer players are exposed to enormous amounts of publicity, whether voluntary or involuntary. Being a public figure comes with the responsibility of knowing how to present oneself to a worldwide audience, which in some ways is created through social media platforms. Social media have become a massive part of everyday life because of the high speed and execution of digital communicating and collaborating, whether it is to the next room or all the way across the world. Twitter has impacted how professional soccer players communicate and collaborate with their fans. By doing this, professional soccer players have the ability to enhance their identities to followers while simultaneously promoting and marketing themselves, as well as their brands to mass audiences via Twitter.
Identity Models And Personal Branding

The following section provides a more detailed explanation of previous research conducted in the analysis of using identity models and personal branding. There is a clear description of how identity is defined in a more universal manner, as well as how personal branding is created and the process in which people market and promote their brands. In addition, different frameworks and concepts are discussed in a manner that represents identity models and personal branding.

According to Tracy (2013), communications theorists tend to define identity as who people are. “Identity includes the most personal aspects of people, what in ordinary life we refer to as a person’s character (honest, considerate, sleazy), personality (overbearing, quiet and thoughtful), or attitudes (for the Tea Party, against fracking, a passionate Buffs basketball fan)” (Tracy, 2013, p. 5). Moreover, Tracy (2013) suggests that identity incorporates “characteristics we take to be relatively fixed, such as ethnic and racial background, age, sex, or nationality. In addition, identity includes roles we take on with another in particular situations (e.g., supervisor-employee, friend-friend, coach-player, sister-brother, discussion leader-participant)” (p. 5).

Tracy (2013), states “Identity is a term with many meanings, both in ordinary life and in academic study. It includes the most personal aspects of who people are, as well as group-level identifications” (p. 20).

After creating a presentable identity, the next logical step for public figures, such as professional soccer players, is to actually use the identity that is put on display for the world for the purposes of promoting and marketing their careers as a brand. Personal branding serves as essentially the marketing aspect of a continuous process of establishing an image in the minds of others. Khedher (2014) discusses how personal branding is a planned process in which people
make efforts to market themselves. The process involves three phases: (1) establish a brand identity, people have to differentiate themselves and stand out from a crowd while fitting expectations of a specific target market, (2) develop the brand’s positioning by developing an active communication of one’s brand identity through managing behavior, communication and symbolism, and (3) evaluate a brand’s image and that to fulfill personal and professional objectives, and thus, the practices of personal branding can help to compete in the crowded job market. Individuals involved in personal branding develop their human capital by investing in continuous learning; enhance their social capital through visibility and notoriety and access to financial success and economic profitability (Khedher, 2014, p. 29-40).

Arai, Ko, and Kaplanidou’s (2013) study proposes and tests “a conceptual Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) that is based on Keller’s Customer-based Brand Equity framework (1993)” (p. 383). The study explains that there are three dimensions, which are essential for the development of consumer brand equity for athletes that make up the MABI. These dimensions are: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. The four sub-dimensions that make up the athletic performance dimension is: “athletic expertise, competition style, sportsmanship, and rivalry” (p. 383). The sub-dimensions that make up attractive appearance are: physical attractiveness, symbol, and body fitness, while the dimension of marketable lifestyle is comprised “of life story, role model, and relationship effort” (Arai et al., 2013, p. 383).

In addition, Burch (2012) utilizes a conceptual framework known as framing theory in order to “examine the type of content produced regarding the portrayals of athletes” (p. viii). Burch (2012) discusses how websites like “sportsin140.com, in addition to the website TweetingAthletes.com, were employed to identify and select the athletes for analysis …
Sportsin140.com and TweetingAthletes.com provided a list of athletes with verified Twitter accounts, and categorize all athletes based upon the sport played” (p. 172).

**The History Of Soccer And The World Cup**

The following sub-section offers a comprehensive look into the historic realm of soccer and its major event, the World Cup. The relevance of this sub-section to this research is connected due to the professional soccer players who play the sport. By being charismatic and skillful, these players establish a world-renowned identity to the worldwide community of soccer fans. Soccer and the World Cup is a stage for them to showcase their talent and be remembered in the history books as possibly the greatest legends to play soccer.

Sports are an exciting way to bring people together by uniting a community and creating a sense of belonging. One of the world’s most popular sports that is played and watched by millions is association football, commonly known as European football, or soccer. FIFA (International Federation of Association Football) is the global governing body of soccer and every four years, an international soccer competition takes place known as the FIFA World Cup, commonly known as the World Cup, where the senior men’s national teams of the members of FIFA contend in a championship competition. According to Crouch (2002), “The World Cup is the greatest sporting event on Earth, a competition that evokes memories so vivid, so breathtaking, of the heroes of yesteryear” (p. vii).

According to Hunt (2010), “There is no other sporting event that captures the imagination across the globe quite like the World Cup. Ever since the first competition in Uruguay in 1930, the tournament has grown in popularity and prestige” (p. 6). The inaugural FIFA meeting took
place in 1904 and an agreement was reached where FIFA had the exclusive right to organize a competition that brought together and showcased the world’s strongest national soccer teams on one big stage (Hunt, 2010, p.6). “The success of the Olympic Football Tournament intensified FIFA’s wish for its own world championship” (Classic Football). Furthermore, it was not until the 1920s that an idea cultivated by the then FIFA president Jules Rimet and French soccer administrator Henri Delaunay obtained momentum (Hunt, 2010, p.6). The 2014 FIFA World Cup took place in several venues across the host nation, Brazil, and it also marked a historic 20th FIFA World Cup competition since the inaugural event in 1930.

**Social Media Background**

The following sub-section refers to the historical background of social media. The world today is driven by technology and innovation, which make social media an enormous component of everyday life due to high speed and execution of digital communication and collaboration. The influence of social media is thoroughly examined in consideration with the opportunities for promotional campaigns and marketing relationships of the various platforms, methods in which social media is used for sporting events, how social media helps athletes actively and diversely assert their identity, and the means by which social media create organizational channels and engage consumers to take action.

According to Owyang and Toll (2007), “Social media, referring to easy-to-access tools that allow digital communication and collaboration, are increasingly making a significant impact in the corporate world” (p. 1). Blogs, message boards, and video are just some of the many forms that social media can take; however, it is social media’s “epidemic” nature that
distinguishes from other platforms (Owyang & Toll, 2007, p. 1). It is important to justify metrics and measurement is necessary. Metrics, according to Owyang and Toll (2007), is defined as “the terms or parameters themselves that an organization wishes to understand” (p. 3). The word “attributes” is used within social media platforms. Measurement is the “process of taking these metrics or attributes and determining how they are impacting (or are being impacted by) the actions of an organization, such as a marketing campaign (internal) or a crisis (external)” (Owyang & Toll, 2007, p. 3).

Papasolomou and Melanthiou (2012) explain that the Internet has changed the way promotional campaigns and marketing communications are used. As social media is on the rise, it is not necessarily phasing out traditional marketing practices, but it provides stronger support. This research identifies and discusses the growing popularity of social media and the impact it has on marketing practices and public relations (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012, p. 319). Furthermore, it is important to research the influence that social media have with the use of sport brands. The purpose of Walsh, Clavio, Lovell, & Blaszka’s (2013) study was to explore sport events that use their social media page, as well as those that do not in order to examine if there are differences in the brand personality of a sport event. “This finding is significant as it is the first known empirical evidence, which suggests that social media may have a positive impact on a sport brand’s image” (Walsh et al., 2013, p. 214). According to Walsh et al. (2013), the outcome of the study suggested that additional examination of social media branding effects are necessary because of the many theoretical and practical implications that were raised.

The research conducted in this thesis affirmed Sanderson’s identity categories, as well as extended the application of the framework that was used. This study focused only on the World Cup and professional soccer players, whereas Sanderson (2013) “explores how rookie athletes in
Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Basketball Association (NBA), National Football League (NFL), and National Hockey League (NHL), used Twitter as an identity expression tool” (p. 419). The results presented the manifestation of identity in the ways of: “(a) Athletes as dedicated workers; (b) Athletes as pop culture consumers; (c) Athletes as sports fans; (d) Athletes as motivators; (e) Athletes as information seekers, and (f) Athletes as everyday people” (p. 419). While using social media, athletes have the ability to assert their identity in a more active and diverse manner. These actions appear to make athletes more approachable and similar with fans, as well as demonstrating the important implications for athletes who “construct and disseminate a variety of identities” (Sanderson, 2013, p. 419).

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) provide some clarification of what the term “social media” exactly means because decision makers, as well as consultants, try to identify ways in which firms can make profitable use of applications such as Wikipedia, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter (p. 59). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) provide a classification of social media. This classification intends to group applications together because they are listed under general categories and can fit into more specific ones by using its “characteristic: collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p.59).

Pegoraro’s (2010) case study investigates how athletes used Twitter, which is a microblogging site where users are allowed to post “tweets” regarding their personal thoughts in 140 characters or less. “Social media are a rising force in marketing and have been fully embraced by the sport industry, with teams, leagues, coaches, athletes, and managers establishing presences” (p. 501). The case study attempted to answer what are athletes saying on
Twitter and “the results indicated that Twitter is a powerful tool for increasing fan–athlete interaction” (Pegoraro, 2010, p. 501).

Gilpin (2010) examines “the role of different online and social media channels in constructing organizational image” (p. 265). Social media platforms present new challenges for coordinating image management for the public relations function because structural and social characteristics provide different roles in constructing an image. According to Gilpin (2010), “Organizations seek to influence their reputation through a variety of self-presentation activities, which collectively express the organization’s identity and promote a particular image” (p. 265). To contribute in building their image, organizations use the social media to post traditional news releases, as well as use these platforms for blogging and microblogging, such as Twitter.

According to Castronovo and Huang (2012), “Social media is pervasive by nature and is characterized by its ability to instantaneously connect an infinite number of people” (p. 5). When looking to connect all marketing communication efforts into an easily accessible, integrated consumer venue, a social media platform serves as the channel to accomplish the connection. Twitter is an effective way to engage consumers in conversation. It has the potential to create loyal customers by developing important relationships through one-to-one levels of communication (Castronovo & Huang, 2012, p. 5). According to Castronovo and Huang (2012), “Twitter is beneficial for engaging with customers and propagating the conversation about one’s brand, products, and/or services. It is also ideal for building relationships with key stakeholders” (p. 5).
The Impact Of Twitter

The following sub-section provides a detailed description of the impact that Twitter has had on its own as a social media platform. Twitter is seen as an ideal fit for sports due to the activities it performs that facilitate consumers and it allows for sports consumers to participate in the conversation with their favorite athletes. Having a tool with the ability to enhance their identities to followers while simultaneously promoting and marketing themselves, allows athletes to express themselves and create bonds with followers. It allows for direct communication and sustaining authenticity to the identities portrayed and opportunities to be taken into consideration and ultimately advantage.

According to research by Rein, Shields, and Grossman (2014), Twitter “is a technology platform ideally suited to sports. As Twitter puts it, ‘Twitter and sports fit together because sports are live, immediate, suspenseful, and fun – these are qualities Twitter mirrors and enhances in real-time’” (p. 78). Also, the reason behind Twitter being dominated by sports and being an ideal fit is “because its language – scores, stats, breaking news, analysis, opinion – aligns well with the nature of the platform” (Rein et al., 2014, p. 79).

Lebel’s (2013) dissertation suggests the following:

The rise of athlete-created content in sport through social media outlets such as Twitter represents a shift for sport consumers–after years of consuming sport filtered through marketing and public relations professionals, sport consumers are now not only a part of sport conversation, they are also largely responsible for shaping the direction of sport discussion. (p. 54)

However, this new relationship that is unfolding and the impact it has, has not been completely understood yet (Lebel, 2013, p. 55).
Marwick’s (2010) article investigates how content producers navigate “imagined audiences” on Twitter. Participants had different types of followings to understand their techniques, including targeting different audiences, concealing subjects, and maintaining authenticity. Some techniques of audience management resemble the practices of “micro-celebrity” and personal branding, both strategic self-commodification. Marwick’s (2010) model of the networked audience assumes a many-to-many communication through which individuals conceptualize an imagined audience evoked through their tweets (Marwick, 2010, p. 114).

Witkemper, Lim, and Waldburger’s (2012) study examines what motives and constraints influence Sport Twitter Consumption (STC) in regard to following athletes. The study attempted to promote a reliable and valid model through which researchers and practitioners can measure Twitter consumption-related motivations and constraints. The proposed combined model consisted of 12 items with four measures of motivation (i.e., information, entertainment, pass time, and fanship) and 12 items with four measures of constraints (i.e., accessibility, economic, skills, social) (Witkemper, Lim, and Waldburger, 2012, p. 170-183).

Hambriek, Simmons, Greenhalgh, and Greenwell’s (2010) study shows that Twitter has grown exponentially since 2008 and its use among professional athletes who use Twitter to communicate with fans and other players. The study used content analysis to place 1,962 tweets by professional athletes into one of six categories: interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content, promotional, and fanship. Many of the tweets fell into the interactivity category (34%). Athletes used Twitter to converse directly with their followers. Those with the most followers had more interactivity tweets. A large percentage of tweets (28%) fell into the diversion category, because many of the tweets involved non-sports-related topics, and relatively few of the tweets (15%) involved players discussing their own teams or sports. In addition, only 5% of
the tweets were promotional in nature, indicating that professional athletes may not be taking advantage of the promotional opportunities Twitter may provide (Hambriek et al., 2010, p. 454-471).

Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, and Burch (2012) explore “the relationships promoted by professional athletes on Twitter utilizing the theoretical framework of parasocial interaction (PSI)” (p. 80). The purpose of this content analysis was to examine tweets posted by professional athletes to conclude if they promoted social or parasocial relationships. In addition, the study explored the manner in which athletes engaged in social interactions and each tweet’s topic, which revealed that both social and parasocial relationships were used equally (Frederick et al., 2012, p. 80).

Shockley’s (2010) content analysis examines how professional athletes’ “Twitter” posts allow athletes to directly communicate with mass audiences. This direct communication raises several questions with regard to dynamics of communication and uses of Internet portals. Findings suggested that professional athletes are mainly neutral overall when posting messages regarding their sport, team, peers, or fans (Shockley, 2010, p. 2).

Foster (2011) states, “Twitter allows athletes to control content about themselves instead of the reporters. The social networking site is an outlet for the player to reach an audience without the filter of the journalists’ mediated interviews (p. 7). The fans obtain sports news about athletes from varying sources; however, as professional athletes use Twitter to talk about their personal and professional lives, Twitter has become the main source to gain information that is credible, as long as the account is verified (Foster, 2011, p. 7).


**Relationship Between Twitter And The 2014 FIFA World Cup**

The following section provides some facts, records, and milestones that were collected throughout the 2014 FIFA World Cup regarding professional soccer players and Twitter. This section was composed in order to demonstrate the strong relationship that connects professional soccer players and Twitter together. It is a showing of how the two are a natural fit for each other and it was extremely important to emphasize this connection by simply using the facts, records, and milestones provided. It was evident from these statistics that all of the sections discussed above are interrelated as identity is established through soccer and the World Cup, which are used by professional soccer players via social media platforms, especially Twitter in order to portray their identity to followers.

The event had many significant moments that extended beyond the pitch. Social media platforms played a key role in allowing millions of soccer fans and players around the world to process landmark occasions. Many social media were used in Brazil, but none were used for some of the most memorable moments like Twitter (“The World,” 2014, p. 1).

According to “The World” (2014), the following records occurred:

The micro-blogging platform itself saw records broken; 672m tweets were sent about the World Cup and an extraordinary 618,725 tweets per minute (TPM) were sent after Germany claimed the trophy and 35.6m tweets (a record for a single sporting event) were posted during the eventual champions’ stunning 7-1 semi-final victory over the hosts. (p. 1)

When Brazil played Germany in the first semi-final match, the world watched in shock and awe when the hosts, Brazil, where thoroughly destroyed in a devastating defeat of a score 1-7. During that match, a new record was set for Twitter for a single event “as
35.6m tweets were posted during the game and a new TPM record was also set during that game (580,166, a record broken five days later) when Sami Khedira scored the fifth German goal” (“The World,” 2014, p. 3).

In addition, the championship final between Germany and Argentina was an enormous event on its own, as the statistics showed “32.1m tweets sent during the match (second only to Brazil 1-7 Germany), and the moment Mario Gotze scored his winning goal sent ripples throughout the social scene, with 556,499 TPM after the Bayern Munich man’s exquisite finish” (p. 4). To close it all out, after the final whistle that signified the end of the match a new record of 618,725 TPM were posted after Germany was announced as World Cup champions (“The World,” 2014, p. 4).

Social media has become a crucial part of everyday life. Each World Cup has had its share of controversies and according to Borden (2014), “the dramas of this year’s event — including a bizarre bite and a backbreaking tackle — have played out with a remarkable immediacy on social media” (p. 1). Peter Shankman, a social media consultant in New York states, “If they can jump online, say something, and see it traverse the world in real time, it makes life that much easier” (Borden, 2014, p. 1).

Following a serious injury (fractured vertebra) to Brazil’s star player, Neymar, that made him miss the rest of the competition, Juan Camilo Zuniga, the player who kneed him, began to receive “death threats and racist taunts from Brazilian fans on Twitter — one of the more printable comments was that Zuniga was ‘the biggest villain in the history of football’ — and he took to social media a day later to explain himself” (Borden, 2014, p. 1-2).

Another controversy that sparked major social media attention was when Luis Suarez “sank his teeth into the left shoulder of Italy’s Giorgio Chiellini during a group-stage game,
theories about digitally enhanced pictures of the bite marks popped up almost immediately” (Borden, 2014, p. 2). The post-match interviews by both Suarez and Chiellini were brief; however, “the players took to social media to offer clarifications once the emotional level of the situation had calmed” (Borden, 2014, p. 2). Figure 1 displays the apology issued by Luis Suarez via Twitter to Giorgio Chiellini regarding the biting incident:

![Figure 1. Luis Suarez’s Twitter Apology to Giorgio Chiellini](image)

An article by Greenberg and Diehm (2014) states, “On Twitter, the popularity of the game and its players is also undeniable. The list of the world’s most popular athletes on Twitter is filled with soccer players whose follower counts dwarf those of just about every U.S. superstar”
According to an article from The Huffington Post, eight out of the top ten most followed athletes in the world on Twitter are professional soccer players. With no surprise, Figure 2 represents the popularity and most followed athletes in the world.
Figure 2. The Most Followed Athletes In The World
RESEARCH QUESTION

This thesis addresses the following question: How do professional soccer players, participating in the 2014 FIFA World Cup, manage their Twitter presence during the event? The focus of this research was targeted at the top twenty professional soccer players with the most number of followers on their personal verified Twitter accounts. It was essential that these twenty professional soccer players were active on the men’s senior national soccer teams, their respective countries had qualified for the tournament, and participated in the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil. This yielded to the use of their personal verified Twitter accounts to portray themselves to their followers and create their identities through their tweets and retweets for the duration of the World Cup. Analysis was primarily qualitative and focused on identities portrayed and managed on personal verified Twitter accounts.
METHODOLOGY

This study was developed within a social constructionist perspective where reality is created with the use of language in context (Gergen, 2015). This study examines how professional soccer players created identities by using different strategies. The following section provides further detail regarding the tweets and the identity categories. The process for the selection of the final twenty professional soccer players is detailed with the requirements for this study, as well as the development of the player ranking system. Also, the standards for the data collection are established, and the modified identity categories form Sanderson’s (2013) study are defined. Finally, the code development follows with how each code was developed and put to use for each identity category, while also providing a brief description and example for the data collected.

Selection Process Of The Twenty Professional Soccer Players

The standards for eligibility and the selection process of the professional soccer players occurred as follows: twenty professional soccer players who are active users of their personal verified Twitter accounts were selected according to the number of followers they had at that specific point-in-time. It was essential that the professional soccer players were active on the men’s senior national soccer team; their country was competing in the 2014 FIFA World Cup, and their number of followers was ranked among the top twenty players with the most number of followers according to the player ranking system of this research.
Ranking System For The Twenty Professional Soccer Players

The twenty professional soccer players were ranked from one through twenty according to those players who had the most number of followers through those who had the least number of followers. Table 1 is a display of the each player’s ranking, their name, as well as their Twitter username, each player’s national team, and the number of followers each player had on the first day of data collection, which was June 5th, 2014. This day marked the time period when essentially the player ranking system was formally “locked-in” and the twenty professional soccer players were officially selected and included for the purposes of this study:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RANKING</th>
<th>NAME (TWITTER USERNAME)</th>
<th>NATIONAL TEAM</th>
<th>NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS (JUNE 5TH)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Cristiano Ronaldo (@Cristiano)</td>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>26,488,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Neymar (@neymarjr)</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>10,725,825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Andres Iniesta (@andresiniesta8)</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>8,652,558</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Followers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Gerard Pique (@3gerardpique)</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>8,440,869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Xabi Alonso (@XabiAlonso)</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>7,255,042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Cesc Fabregas (@cesc4official)</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>6,565,639</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>David Villa (@Guaje7Villa)</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>5,893,169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Mesut Ozil (@MesutOzil1088)</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>5,783,848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Sergio Aguero (@aguerosergiokun)</td>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>5,609,908</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Robin van Persie (@Persie_Official)</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>5,075,658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Sergio Ramos (@SergioRamos)</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>4,422,655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Daniel Alves (@DaniAlvesD2)</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>4,364,562</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Diego Forlan (@DiegoForlan7)</td>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>4,098034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Juan Mata (@juanmata8)</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>3,580,992</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Data Collection

Once the twenty professional soccer players were selected according to the number of Twitter followers they had prior to the start of the event, from most tweets to least tweets, the data for the study consisted of tweets and retweets from these twenty professional soccer players who participated in the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil. The data collection process commenced one week before the event started, continued through the entire duration of the event, and concluded one week after the championship final. The process of the data collection was to continue throughout the duration of the competition, even when a player’s national soccer team was eliminated in the group stage, knockout stage, etc.

The time period of the data collection lasted 46 days. The start date was Thursday, June 5th, 2014, through and including Sunday, July 20th, 2014. The tweets and retweets were
manually retrieved from each professional soccer player’s personal verified Twitter account, and copied and pasted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for analysis. Some of the professional soccer players selected tweeted in more than one language to reach out to their followers; however, for those who only tweeted in their native language, the application Google Translate was used to detect the language that was being used and interpret the message that was tweeted to their followers.

**Identity Categorization**

The initial determination of this research was to use open coding by scanning through the tweets and retweets of the twenty professional soccer players and creating tentative labels to categorize each tweet and retweet; however, after performing extensive research, the identity categories used for the purposes of this study were obtained from Sanderson’s classification scheme for tweets, which was a thematic analysis “with each tweet serving as the unit of analysis” (Sanderson, 2013, p. 424) based on Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) grounded theory approach. After several times of scanning through the tweets and retweets of this research, it was realized that the identities expressed in Sanderson’s study corresponded with the identity categories established with this study. Therefore, for the purposes of this research the identity categories were taken and slightly modified in order to meet the requirements and standards of the data collected from the twenty professional soccer players. The identity categories were modified and used as follows:
(A) Players as Dedicated Workers

The first category that Sanderson developed was “Athletes as Dedicated Workers,” which was applied that “As organizational newcomers, it was crucial for rookie athletes to project an identity that demonstrated their commitment to athletic success” (Sanderson, 2013, p. 425). For the purposes of this research, the first category was utilized as “Players as Dedicated Workers” and was defined as the importance of professional soccer players to display an identity that demonstrated commitment to the success of the individual player’s national team during the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

(B) Players as Connectors

The second category developed was “Athletes as Connectors,” which included three sub-categories that included: (a) Endorsements; (b) Acknowledgments; and (c) Promotion. Twitter is a medium that allows athletes to express their identity as a connector. According to Sanderson (2013), “Through their tweets, athletes asserted a ‘hub’ identity, projecting as a source through which information flowed” (p. 426). For the purposes of this research, the second category was utilized as “Players as Connectors.”

(a) Endorsements were classified as athletes offering “their stamp of approval on a variety of issues, ranging from restaurants to commercial products” (Sanderson, 2013, p. 426). Sanderson (2013) found “Athletes also employed Twitter to endorse fellow teammates or other friends who use Twitter, encouraging people to follow these individuals” (p. 426). For the purposes of this research, the “Endorsements” sub-category was utilized for professional soccer players who engaged in any variety of issues and the stand they took regarding these issues, as
well as endorsing fellow teammates, their national team, other national teams, and professional soccer players from other national teams during the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

(b) Acknowledgements were classified as athletes who “respond to re-tweet requests from fans. In acknowledging and granting these requests, fans received attention (albeit momentary) that would be difficult to obtain in face-to-face contexts” (Sanderson, 2013, p. 426). According to Sanderson (2013), “Twitter also enabled athletes to broadcast requests for people to engage in action to support various causes, thereby linking the athlete with these groups, movements, or events” (p. 426). For the purposes of this research, the “Acknowledgements” sub-category was utilized for professional soccer players who also responded to fan re-tweet requests and took the time to acknowledge their followers. This sub-category was also used to classify tweets that professional soccer players posted in order to invite their followers to support various causes, which link them with these groups, movements, or events.

(c) Promotion was classified as a social media method that is useful in order to engage in public relations and use Twitter to publicize events that athletes were taking part in. According to Sanderson (2013), “In broadcasting their preferences in restaurants, consumer products, publicizing events, and acknowledging others, athletes connected themselves with a host of topics, subjects that their followers enjoyed, increasing connection” (p. 427). For the purposes of this research, the “Promotion” sub-category was utilized for professional soccer players who publicized events and transmitted some information about their preferences and various trends.

(C) Players as Pop Culture Consumers

The third category developed was “Athletes as Pop Culture Consumers,” which was
applied as athletes frequently referencing popular culture and communicating identities that were associated with various entertainment genres, which included tweets with commentary on television programming and movies (Sanderson, 2013, p. 427). For the purposes of this research, the third category was utilized as “Players as Pop Culture Consumers.”

Sanderson’s (2013) study found the following:

Describing their popular culture preferences provided yet another way for athletes Twitter followers to connect with them. These disclosures provided fans with a glimpse of, among others, the types of music, movies, and television programming that athletes enjoyed, which may have reflected their own popular culture tastes.

(p. 427)

This identity category was focused on the tweets and retweets that were aimed toward the types of entertainment in which the professional soccer players followed during the 2014 FIFA World Cup. These tweets and retweets also allowed for connections between these players and their Twitter followers regarding their preferences of various types of entertainment such as music, movies, television programming, and other types.

(D) Players as Sports Fans

The fourth category developed was “Athletes as Sports Fans,” which was applied as athletes conveying their identity as sports fans because “athletes not only viewed sports as a career, but passionately followed other sports as well” (Sanderson, 2013, p. 427). Athletes would state their opinions of a variety of sports issues and share their enthusiasm for sports events and comment on sports topics. For the purposes of this research, the fourth category was
utilized as “Players as Sports Fans” and focused on capturing the tweets professional soccer players posted during the 2014 FIFA World Cup about sports topics (teams, players, etc.) and issues that transpired during the time period that data was collected.

(E) Players as Motivators

The fifth category developed was “Athletes as Motivators,” which was applied as athletes using Twitter to inspire their followers. Athletes did this by posting uplifting statements or reflecting on poignant moments, which led followers to look for encouragement from the athletes.

Sanderson’s (2013) study found the following:

In sharing these inspirational quips, athletes projected an encouraging and motivational identity, remarks that were conveniently accessible via Twitter. Although athletes provided memorable quotes via the mass media, Twitter allows fans to receive these messages instantly and directly, and athletes can offer this commentary, as they feel compelled to do so. (p. 428-429)

For the purposes of this research, the fifth category was utilized as “Players as Motivators” and focused on capturing tweets that included inspirational and encouraging quotes that professional soccer players posted during the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

(F) Players as Information Seekers

The sixth category developed was “Athletes as Information Seekers,” which was applied as athletes seeking for assistance from their followers and placed them as necessary sources of
informational support. In doing so, athletes were able to obtain swift responses.

Sanderson’s (2013) study found the following:

Social media has created avenues for fans to offer advice to athletes (Sanderson, 2008; Kassing & Sanderson; 2009) and such behavior is only enhanced when athletes overtly request information from their followers. In asking followers for assistance, athletes appear more personable and bolster perceptions of their approachability. Athletes clearly could obtain this information independently; however, Twitter allows them to use information requests as interactional tools. (p. 429)

For the purposes of this research, the sixth category was utilized as “Players as Information Seekers” and focused on capturing tweets that that professional soccer players posted regarding any type of assistance that was needed to be obtain during the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

(G) Players as Everyday People

The final category Sanderson developed was “Athletes as Everyday People,” which included four sub-categories that included: (a) Voicing Frustration; (b) Seeking Leisure; (c) Family Experiences; and (d) Humor. Athletes used Twitter to stimulate their identity as an everyday person that went through similar life experiences as their followers. According to Sanderson (2013), “Athletes shared a variety of life experiences with their followers on Twitter. Through these tweets, athletes showed a ‘personal’ identity, allowing followers a glimpse into their day-to-day lives.” (p. 429). For the purposes of this research, the last category was utilized
as “Players as Everyday People,” which included the identity sub-categories of (a) voicing frustration; (b) seeking leisure; (c) family experiences, and (d) humor.

The (a) Voicing Frustration sub-category was classified as athletes who often “notified followers of complications they were experiencing throughout the course of their day. In some cases, these were general statements” (Sanderson, 2013, p. 429). For the purposes of this research, the “Voicing Frustration” sub-category was utilized for professional soccer players who tweeted about daily complications they experienced throughout the course of their day during the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

The (b) Seeking Leisure sub-category was classified as athletes who updated followers about “how they were spending their leisure time, providing them with insights into the activities they enjoyed when away from their sport” (Sanderson, 2013, p. 430). For the purposes of this research, the “Seeking Leisure” sub-category was utilized for professional soccer players who tweeted about their leisure time and offered insights of their activities they enjoyed away from soccer during the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

The (c) Family Experiences sub-category was classified as athletes who used Twitter to report on family events in which they were participating and to announce significant developments (Sanderson, 2013, p. 430). For the purposes of this research, the “Family Experiences” sub-category was utilized for professional soccer players who tweeted about their family events and developments; however, most players were away from their families during the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

The (d) Humor sub-category was classified as athletes who “posted commentary discussing funny events that happened to them or humorous situations in which they found themselves” (Sanderson, 2013, p. 430). For the purposes of this research, the “Humor” sub-
category was utilized for professional soccer players who tweeted about humorous events or situations that they witnessed or were a part of during the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

**Code Development**

In order to classify and connect the identity categories with all of the player tweets, each category was assigned a unique code. The letters ZX were used, as they were not common letters used throughout the entire process, along with the letter of each individual category in order to differentiate them. For example, a tweet that was associated with (A) Athletes as Dedicated Workers, was assigned the code ZXA. Also, if a tweet fell under a category that had a sub-category, the code would be assigned as, for example, ZXBa. The identity category “Ambiguous Tweets” was created and labeled as (Q), which was aimed to portray vague questionable tweets, and were assigned the code ZXQ. Table 2 contains a list of all identity categories, codes, and short descriptions of the requirements that the tweets may meet in order fall under and be assigned to one or more codes (one tweet may have more than one code):

**Table 2. List of Identity Categories, Codes and Descriptions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IDENTITY CATEGORIES</th>
<th>CODES</th>
<th>DESCRIPTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(A) Athletes as Dedicated Workers</td>
<td>ZXA</td>
<td>Demonstrated commitment to the success of the individual player’s national team during the 2014 FIFA World Cup.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B) Athletes as Connectors</td>
<td>ZXB</td>
<td>Identity projected as a source, which information was delivered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Endorsements</td>
<td>ZXBa</td>
<td>Engaged and took a stand in a variety of issues, as well as endorsed fellow teammates, their national team, other national teams, and professional soccer players from other national teams.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ZXBb</td>
<td>Responded to fan re-tweet requests and took the time to acknowledge their followers. Also, used to classify tweets that invited followers to support various causes, groups, movements, or events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Promotion</td>
<td>ZXBc</td>
<td>Publicized events and transmitted some information about their preferences and various trends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(C) Athletes as Pop Culture Consumers</td>
<td>ZXC</td>
<td>Communicated identities associated with various entertainment genres, which included tweets with commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(D) Athletes as Sports Fans</td>
<td>ZXD</td>
<td>Discussed sports topics (teams, players, etc.) and issues that transpired during the time period that data was collected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E) Athletes as Motivators</td>
<td>ZXE</td>
<td>Focused on capturing tweets that included inspirational and encouraging quotes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(F) Athletes as Information Seekers</td>
<td>ZXF</td>
<td>Focused on capturing tweets that players posted regarding any type of assistance they wanted to obtain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(G) Athletes as Everyday People</td>
<td>ZXG</td>
<td>Players as everyday people who encountered many of the same life experiences as their followers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Voicing Frustration</td>
<td>ZXGa</td>
<td>Daily complications experienced throughout the course of the day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Seeking Leisure</td>
<td>ZXGb</td>
<td>Leisure time and insights of activities away from soccer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Family Experiences</td>
<td>ZXGc</td>
<td>Family events and developments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Humor</td>
<td>ZXGd</td>
<td>Humorous events or situations witnessed or participated in.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 is a list of selected tweets professional soccer player tweets that embody and represent examples for all of the identity categories and codes in which they fell under in order to give further assistance in connecting identity categories and codes with player tweets:

Table 3. Examples of Identity Categories and Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IDENTITY CATEGORIES</th>
<th>CODES</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(A) Athletes as Dedicated Workers</td>
<td>ZXA</td>
<td>@MesutOzil1088: “Successful rehearsal! #Brasil2014 #WorldCup #DFBTeam #GERARM pic.twitter.com/IIIVCpAOxx” 2:16 PM - 6 Jun 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B) Athletes as Connectors</td>
<td>ZXB</td>
<td>@Cristiano: “Check out the blog I wrote on Sportlobster, a personal message to my fans ahead of Brazil. Hope you like it! <a href="http://bit.ly/MessageToMyFans%E2%80%9D">http://bit.ly/MessageToMyFans”</a> 4:55 AM - 5 Jun 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Endorsements</td>
<td>ZXBa</td>
<td>@WayneRooney: “Time to join</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| (b) Acknowledgements | ZXBb | @Cristiano: “You asked: Can you send me a picture on you when you playing football in CF Androinha?
|-----------------------|------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (c) Promotion         | ZXBc | @neymarjr: “Are you a fan? Don’t miss the chance to meet me at #MeetNeymar challenge by #GuaranaAntarctica !! Enter http://www.meetneymar.com
@MeetNeymar” 9:59 AM - 8 Jun 2014 |
| (C) Athletes as Pop Culture Consumers | ZXC   | @WayneRooney: “Loving house of cards” 7:25 PM - 9 Jun 2014 |
| (D) Athletes as Sports Fans | ZXD   | @3gerardpique: “San Antonio Spurs http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=OUMkyyrWhWE&feature=youtu.be …” 9:10 PM - 5 Jun 2014 |
| (E) Athletes as Motivators | ZXE   | @DaniAlvesD2: “His focus is independent of the opinion of others,
focuses on the goal and do not ever give up. #Deusnocomandosempre…
http://instagram.com/p/paTCPpOH13/”
8:40 PM - 18 Jun 2014

(F) Athletes as Information Seekers

@Cristiano: “Hello guys, we arrived in Brazil. Any fans from Brazil over here?

(G) Athletes as Everyday People

@MesutOzil1088: “Best hairdresser 😊 #ulvi#hairdresser #Silberburgstraße#Stuttgart
https://twitter.com/MesutOzil1088/status/489207636395839488/photo/1”
5:39 PM - 15 Jul 2014

(a) Voicing Frustration

@DaniAlvesD2: “I would like to refute the information that is being invented about me, and they were a bit more respectful if they...” 8:48 AM - 15 Jul 2014

(b) Seeking Leisure

@Cristiano: “Enjoying another great sunset.” 11:34 AM - 16 Jul 2014
| (c) Family Experiences | ZXGc | @SergioRamos: “Enjoying my last days of vacation next to my wife @PilarRubio_...!! 💖 ... pic.twitter.com/7dLRYtu0mQ” 2:58 PM - 15 Jul 2014 |
| (d) Humor | ZXGd | @MesutOzil1088: “on the way to the rugby world cup 2015. Just kidding - I still prefer my favourite toy: the football #DFBTeam” 1:24 PM - 23 Jun 2014 |
| (Q) Ambiguous Tweets | ZXQ | N/A |
GENERAL FINDINGS

The following section examines the general findings discovered from this research. This section highlights and takes an in-depth look into the demographic information, as well as graphical display of Twitter activity, the statistical view of the Twitter content identity categories that each player used, the four areas that displayed the days with the most tweeting intensity for the duration of this study, and a look into the overall growth of the average number of followers per day for the twenty professional soccer players that were selected for this research. The “Findings of Twitter Content Categories Used By Players” sub-section further analyzes the activity of the top, middle, and bottom tiers of the player ranking system, some missed opportunities of players while using Twitter, certain identity categories that were unexploited by players, some general observations of the Twitter content categories, and further look into the “Players as Everyday People” and “Ambiguous Tweets” categories. Next findings for the top four days that reveals the highest tweeting intensity areas and additionally analyzes them individually into four different sub-sections. Finally, the overall average number of followers per day is analyzed while determining the popularity of the twenty professional soccer players during the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

Twitter Statistics

The data collection yielded a total of 556 tweets and retweets. An analysis was done to obtain the demographic information of each professional soccer player’s Twitter activity during
the data collection time period. Figure 3 represents a graphical display of each professional soccer player’s individual total number of tweets and retweets during the 2014 FIFA World Cup:

![Figure 3. Total Number of Tweets Per Player](image)

**Findings Of Twitter Content Categories Used By Players**

Following the collection of all the tweets and retweets by the players, each tweet and retweet was sorted into a category that reflected the respective identity and consequently the identity of the player as they were each presented on Twitter for the duration of the 2014 FIFA World Cup. After looking through the Twitter Content Categories Used By Players, many findings were made for each player and the way they used Twitter to project their respective identities (see the APPENDIX section and refer to Table 4 for thorough numerical analysis and graphical examination of Figures 6 through 25 for each professional soccer player’s identity categories used on their personal verified Twitter accounts during the 2014 FIFA World Cup).
Examining The Top Tier Of The Player Ranking System

Professional soccer players who ranked between the numbers one and six were considered to be in the top tier of the player ranking system. It was interesting to discover that professional soccer players that ranked on the top of the ranking system based on the number of followers they had, projected the “Players as Connectors” (ZXB) category along with its three sub-categories: (a) Endorsements, (b) Acknowledgements, and (c) Promotion. It was discovered that these professional soccer players who had numerous followers used these categories the most in order to maintain their Twitter presence because they are regarded as fan-favorites and possibly some of the top professional soccer players that have ever played soccer.

Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar, who are ranked number one and two, respectively, attracted the attention of many female fans because of their looks, which helped boost each player’s number of followers. According to Arai et al. (2013), “Attractive appearance refers to an athlete’s external appearance that is defined by physical attractiveness, symbol, and body fitness. Attractiveness can be any arbitrary, distinctive, and non-descriptive feature of an athlete that the public can recognize or appreciate” (p. 388). Also, these two professional soccer players are possibly in the top five players in the world who have outstanding soccer skills and talent. Specifically, these two players are the standouts for the “Players as Connectors” (ZXB) category along with its three sub-categories: (a) Endorsements, (b) Acknowledgements, and (c) Promotion.

Examining The Middle Tier Of The Player Ranking System

Professional soccer players who ranked between the numbers seven and fourteen were
considered to be in the middle tier of the player ranking system. Some players such as Mesut Ozil, Sergio Aguero, and Daniel Alves, who were ranked in the middle of the ranking system, demonstrated a wide variety of categories. Ozil is currently one of the top midfielders in the sport and his home country of Germany did successfully win the 2014 FIFA World Cup. He projected the identity that falls under the category of “Players as Dedicated Workers” (ZXA) and major influence as a connector, “Players as Connectors” (ZXB) with frequently falling under the sub-category of (c) Promotion, as well as showing an identity of a prominent “Players as Motivators” (ZXE) category.

Sergio Aguero, one of the best young midfielder/forwards in soccer, demonstrated a wide range of various identities, without having a specific one stand out more than others. He projected the “Players as Connectors” (ZXB), while using all three sub-categories. Throughout the data collection, Aguero’s tweets and retweets had many connections with “Players as Pop Culture Consumers” (ZXC) and “Players as Everyday People” (ZXG). A possible explanation may be that he was not far away from his home country of Argentina and was able to continue his life as a pop culture consumer and most importantly as an everyday person, without being distracted from all the hype that comes with the event.

Daniel Alves, a veteran defender for Brazil used Twitter daily. The observation made for Alves is that out of the twenty players followed during the data collection, he ranked first with most tweets falling under the “Players as Motivators” (ZXE) category. This may be explained by the veteran presence that he had for the young Brazilian squad, as well as being in his home country during the tournament and wanting to be a good influence and inspiration to young Brazilians, but also for young people around the world who kept their eyes on the World Cup.
Examining The Bottom Tier Of The Player Ranking System

Professional soccer players who ranked between the numbers fifteen and twenty were considered to be in the bottom tier of the player ranking system. The bottom section was not as active as the middle section of the player ranking system; however, after reviewing the records of number of followers per player each day, every professional soccer player’s number of followers who ranked in the bottom section continued to increase, especially Luis Suarez who was ranked last on the ranking system. It is possible that Suarez’s number of followers increased because he was involved in one of the biggest controversies (biting incident) in the World Cup and that generated major interest by followers and fans, not only of the player, but also of the World Cup and rest of the world because of his reputation as a “dirty player.” Everyone wanted to see how FIFA was going to discipline him based on his actions, as well as being a repeat offender.

Missed Opportunities For Players On Twitter

Some of the twenty professional soccer players also used Twitter less frequently during the data collection process, such as Gerard Pique and Xabi Alonso who are superstar players for the Spanish squad. They ranked fifth and sixth, respectively, based on the most number of followers on the ranking system, did not use Twitter to their advantage during the World Cup. Both players hardly ever used Twitter during the duration of the data collection; however, by not using social media, specifically Twitter, to connect with fans, their personal brand could be damaged towards fans, but also these may be missed opportunities to receive more money for endorsing, acknowledging, and/or promoting people, products, various causes, and public relations among others on Twitter.
The same can be conveyed about Nani who was ranked in the bottom five and only used Twitter a total of two times, which fell under the “Players as Dedicated Workers” (ZXA) category. Based on his low number of followers and the magnitude of the World Cup, one would think that this would have been a major opportunity to take advantage of Twitter and connect with fans in order to boost fame and presence. One argument may be that if you want to accomplish those things, you must do it out on the soccer field; however, in today’s world, technology is a major driving force where most fans spend their leisure time on.

**Unexploited Identity Categories**

It was very interesting to note that the category “Players as Information Seekers” (ZXF) was hardly used by the twenty professional soccer players. A possible explanation for this may be that the World Cup is such a major event across the world that the players were in mostly a position were they projected an identity more of role models rather than seeking advice and assistance from their followers, as well as using fans as sources of informational support. It can be stated that most tweets and retweets were more inspirational than seeking information.

There were just a select few of players who projected the identity of being general sports fans. The category was “Players as Sports Fans” (ZXD) and players who were ranked in the middle section of the ranking system mostly utilized it. The top five and bottom five players hardly projected an identity of being general sports fans. This may be explained by the magnitude of the World Cup and most sports leagues are finished or finishing up for the season; however, the players who used this category were more focused on maybe minor, amateur, or youth leagues.
General Observations Of Twitter Content Categories

Another interesting discovery dealt with tweets that players posted were projected more than one identity and several categories were related to each specific tweet. This may be because the players addressed many things and were not consciously aware that they focused on different categories because the message was interrelated with several categories.

The number of total tweets that each player made during the data collection process is not directly related to the number of followers for each player. The top section had the most followers, but they tweeted rarely, with the exception of Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar. This may be because they already have the fame and the presence on social media, which means that they are not worried about losing it any time soon, so they do not keep up with it daily or they have just taken a break because of how great this event is and its meaning to not only the world, but themselves, as well.

The middle section was the most active with players tweeting regularly and seeing an increase in followers throughout each day. Players like Mesut Ozil, Sergio Aguero, and Daniel Alves who were in the middle, tweeted regularly and their number of followers saw increases, which means and shows that they tired to take advantage of Twitter during the World Cup; however, it is not clear if it was done on purpose or if it was a coincidence.

An additional observation made that has generated much interest is the fact that for the entire duration of data collection, the total number of tweets made by the twenty players was 556 tweets; however, the total number of different categories assigned to the 556 tweets was 1,379 categories in which players advanced various identities from their tweets. This is a strong indication that professional soccer players advanced many identities when they posted a single tweet.
Examining The “Players as Everyday People” Category

For the “Players as Everyday People” (ZXG), players showed an identity of the category for the week before and the week after the World Cup, especially the week after when everything was done. Furthermore, players whose national teams were eliminated and went home early were more inclined to do activities that everyday people would do and then tweet about it to their followers. This observation seems logical because this can be seen as a business trip from the perspective of the players and when everything is over, they are able to go back to their regular lifestyle and get ready for their club team’s new season, which most commence in late August with training camp commencing in late July and early August.

For the sub-categories of “Players as Everyday People” (ZXG), they were represented very slighted throughout the entire process with the exception of the fourth sub-category, (d) Humor, which was used only once by Mesut Ozil. It is possible that this sub-category was used less than the others because the players used Twitter to connect with their followers rather than displaying humor. Even though humor may be a great way to start connections with people and “break the ice,” players did not display such an identity because it was important for players to remain focused on the goals they set for themselves and their national team rather than taking the World Cup as a fun experience. These players are professionals and they view these events with more of a business mind set rather than a time for amusement and relaxation.

Examining The “Ambiguous Tweets” Category

Another observation was made regarding the “Ambiguous Tweets” (ZXQ) category. This category was created in order to place tweets that professional soccer players posted that
was difficult or too ambiguous to classify in one of the other categories. No tweet was marked as (ZXQ) because after careful and thorough analysis of the tweets, each one could be classified as a tweet that players projected a specific identity and fell into one or more of the categories created. The “Ambiguous Tweets” category was very useful during the process of tweet analysis because it was used as a category to place a tweet in if it was not clear at first and then go back to it and review it after everything was completed.

The Four Areas Of High Tweeting Intensity

During the data analysis, a graph was created in order to display the combined total number of tweets posted by all players per day for each day. The graph revealed four areas that are known as “high tweeting intensity areas.” The first high tweeting intensity area was created as a plateau of three different days in the week before the commencement of the 2014 FIFA World Cup. These include June 9th, June 10th, and June 12th, with each of those three days having a combined total of 22 tweets for all 20 players. The second high tweeting intensity area came on June 30th with a combined total of 26 tweets, which is the highest tweeted day during the data collection. The third high tweeting intensity area was on July 7th with a combined total of 21 tweets, followed by the fourth and final high tweeting intensity area, which came on July 15th with a combined total of 25 tweets. Figure 4 is a graphical representation of the four areas of high tweeting intensity:
Figure 4. Display of the Four Areas of High Tweeting Intensity

First Area Of High Tweeting Intensity

The first area of high tweeting intensity was created as a plateau of 22 tweets per each day for the three different days that include June 9\textsuperscript{th} (Pre 5), June 10\textsuperscript{th} (Pre 6), and June 12\textsuperscript{th} (Day 1). After going through all tweets from all three days, respectively, it is noted that the tweets were greatly targeted toward the build-up to the commencement of the 2014 FIFA World Cup. A majority of the players tweeted about their focus on being successful during the event and about their preparation and training. Players were focused on tweeting about their commitment to athletic success, which is essentially the “Players as Dedicated Workers” (ZXA) category. Players demonstrated a great emphasis on what goals they have for their national team and their individual goals they ultimately want to achieve. Tweets about support, motivation, and encouragement were also very popular during these three days when it came to the players’
country. For example, David Villa tweeted, “I want to help my team scoring as many goals as possible this #WorldCup. That’s why I’m here. #allin or nothing pic.twitter.com/H4SyDzhIIa 7:41 AM - 9 Jun 2014.” Neymar tweeted, “Brazil’s ready to show the world how we play the beautiful game. http://youtu.be/Iy1rumvo9xc @nikefootball #riskeverything 3:06 PM - 9 Jun 2014.” Another popular category for the first high tweeting intensity area was “Players as Connectors” (ZXB), along with the three sub-categories of (a) Endorsements; (b) Acknowledgments; and (c) Promotion. Many players were trying to create connections with their followers by either endorsing products, acknowledging followers by responding to re-tweet requests, and promoting events as a public relations utility. For example, Robin van Persie tweeted, “I support the @UNAIDS #ProtectTheGoal campaign to raise global awareness of #HIV http://ow.ly/xQSiA 6:04 PM - 10 Jun 2014” and Sergio Ramos tweeted, “We fight so that all the children in the world can fulfill their dreams. With @unicef_es we are going to achieve it. pic.twitter.com/hYhor79o6B 10:42 AM - 10 Jun 2014.”

**Second Area Of High Tweeting Intensity**

The second area that displayed a high tweeting intensity area was June 30th (Day 19) with the combined total number reaching its highest point with 26 tweets. This day was significant because of the “Players as Connectors” (ZXB) category, which was used several times, especially the sub-category (b) Acknowledgments, (ZXBb). Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar who are ranked as number one and number two, respectively, on the ranking system spent time to interact with their followers. Cristiano Ronaldo held a session of “you asked” on Twitter, where followers ask questions and the player re-tweets and replies to the question. For example, “You
asked: Can you send me a picture on you when you playing football in CF Androinha? http://bit.ly/TwhkgA 6:21 AM - 30 Jun 2014” and “You asked: Besides football, which other hobbies do you enjoy? http://bit.ly/1IJaT5k 6:23 AM - 30 Jun 2014.” Ronaldo tweeted a total of 15 times that day and all of his tweets were geared toward answering fans questions. On this day, other players focused their tweets on the event, such as Robin van Persie who tweeted, “After a hard-fought victory vs. Mexico we qualified for the WC 1/4 finals proud of my team!! Game by game FOCUS 9:49 AM - 30 Jun 2014” and Mesut Ozil who tweeted, “quarterfinals! #GER #allin or nothing #DFBTeam 4:25 PM - 30 Jun 2014.” Their national team had advanced to next stage of the tournament, whereas Ronaldo’s Portugal had been eliminated from the tournament a few days before June 30th. These players were focusing their tweets on their commitment to athletic success, “Players as Dedicated Workers” (ZXA), and encouraging and inspiring their followers, “Players as Motivators” (ZXE). This day also marked the first time Luis Suarez made a public apology for biting Italian player Giorgio Chiellini, on June 24th, during the decisive World Cup Group D match between Uruguay and Italy. Luis Suarez tweeted, “My apologies to Chiellini: pic.twitter.com/CvfkkjxzLM 10:12 AM - 30 Jun 2014.”

**Third Area Of High Tweeting Intensity**

The third area that displayed a high tweeting intensity area was July 7th (Day 26) with the combined total number reaching 21 tweets. This day has great significance because it was the day that soccer great and legend, Alfredo Di Stefano, passed away. Most of the player tweets were geared toward paying tribute and respects to this soccer legend. The categories that were used on this day included “Players as Connectors” (ZXB), especially the sub-category (c)
Promotion, (ZXBe), “Players as Motivators” (ZXE), and “Players as Everyday People” (ZXG).

Some tweets that describe the mood of this day can be seen from players, such as Cristiano Ronaldo tweet, “It’s a very sad day. For me, for all the madristas, for the world of football. #EternoAlfredo 9:45 AM - 7 Jul 2014,” Mesut Ozil’s “R.I.P. Alfredo Di Stefano 9:01 AM - 7 Jul 2014,” and Sergio Ramos’ “RIP Sir Alfredo Di Stefano. I will never forget each of the shared moments with such a football legend. pic.twitter.com/J4FFcXM9ph 10:12 AM - 7 Jul 2014.”

There was no specific player who tweeted about something else that was completely random with what was going on. All players who tweeted that day paid their respects to Alfredo Di Stefano and shared some memories and they had with him.

**Fourth Area Of High Tweeting Intensity**

The fourth and final area that displayed a high tweeting intensity area was July 15th (Post 2) with the combined total number reaching 25 tweets. This day was significant because it was two days after Germany defeated Argentina to win the 2014 FIFA World Cup. The dominant players who tweeted were Neymar and Mesut Ozil. The first was very interactive by tweeting with his followers, thus hitting the “Players as Connectors” (ZXB) category, which was used several times, especially the sub-category (b) Acknowledgments (ZXBe), which is when players respond to re-tweet requests from followers. The second had just finished Germany’s victory and returned to his native Germany to celebrate this successful occasion, which can be seen from the following tweets: “back in the country of the world champions :-) #DFBTeam #happy 1:31 AM - 15 Jul 2014” and “awesome! #WORLDCHAMPIONS #WorldCup pic.twitter.com/x1xkwnl7SA 2:25 AM - 15 Jul 2014.” There was not a specific event or topic
that other players tweeted about on this day because most have to do with personal happenings, such as Daniel Alves’ tweet, “I hope that further information be cleared before published, for I am very respectful of the people who are part of my life ... 8:55 AM - 15 Jul 2014.” This tweet was mostly concerned with the “Players as Everyday People” (ZXG) category because the 2014 FIFA World Cup was over and players are just living their everyday lives and going about their daily routines and dealing with rumors that come about in the media about them.

**Overall Average Growth Of The Number Of Followers Per Day**

Throughout the time period of data collection, the number of followers for each of the twenty professional soccer players was recorded in order to examine the popularity of the players, as well as the influence that the World Cup had on people to stimulate them to “follow” their favorite players on Twitter. Data was collected and recorded everyday between the hours of 9:00 a.m. (EST) and 10:00 a.m. (EST), the time in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S.A. The number of followers for each player were recorded within the first 10 minutes of the allotted time; however, the range of the hour-long time frame was selected in order to have a window of opportunity just in case of the event that crisis management needed to go into effect, e.g., power outage, no Internet access, etc. Figure 5 is a graphical representation of the average number of followers per day and displays the overall average growth for the combined twenty professional soccer players:
The first observation that was made after reflecting on Figure 5 is that there was steady increase in the growth of the average number of followers. On the first day of the World Cup, which was June 12th, 2014, there was a fast spike. This discovery can be connected to that it was the first day of the competition and people around the world were getting ready to follow the event and their favorite players. From the first day until the last day of the actual event, the overall growth was steeper, which means that Twitter was a great way for fans and followers to be kept updated with what was going on with the event, as well as with their favorite players. Lastly, the entire week after the 2014 FIFA World Cup displayed significant and continuous growth for the players and the number of followers they gained partially due to the event.
STRATEGIC FINDINGS

The following section examines the major findings discovered from this research. This section highlights the business side of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and its meaning to professional soccer players in terms of management and marketing. The application of Sanderson’s (2013) study is affirmed, as well as a deeper look into the reason why Twitter matters to professional soccer players, the complexity of managing Twitter accounts, and the financial opportunities that are accessible from establishing a Twitter presence as a world-renowned professional soccer player. The twenty professional soccer players selected and participated in this study were shown to demonstrate rather consistent Twitter identity strategies for the duration of the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

1. Applying Sanderson’s Thematic Analysis

One of the major findings of this research was founded by recognizing that this study significantly affirmed the identity categories from Sanderson’s (2013) study and it extended the application of his framework that the identity categories vary across time in relation to specific events. Sanderson’s (2013) thematic analysis of using grounded theory methodology was shown to be highly applicable. This study established that Twitter has opened remarkable paths for professional soccer players to broadcast multiple identities and use various strategies to interact with their followers.
2. Establishing A Twitter Presence

After recording each individual professional soccer player’s number of followers for the entire duration of the data collection it was founded that it is extremely important to establish a Twitter presence over time. By establishing a robust Twitter presence, professional soccer players help to market and promote themselves by reinforcing their identity and personal brand. Following further review of the tweets and retweets, data showed that professional soccer players advanced multiple identities to connect with their followers and demonstrated consistent identity strategies. The popularity of these twenty professional soccer players was highly impressive as the number of followers for each player continued to increase each day at significant rates.

Even though some professional soccer players were not frequent users of Twitter during the 2014 FIFA World Cup, their number of followers would increase each day. It was noted that players in the top tier of the ranking system such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar, who were ranked numbers one and two, respectively, were mostly focused on connecting with their followers, thus, advancing the “Players as Connectors” (ZXB) identity category. This means that they spent some of their time interacting with their followers and making their presence known on Twitter. Most tweets and retweets that were posted by the twenty professional soccer players demonstrated more than one identity.

3. Complexity Of Managing Twitter

The twenty professional soccer players demonstrated diverse identities in their individual and collective Twitter activities. According to Sanderson (2013), by using Twitter, “athletes can project a diverse identity, one that encompasses much more than fans see on television or read
about in sports periodicals” (p. 430). Moreover, complexity is evident in the way Twitter accounts are managed by these world-renowned professional soccer players who participated in one of the world’s biggest events.

The complexity comes into play from a strategic point of view that ultimately focuses on a few identity categories to reach out to their followers while simultaneously advancing specific identities, including marketing and promoting their personal brand. Furthermore, given the great demands of being a world-renowned professional soccer player who is competing on the biggest stage the sport has to offer, managing a Twitter account strategically is not likely to get the proper attention it needs.

Therefore, evidence shows that professional soccer players must recognize the fundamental and true potential of their personal verified Twitter accounts by practicing sophisticated methods in using and/or specializing in specific identities to interact with their followers. As a result, the Twitter presence moves away from complex methods that generate more significant messages and essentially make the “player-to-followers” interaction a more meaningful experience. Ultimately, this will make matters less complex for professional soccer players to market and promote identity and personal brands to their followers and all services will be performed in a much more efficient and effective manner.

4. Financial Opportunities Created By Twitter

The large number of Twitter followers for each of these professional soccer players and their high endorsement incomes (Arai, et al., 2013) means that there is tremendous financial potential in using Twitter appropriately and effectively. Money is a major player and
endorsements and promotions are rather easy and inevitable to get involved in as a superstar athlete, especially for professional soccer players who participated in the 2014 FIFA World Cup because this is the biggest stage for the best players to showcase their skills and talent to the entire world.

Many of the top professional soccer players in the world have a personal verified Twitter account to make their presence known in the virtual world and interact with their followers; however, this study founded that the number of followers for each individual professional soccer player, as well as the overall average number of followers per day for the combined twenty professional soccer players increased at significant rates. Consequently, it is extremely important for professional soccer players to become even more mindful of the identity strategies that are being used to market and promote their personal brands, which will ultimately lead to taking better advantage of the abundant financial opportunities by capitalizing on something so simple as being active on and strategic with followers. The financial implications of using Twitter in a savvy manner may be seen as an opportunity not only for the individual athlete, but also for associated brands.
LIMITATIONS

The following section examines some limitations that were discovered throughout the process of this study. While this study provides unique insight into the identity strategies used by the twenty professional soccer players with the most number of followers on Twitter during the 2014 FIFA World Cup, it does have limitations. Due to the timeline of this exploratory study, there may have been additional strategic findings that have yet to be discovered. Some limitations include the time period for data collection; the sample of professional soccer players followed being increased to more than twenty; and presenting a different perspective of identity strategies based upon the interactions of professional soccer players and their followers.

Data Collection Time Period

The first aspect that may have been a driver that caused limitations to this study may have been the time period of the study. The study took place for 46 days from Thursday, June 5th, 2014, a week before the start date of the 2014 FIFA World Cup, and concluded on Sunday, July 20th, 2014, a week after the championship final. It may have proven to be better to extend the time period of data collection in order to capture more tweets and retweets by the twenty professional soccer players. For example, maybe the data collection should have started two or three weeks before the actual start date and should have ended two or three weeks after the end date in order to yield a larger sample. This would have added a much greater variety of tweets and retweets, as well as a deeper insight on how these twenty professional soccer players
prepared leading up to the event and their reactions and activities following the conclusion of the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

**Greater Professional Soccer Player Sample**

Another factor that may have caused a limitation to this research is that the total number of professional soccer players selected and followed for the duration of the research was twenty. It may have been better if the sample was greater than twenty, for example, thirty or forty players, in order to have more diversity, not only form the players and their countries, but also from the nature of these players’ tweets and retweets. The number of different countries represented in this research was nine countries with seven of the players being from the same country. It may have been also interesting to follow players who represent other countries not listed in this research and explore how players from other regions and countries used Twitter during the 2014 FIFA World Cup. Also, with more players come more tweets and retweets, so the data sample would have proven to be larger, which would have yielded a greater number of tweets and retweets.

**Interaction Between Players And Followers**

In addition, this study was focused on examining the identity strategies used by professional soccer players on Twitter; however, the study did not go into detail of the interactions between the professional soccer players and the followers. In essence, even though various identity strategies were used to advance identities to the followers, the study did not examine the reaction of the followers to the tweets posted by the professional soccer players.
This analysis would be accomplished by examining how tweets are retweeted by followers and whether there is a positive or negative response to the tweet. By taking a closer look at this, it would help to study how identities are reinforced and/or repositioned by the followers and present a different perspective of identity strategies used by the professional soccer players established through the feedback of followers.
OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The following section examines some opportunities for future research. Based on the general and strategic findings of this study, more opportunities have surfaced that have enhanced future research to similar studies regarding Twitter, or other social media platforms, and professional soccer players, or athletes in general, during future FIFA World Cup events, or events of the same magnitude in which athletes participate in and market themselves through social media. This study explores the identity strategies used by professional soccer players over the time period of the 2014 FIFA World Cup. Future studies can focus on the identity categories that professional athletes focused on by using a select few of these identities.

Follow The Same Sample In Four Years

Since the FIFA World Cup is contested every four years, an opportunity for future research would be to take the same sample of players and follow them on Twitter during the 2018 FIFA World Cup, regardless of the number of followers they have at the time. Some players may have reached a point in their careers where they will not be called upon to participate in the event due to age or retirement; however, it would be interesting to see how these twenty professional soccer players have matured and changed, or kept same, their Twitter identities, which they display to their followers.
Select Non-Participating Professional Soccer Players

Another option that has presented itself would be to follow professional soccer players who are not participating in the FIFA World Cup due to retirement, age, and their national team did not qualify for the event, or they are not good enough as opposed to their other fellow countrymen. It seems interesting that when famous celebrity athletes are not a part of a major event, they are most likely the ones who are quick to judge, criticize, and take sides when something occurs during big event. It may be stimulating to capture the reactions of non-participating players and interpret their moods and thoughts.

Select One National Team And Follow Its Players

In addition, many of the powerhouse national teams such as Brazil, Germany, Argentina, Spain, etc., have some of the most famous and best professional soccer players in the world. It would be interesting to follow the Twitter activity of players from one national team and who are participating in the competition. This would be interesting to explore the nature and culture of these similar players and their home country.

Follow All National Teams Participating In The World Cup

Another option would be to follow the verified Twitter accounts of the 32 national teams that are participating in the World Cup. This would be interesting because it would capture the identities that the national team as a whole is displaying to its followers rather than individual players. Again, this may be limited because the personality that would be projected seems that it
would be difficult to interpret because the teams may be only focused on promoting things that have only to do with the team, practice, and game day, rather than activities away from soccer and the event.

Follow Female Athletes Via A Social Media Platform

Even though many studies, including this one, analyze the identities of male athletes and their use of social media, it would be very interesting to select and follow female athletes and examine the similarities and differences they share with male athletes using Twitter or another social media platform. Also, this would be a great way to show the world the great impact that females have in the world of sports, an arena that is dominated mostly by males. This gender analysis would be exceptional in demonstrating identities that cannot be captured through only studying male athletes because of the norms that various cultures and society have in place and label both genders.
CONCLUSION

Twitter was one of a number of media channels for the 2014 FIFA World Cup. While the abbreviated nature of tweets may make Twitter look simple and simplistic, this study showed there is much more happening and potentially happening. Study findings included the following major points: 1) Sanderson’s (2013) thematic analysis of using grounded theory methodology was shown to be highly applicable; 2) professional soccer player involvement on Twitter provides a notable opportunity to project one or more professional identities; 3) actual and potential use of Twitter involves considerable complexity; and 4) appropriate and effective uses of Twitter likely facilitate financial opportunities while inappropriate and ineffective uses of the medium are a likely financial threat.
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APPENDIX

Table 4. Numerical Analysis of Twitter Content Categories Used By Players

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**Figure 6. Identities Used By Cristiano Ronaldo**
Figure 7. Identities Used By Neymar

Figure 8. Identities Used By Wayne Rooney
Figure 9. Identities Used By Andres Iniesta

Figure 10. Identities Used By Gerard Pique
Figure 11. Identities Used By Xabi Alonso

Figure 12. Identities Used By Cesc Fabregas
Figure 13. Identities Used By David Villa

Figure 14. Identities Used By Mesut Ozil
Figure 15. Identities Used By Sergio Aguero

Figure 16. Identities Used By Robin van Persie
Figure 17. Identities Used By Sergio Ramos

Figure 18. Identities Used By Daniel Alves
Figure 19. Identities Used By Diego Forlan

Figure 20. Identities Used By Juan Mata
Figure 21. Identities Used By Gonzalo Higuain

Figure 22. Identities Used By Chicharito
Figure 23. Identities Used By Nani

Figure 24. Identities Used By Wesley Sneijder
Figure 25. Identities Used By Luis Suarez
SUMMARY:
Fluent in English and Greek and familiar with both American and Greek cultures
High regard for interpersonal skills and excellent work ethic
Globalization – adaptable to new environments by applying a quick learning initiative
Teamwork – assertive to effectively work independently and as a team member
Leadership – accountable to take charge of a project and lead people as a team leader

EDUCATION:
Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, Management & Marketing Option
The Pennsylvania State University, 2015
Honors in Letters, Arts, and Sciences
Thesis Title: A Game of Presence, Complexity, and Money: An Analysis of Professional Soccer Players’ Twitter Use During the 2014 FIFA World Cup
Thesis Supervisor: Ross Brinkert

HONORS & AWARDS:
Dean’s List – All Semesters
Schreyer Honors College Scholar
2014 Susan Lynne Keiser Scholarship
Civitas Victus Dictio (CVD) Honor Society
The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi
Fall 2011 Penn State Abington First-Year Engagement Program (Certificate)

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:
Internship with Kolber Marketing, Inc.
Position: Administrative Assistant to the President
Supervisor: Gene K. Kolber
Fall 2014/Spring 2015

ACTIVITIES:
Penn State Abington ENACTUS – Member
Invited to evaluate the final three candidates for the Division Head of Social Sciences position at Penn State Abington (Spring 2014)
Invited to evaluate the Business Degree Program at Penn State Abington (Spring 2015)