The Subban Brand: A Case Study of a Hockey Star's Instagram

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Abstract

Human brands can be described as a set of associations corresponding with a particular person. The creation and maintenance of a strong human brand can shape perceptions of an athlete, and therefore create strong and lasting connections between athletes and consumers. The purpose of this research was to conduct a case study to identify the various elements of National Hockey League (NHL) player P.K. Subban’s human brand, as well as determine if and how his changing circumstances and environment has influenced how he presents his brand. A case study of his Instagram content from August 2013 to January 2018 was conducted. The use of both a priori and emergent coding enabled the researcher to analyze the frequency at which these elements were communicated to his Instagram followers, the proportionality of each category, as well as the consistency of how Subban presents himself throughout the many phases of his brand. The researcher attempted to uncover any posting patterns present in Subban’s Instagram account as well as any kind of evolution within his human brand over the course of the time period studied.

Ultimately, this discovery leads to a greater understanding of Subban’s self-marketing methods and tactical insights into online promotional strategies of one of hockey’s most marketable players. Because the data spanned a considerable period of time (5 years), the results will be able to determine evolutions (changes within the phases of his brand) or consistencies within Subban’s brand as his online presence evolved.
Acknowledgements:

I could have never imagined I would be writing a thesis. Research was boring to me. It was all numbers and math and when can you ever be creative with math? Turns out numbers can be pretty fun when you are passionate about the topic. This entire experience has transformed me as a student, an academic, and a person and I could not be happier with the person I have become. Having said that, I would be nowhere without my support system.

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Glossary of Terms:

**Attitudinal Loyalty**: a fan’s concern for the well-being of a team, and said fan’s commitment to a team; attitudinal loyalty is high if the fans’ loyalty can withstand criticism of other fans or non-fans.

**Behavioural Loyalty**: a fan’s behavioural intentions toward a team; behaviours such as attending a team’s games live, watching live games on television, purchasing team merchandise, and attempting to convince others to become fans of said team all contribute to strong behavioural loyalty.

**Brand Awareness**: ensures that consumers in the desired target market are aware of the brand or team, and remember the name.

**Brand Energizer**: a branded product, symbol, or entity that significantly energizes a target brand. The energizer can be independent of the brand, and live beyond the product and its’ use.

**Brand Equity**: the perceived value of the brand itself; for example, the value of a name brand in the mind of the consumer is generally much higher than the value of a generic brand’s equivalent.

**Brand Image**: the brand image can also be considered the brand’s “personality” and consumers’ thoughts and feelings surrounding the brand.

**Brand Loyalty**: refers to the loyalty of a brand’s consumers and their likeliness to repurchase or continue to engage with the brand or team.

**Brand Management**: managing the brand, in general, when it comes to raising brand awareness, creating a strong brand image, and applying strategies to increase brand reach.

**Brand Identity**: the identity of a brand in the eyes of a consumer.

**Brand Personality**: see Brand Image

**Co-Brand/Branding**: popular technique used to transfer the positive associations of an existing (constituent) brand, to a new co-brand (composite brand). This has become increasingly popular for introducing new products to consumers.

**Consumer Identification**: a consumer’s willingness to identify with the brand or sports team.

**Consumption Behaviour**: consumer behaviour in relation to a brand or team; for example, team-related consumption behaviour relates to the fans consumption patterns concerning a team.
Followers: social media users who “follow” an account, either for a brand or a team, to keep up-to-date and interact with the brand or team.

Millennial: individual born after 1980, that is part of Generation Y and grew up socializing and making purchases online. Technology such as personal computers and smartphones are essential for communication and interaction among this generation.

Non-Product Related Brand Attributes: external aspects of the core product that relate to its consumption (i.e. team history and tradition, logos, colours, etc.).

Online Community: the community of followers and active participants that engage with the brand or team in an online setting, mainly on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Organic (or Authentic) Content: social media content that has not been paid for by a sponsor or business. Photos or videos posted organically by the individual.

Parasocial Interaction/Relationships (PSI): relationship between “media figures” and media users. These figures can be celebrities, athletes, or figures present in mass media. Media users have an affinity for the media figure, yet there is no reciprocity in the relationship.

Perceived Value: the value of a brand or team in the mind of the consumer (see Brand Equity).

Post Engagement: the amount of views, likes, comments, shares, retweets, replies or favourites that a post, either photo, video or text, receives.

Product-Related Brand Attributes: elements that make up the core product or brand (i.e. star players, coaching staff, etc.).

Self-Presentation: the act of presenting oneself to a particular audience, “curating” a particular image in order to either fit into or challenge stereotypes and traditional societal norms.

Social Media: various online platforms upon which consumers and fans can interact and communicate with brands and teams, as well as individual athletes. In this case, social media refers to platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, where a two-way communication can occur.

Sponsor-Related Posts: social media posts, either text-based, photos or videos, that are related to a sponsor of a team, brand, or individual.
“I’m not afraid to be different.”
- P.K. Subban
Chapter I: Introduction

P.K. Subban is one of the National Hockey League’s (NHL) best defensemen and has been widely recognized as one of its most dynamic players, both on and off the ice (Campbell, 2016). At 29-years-old, the Toronto-born Subban was drafted in the second round of the 2007 NHL Entry Draft by the Montreal Canadiens (NHL.com, n.d.). Following the 2012-2013 NHL season, Subban won the Norris Trophy, awarded to the league’s best defenseman. In 2016, his last season with the Canadiens, Subban held the fifth-highest average time-on-ice in the NHL, with 26:22 minutes-per-game and had a team-high 45 assists. On June 29, 2016, Subban was traded to the Nashville Predators for fellow veteran defenseman Shea Weber (NHL.com, n.d.).

Subban has successfully developed a following on social media, in particular Twitter and Instagram, with more than 1.11 million and 770,000 followers respectively at the time of this study. Subban has added another entity to his human brand (Thomson, 2006) by building his social media following and communicating his brand personality through his social platforms, particularly his Instagram. The creation and maintenance of a strong human brand can shape perceptions of an athlete, and therefore create strong and lasting connections between athletes and consumers.

Writing in Mclean’s, columnist Charlie Gillis (2014) argues Subban was exactly what the NHL needed to broaden its appeal to the expanding demographic of ethnically diverse fans: a black man playing on hockey’s biggest stage. Gillis (2014) notes that some believe Subban was the victim of discrimination, overlooked by the NHL, potentially targeted because he challenges the status quo. But despite being the target of such discrimination and bigotry, Subban has stated that he does not want his race to
define him. As one of a few black athletes in the NHL, he is considered “different” and according to Subban, different is good: “people enjoy seeing different things because it’s refreshing” (VICE Sports, 2015). “Being a black hockey player is a very, very, very, very, very small part of [his overall brand]” (VICE Sports, 2015).

Subban’s differentiation extends beyond talent and race as he has used social media to convey his outgoing manner and share his personal life with the online world. Subban has engaged his throng of followers with what he calls “his brand” (VICE Sports, 2015). Subban has developed and grown his brand exponentially through his various social media outlets and the sponsorships that have come to him due to his active social media presence (McShad, 2017). Subban has distinguished himself from the rest of the league in terms of self-branding because of his social media channels, as well as his personal website, pksubban.com (Spiker, 2015). He has stated that his personality, the ways in which he conducts himself on and off the ice, the ways he treats people and his philanthropic endeavours are the most important elements of his human brand (VICE Sports, 2015).

A social media strategy that demonstrates an individuals’ personality through their online posts appeals to fans and followers but can also benefit athletes and celebrities in terms of brand endorsements and corporate sponsorships. In some cases, a prominent and active social media presence can even lead to the creation of an athlete’s own brand or company, as in Subban’s case. Due to his impassioned and attention-seeking personality both on and off the ice, as well as the online community he has built, Subban has drawn the attention of several organizations and corporate partners (e.g.,
RW&CO, Bridgestone Tires, Air Canada and Scotiabank) as well as created his own brand through his Twitter, Instagram and Facebook profiles.

The researcher has selected P.K. Subban and his Instagram account as the focus of this research because he is worthy of exploration as a professional athlete as well as a human brand. Subban is one of the league’s better players, but not the best. From that standpoint, Subban cannot rely on his on-ice dominance alone to bolster his brand the way Connor McDavid, widely acknowledged as the league’s best player, might. He is, however, definitely among the most popular (NHL.com, 2017). In addition to playing (and succeeding) in a non-traditional hockey market, Subban has been elected a captain for the NHL All-Star Game for the last two seasons – a role determined by fan balloting (Bratten, 2017). This result speaks to Subban’s popularity among NHL fans, accomplished without the aid of being the league’s best player.

The Predators’ organization is relatively new in NHL terms. The league celebrated its centennial season in 2017-2018 and the Predators franchise started play in 1998, just 20 years ago. In Subban’s first season with the team, the Predators broke franchise records for sold-out games (41) and single-game attendance with 17,423 during the 2017 Stanley Cup Playoffs (Wilkins, 2017). Subban said when he arrived in Nashville, the city was described as a ‘C’ hockey market. Since his arrival, Subban describes the city as an ‘A’ market and has alluded to the fact that the city of Nashville was wrongfully assessed when it came to its commitment to its hockey team based on the level of noise in the arena as well as the engagement of the fans in the community (Wilkins, 2017).
Instagram

Instagram was selected as the primary online tool for this project because of Subban’s high rate of activity on the site. Instagram is also among the most used social networking mobile applications (hereafter known as ‘apps’ or ‘app’) amid Millennials (Wang, Niiya, Mark, Reich & Warshchauer, 2015), namely Subban and his followers. Instagram was founded in 2010 by co-founders Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger (Instagram, 2018) and has more than 1 billion users (Statista, 2018). Its founders have said Instagram, “has become the home for visual storytelling for everyone from celebrities, newsrooms and brands, to teens, musicians and anyone with a creative passion” (Instagram, 2018). This photosharing app allows users to edit and apply filters to photos taken on a smartphone and share the photos on social media like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and within the app itself. There were already 30 million users within 18 months of the app’s creation, which speaks to its popularity and growth potential (Benjamin, 2012).

With more than 1 billion users and 165 million of those users being sports fans, meaning they follow at least one sports-related account, Instagram is the perfect platform for athlete self-branding (Patel, 2016; Statista, 2018). Visual-based social media like Instagram are ideal for the sharing of athlete and team authentic experiences, the communication of personalities, and engagement with fans (Patel, 2016). Not only does this photosharing app allows users to follow and interact with celebrities and athletes, but it encourages and facilitates self-presentation (Marshall, 2010). According to Marshall (2010), social media, in particular Instagram, enable users to create and maintain a certain character or performance of self. The app even allows the user to curate, edit and ‘touch-
up’ the photo or post to present the best version of themselves to their audience, essentially allowing the user to create their social media presence and attempt to adhere to stereotypical expectations due to social classes or roles in society.

**Context**

In August 2014, Subban created P.K.S.S. Management; a marketing company dedicated to establishing relationships and partnerships with companies that support the P.K. Subban brand (Pksubban.com, 2017). In an interview with VICE Sports (2015) Subban mentions he attempts to ensure his brand and his personality remain present throughout his various sponsor partnerships (i.e., RW&CO. and Bridgestone Tires). These collaborations showcase his personality by allowing Subban to appear in comedic television advertisements, high-energy online videos and quirky advertisements as shown in Appendix A (RW&CO., 2017).

Washburn, Till and Priluck (2000) noted that another brand or in this case, an individual, can attach themselves to an already-established brand and attempt to transfer the positive associations of the larger, more established brand to themselves. This process is called **co-branding** (or a co-brand). Co-branding can also be beneficial for the larger brand (in this case the NHL) because the league benefits from Subban’s promotion of not only his own brand, but that of the NHL as well. In situations of co-branding, one entity can also harm the others with negative publicity. Football running back Adrian Peterson, for example, was suspended by the National Football League (NFL) and was dropped by several sponsors after his physical discipline of his child made negative national headlines (Wallace & Isidore, 2014). In Peterson’s case, he was deemed a liability to the NFL’s brand, as well as to those that hired him as a celebrity endorser.
Critics from Subban’s days with the Canadiens claimed the defenseman was a “distraction from the game [and] his personality has often been the subject of media attention” (VICE Sports, 2015). This criticism has led detractors to believe that Subban’s individual branding received more emphasis than team success and his split focus could be jeopardizing the team’s performance (Gillis, 2014). Subban’s personality was scrutinized prior to the trade to the Predators (Campbell, 2016; Guiste, 2016). Subban risked alienation from the rest of his team by the attention he commands and that might explain why he was traded from the Canadiens. Ken Campbell (2016) of The Hockey News reported that Subban, an extrovert who brings a considerable amount of attention to himself, was not an ideal fit with the Canadiens due mostly to the team’s conservative environment (Campbell, 2016; Guiste, 2016). Campbell (2016) suggests Subban was completely invested in Montreal, city and team, however the Canadiens “never managed to totally beat the individualism and creativity out of Subban” (para. 6). While Subban risks alienation due to his individuality, he is rewarded with the popularity of his brand which in turn, leads to increased number of followers, donations to his charity, Subban branded apparel (Subban, 2017a; Subban, 2017b; [Appendix B]) purchases and sponsorships.

Purpose

There is no shortage of research applying the self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1956) to athletes and social media (e.g., Colapinto & Benecchi, 2014; Frederick, Pegoraro & Burch, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2014; Hull, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuck, 2012; Marshall, 2010; Parganas, Anagnostopoulos & Chadwick, 2015; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). These authors often focused on self-presentation theory
through the use of social media in examining an entire league or team (e.g., Frederick, Pegoraro & Burch, 2017; Parganas, Anagnostopoulos & Chadwick, 2015) or a collective group of individual athletes (e.g., Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2014; Hull, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuck, 2012; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Despite exploration in the area, little research has been conducted on individual athletes’ social media presence through a self-presentation lens. Few case studies focus on an individual athlete’s use of a particular social media platform and this study aims to contribute to the field’s knowledge base through an in-depth analysis of P.K. Subban’s branding through Instagram.

By invoking Goffman’s (1956) self-presentation theory and applying it to an individual athlete in a North-American professional sport, the researcher will be able to explore the athletes’ brand through a self-presentation lens. The current study aims to utilize this self-presentation theory alongside the foundations of branding and self-marketing in order to explore the set of associations identified with a particular athlete. This study differs from existing literature wherein it utilizes both the self-presentation theory as well as self-marketing foundations in order to study one individual athlete belonging to a North American professional sport. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which P.K. Subban uses Instagram to communicate his brand to followers through a self-presentation lens. Additionally, the current study will address the gap in the literature when it comes to analyzing an individual athletes’ curated social media presence.
P.K. Subban was selected for this study because he is one of a small number of NHL players that has a very strong social media presence\(^1\) as well as his own website, branded apparel and is involved in a number of philanthropic endeavours (Spiker, 2015). The researcher chose to examine an individual Canadian athlete who plays in the NHL due to limited research in this area. Throughout the course of this study the researcher investigates the ways Subban uses Instagram to communicate his human brand to his followers. Additionally, the researcher aims to add to the knowledge of athletes self-branding and performance of self, particularly as it pertains to Instagram.

\(^1\) Subban posts roughly five times per week, which is among the ranks of superstar athletes such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Russell Westbrook. Much more frequently than the NHL’s best players who either do not use social media (Sidney Crosby) or are much less active (Connor McDavid).
References:


Chapter II: Methodology

This section identifies and explains the research design used to conduct this project, followed by an elaboration of those procedures. Included in this section is information on data collection and data analysis, as well as coding measures and practices designed by the researcher to classify the qualitative and quantitative data.

Research Questions

1. What were Subban’s brand pillars and posting patterns when he first created his Instagram account in 2013?

2. How did the creation and re-launch of pksubban.com by P.K.S.S. Management in 2015 change those pillars and posting patterns, if at all?

3. How did Subban’s trade to the Nashville Predators in 2016 change those pillars and posting patterns, if at all?

Through a qualitative research approach, the investigator obtained data from Subban’s Instagram profile. This approach enabled the researcher to analyze and assess Subban’s Instagram posts. The researcher decided to focus on Instagram because of the effectual sharing of information among users. In this case, a professional athlete can communicate information in the form of text, photos or videos to the consumer in a simple, free, in an immediate manner.

In order to address the research questions, the five-year dataset has been reduced into three sections (hereafter known as phases), each separated by a specific transition in Subban’s life with the purpose of identifying changes or consistencies between each phase. This enabled the researcher to determine whether and how Subban’s posts changed based on those specific transitions in his life. By separating Subban’s posts into
three phases, the researcher was able to determine the changes to Subban’s brand by comparing the phases to each other. Phase One takes place from the date of Subban’s first Instagram post (August 18th 2013) to the day before the launch of pksubban.com (October 15th 2015). Phase Two begins the day of Subban’s website release (October 16th 2015) and ends the day before his trade to the Predators (June 28th 2016). Finally, Phase Three begins the day Subban was traded and ends on the final day of the 2018 NHL All-Star Weekend (January 31st 2018).

Research Design

Additionally, the selection of a case study enabled the researcher to study one particular phenomenon or event in great detail (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2005). The case study also allowed for complete emersion in the subject in order to gain a thorough understanding of Subban’s Instagram branding strategies (Andrew, Pedersen & McEvoy, 2011). Stake (1995) notes that through a case study, a researcher’s priority will be to understand one particular case without necessarily being able to transfer the knowledge to other cases. According to Yin (2005), a case study can be a useful approach when there are descriptive or exploratory research questions. In the case of the current study, the research questions posed by the investigator are both descriptive (what were his brand pillars when he first started his Instagram) and exploratory (how did the development of his brand throughout the phases impact these pillars). A case study approach also allows a researcher to make direct observations and collect data in a natural setting as opposed to prying for information and prompting responses from participants (Yin, 2005).
Data Collection

The researcher utilized archival data, which according to Kozinets (2015), “comprises any and all online social experience-related data that researchers ‘find’, ‘collect’ or gather from social media communities” (p. 165). The archival data was collected from the posts on Subban’s Instagram profile. This data was useful to the researcher because it was not been prompted by the investigator, rather it is genuine, raw data created by and within the online community of Instagram. The researcher reviewed all of the content produced by Subban on his Instagram account (711 posts), between August 2013 and January 2018. Data collection took place from January to April 2018.

This research was conducted via a mobile telephone on the Instagram app and personal computer (Instagram is accessible via the mobile app as well as a general web browser). The information from the posts was compiled into a Microsoft Excel document, where the researcher grouped the posts in chronological order. The researcher recorded the date of the post, the content (who is photographed, and what they are doing in the photo or video), the caption of the photo, the hashtags used in the posts’ caption, the post type (either photo or video), and the number of likes at the time of collection.

Data Analysis

Often in case studies the data collection and data analysis take place simultaneously (Yin, 2005) and this was partly the case for the current study. A part of the data analysis was to determine the categories in which the post fit best. This step took place at the same time as the data collection, meaning as the information from each post was collected, the researcher coded said post simultaneously; immediately inserting it into a category for further analysis. Additionally, in order to remain as unbiased as
possible, the researcher went back over the data as a quality control check (Stemler, 2001) to ensure the emergent categories were being applied to the data correctly during the collection period.

Prior to the commencement of this project, the researcher made it a priority to become familiar with the content on Subban’s website a priority. It became apparent during this process that Subban, via the tabs on his website, identified six categories of his brand: Life, Style, Philanthropy, Business, Fitness, and Press (Pksubban.com, n.d.). According to self-presentation theory, these six categories on his website would be indicative of how Subban is presenting himself to his audience. As such, the researcher decided to use these six categories as the foundational pillars as part of the a priori coding of this study. These categories were established prior to the data collection for this study and therefore the data will be applied to this code (Stemler, 2001). Since the researcher has no direct access to Subban, his website acts as a proxy for his voice when it comes to making these types of determinations. Because these pillars were so prominent on his website, the researcher deemed these categories what Subban wants his brand to represent and most likely what would be present on his Instagram account as well.

Any categories beyond the list of six pre-determined categories were deemed emergent and added to the list. These emergent categories were established during the data collection for this study (Stemler, 2001) It is also important to note that the researcher opted to change Press (the category name on Subban’s website) to Media as its comprehensive nature allowed for more thorough coding. The Press tab on the website simply includes articles or links to articles where Subban appears in mainstream media or video features, but the researcher made the adaptation so that Media could incorporate
Subban’s appearances in mainstream video and print media, screenshots of articles, as well as instances where Subban would appear on television shows and behind the scenes photos and videos of those instances.

The researcher utilized a combination of a priori and emergent coding for this project. As previously noted, the researcher employed several pre-set categories before the data collection in order to create a starting point with the pre-existing elements of Subban’s human brand, yielding an a priori method of coding. With the six existing pillars in place, any post that did not fit within the predetermined categories would be placed in a new pillar, yielding several different emergent categories. This type of emergent coding allows for the categories and patterns to present themselves naturally through the data (Blair, 2015), allowing the researcher to come across these categories organically, rather than strictly using the six categories.

The coded data was then grouped into the categories (including those present on Subban’s website) that emerged throughout the collection process and the categories were analyzed to determine which category Subban communicated most frequently through Instagram. The posts were categorized by pillar; when a post fit within two or more different categories, the researcher placed the post in each applicable category. This method enabled the researcher to remove a level of bias from the data collection. Rather than the researcher determining the correct category for a post, the post was placed into multiple categories to eliminate uncertainty. For example, a photo of Subban posing with a minor hockey team that he was visiting for the day as part of a partnership with Scotiabank could be considered Hockey, Kids, and Business. Moreover, due to Subban’s partnership with Canadian clothing brand RW&CO., some of his posts may be difficult to
distinguish between categories (i.e. Style and Business). The researcher has determined that posts where RW&CO. is a focus should be categorized as both Style and Business since the partnership highlights Subban’s style and eye for fashion, as well as his business ventures in the fashion industry. It is important to note that the researcher coded all data as one large dataset, then divided the dataset into the three phases to analyze categories and shifts within the phases.

Due to the uneven length of each of the three phases, the researcher implemented a post-per-month (PPM) analysis as a crucial part of the data analysis step of this study. The PPM analysis enabled the researcher to create a more balanced comparison between the phases. It was equally important for the researcher to calculate the total PPM (TPPM) for each category over the entirety of the data collection timeline to fully understand the evolution and posting patterns within Subban’s Instagram account. In addition to a PPM analysis, the researcher calculated the proportional percentages of each category within each phase to provide further illumination into category prominence.

The methodology and coding process can be seen as derivative of Armstrong et al., (2016). Similar to Armstrong et al., (2016) the posts were grouped (in this case by phase) and the categories were analyzed. Not only was the amount of posts in each category analyzed, but the posts were also analyzed by phase to determine Subban’s posting patterns over the development of his brand. Conclusions were drawn from the analysis to determine the various elements of Subban’s brand
References:


Subban, P.K. [subbanator]. (2018, January 24). Here we go!! Make sure you tune in tonight to #TheDailyShow with @trevornoah … this should be fun [emojis] [Photo]. Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BeWfhsNA7uu/?taken-by=subbanator.

Chapter III: Results

In addition to the six a priori codes, nine codes emerged from the data resulting in 15 codes. Table 1 provides a summary of the a priori and emergent codes that were present in the 711 Instagram posts collected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*Coding key created by the researcher*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition of Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life</td>
<td>Any post that depicted an element or elements of Subban’s personal life (i.e. a photo of him and a friend or a photo of him and his siblings when they were younger)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Any post where Subban includes or mentions (tags) a business partner or sponsor (i.e. a post where Subban hashtags ‘#ad’ or ‘#sponsored’, or where he explicitly thanks a company or business for providing an item or service)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philanthropy</td>
<td>Any post where Subban was depicted as giving back to the community (i.e. during team hospital visits, where he is photographed donating to a charity, at a charity event or giving back through his Blueline Buddies program)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>Any post where Subban’s fashion was the focal point (i.e. by mentioning an article of clothing in the caption or posing in a way that highlighted his attire)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Any post where Subban was depicted in mainstream or sports media (i.e. where he posted about being on the cover of a magazine, featured in an article, behind the scenes of a late-night talk show, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitness</td>
<td>Any post where fitness, health or working out was the focal point (i.e. showcasing gym techniques or workouts). Posts where Subban was at practice would be considered a fitness post when he was demonstrating on-ice training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hockey</td>
<td>Any post that depicted an element of hockey, whether it be a video where he mentions hockey, an ad where he is dressed in his equipment, a photo of him on the ice during a practice or a game or a photo that took place at the arena.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrity</td>
<td>Any post where there was a celebrity² (person involved in the entertainment of show business industry) in the photo. In this case,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

² The researcher has specifically defined “celebrity” for the purpose of this study in order to avoid discrepancies during coding based on the following elements: 1. When Subban has tagged the individual in the post, associating himself with their brand; 2. When a tagged Instagram account is verified, meaning Instagram has confirmed that the account is the true account of the celebrity it represents (Instagram, 2018); 3. When the individual has a Wikipedia page (should only be a coding measure when a known celebrity’s account is not tagged by Subban). The existence of a Wikipedia page confirms the celebrity or public figure is well-known and recognizable by the general public (Wikipedia, 2018).
other athletes from different sports (i.e. NBA players or NFL players) were considered celebrities, but other current hockey players (i.e. Subban’s teammates or other players currently in the NHL) were not considered celebrities as they could be considered Subban’s colleagues and co-workers. Hockey legends, such as Bobby Orr or Wayne Gretzky would be considered celebrities since they do not currently play with Subban in the NHL.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kids</td>
<td>Any post where there were children in the photo or video (i.e. minor hockey players, family members, young fans, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fans</td>
<td>Any post where Subban was with fans or mentioned his fans in the caption (i.e. a photo of art a fan created for him)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Any post depicting his family members (i.e. mother, father, siblings, nieces or nephews, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teammates</td>
<td>Any post where Subban was with one or more of his current teammates (current at the time of the photo or video)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Any post where Subban included food in some way (i.e. a plate of sushi or a photo of him and his friends, family or teammates out for dinner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Any post where there was a mention of race or some version of a racial connotation (i.e. photos celebrating Martin Luther King Jr. Day, quotes about racism, or a Blueline Buddies post)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Any post where there was some religious connotation included (i.e. him and his family saying grace before dinner or him wishing his followers a Merry Christmas – which is regarded as a religious greeting where Happy Holidays or Season’s Greetings is viewed more secular)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following section presents the results from data collection process and identifies categories from Subban’s posts that have been observed. Each phase was analyzed individually, and then compared to the others to identify noteworthy changes throughout the course of his brand. Below, Table 2 highlights the PPM and Total PPM (TPPM) for each category. Table 3 depicts the proportionality of each category within Subban’s brand which allowed the researcher to look at the overall composition of Subban’s posts communicated through his Instagram account.
### Table 2

**Total PPM (TPPM) per Category and per Phase**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Phase One</th>
<th>Phase Two</th>
<th>Phase Three</th>
<th>TPPM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=165)</td>
<td>(n=187)</td>
<td>(n=359)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>14.75</td>
<td>10.15</td>
<td>7.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hockey</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>7.05</td>
<td>4.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philanthropy</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitness</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrity</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fans</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teammates</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TPPM per Phase</strong></td>
<td>12.04</td>
<td>39.20</td>
<td>38.48</td>
<td>25.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3

**Category Proportions by Phase and Overall**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Phase One</th>
<th>Phase Two</th>
<th>Phase Three</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life</td>
<td>30.54 %</td>
<td>37.58 %</td>
<td>26.19 %</td>
<td>29.72 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hockey</td>
<td>16.07 %</td>
<td>16.54 %</td>
<td>18.18 %</td>
<td>17.20 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>8.03 %</td>
<td>8.28 %</td>
<td>5.29 %</td>
<td>6.59 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philanthropy</td>
<td>4.82 %</td>
<td>6.69 %</td>
<td>12.35 %</td>
<td>9.30 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>3.85 %</td>
<td>3.50 %</td>
<td>2.58 %</td>
<td>3.07 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>3.53 %</td>
<td>0.31 %</td>
<td>2.04 %</td>
<td>1.98 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitness</td>
<td>0.96 %</td>
<td>1.91 %</td>
<td>2.71 %</td>
<td>2.12 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrity</td>
<td>8.04 %</td>
<td>7.32 %</td>
<td>7.73 %</td>
<td>7.69 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids</td>
<td>6.43 %</td>
<td>4.46 %</td>
<td>6.51 %</td>
<td>6.00 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>5.78 %</td>
<td>5.41 %</td>
<td>5.70 %</td>
<td>5.64 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fans</td>
<td>3.85 %</td>
<td>0.95 %</td>
<td>1.36 %</td>
<td>1.83 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>0.64 %</td>
<td>0.31 %</td>
<td>2.85 %</td>
<td>1.76 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teammates</td>
<td>5.14 %</td>
<td>5.41 %</td>
<td>4.75 %</td>
<td>4.98 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>0.96 %</td>
<td>1.59 %</td>
<td>1.09 %</td>
<td>1.17 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>1.29 %</td>
<td>0.00 %</td>
<td>0.68 %</td>
<td>0.95 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100.00 %</td>
<td>100.00 %</td>
<td>100.00 %</td>
<td>100.00 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Phase One (August 18th 2013 to October 15th 2015):

Phase One is mainly comprised of organic content, meaning the content was not sponsored or paid for by a business partner (Advance Ohio, n.d.). The organic content that made up Phase One yielded 15 categories in total (see Table 3 below). The Life pillar was the most frequent category of Phase One, with 95 photos in 26 months. This made for a 3.65 PPM average during this phase preoccupying 30.54% of his brand in Phase One. The second most frequent category in Phase One was Hockey, with 50 total posts, for an average of 1.92 PPM and 16.07%.

The third most frequent category (8.04%) in Phase One was Celebrity, a category that included photos of Subban with famous friends or Hollywood celebrities such as Jay Baruchel, Vin Diesel and Seth Rogan to name a few. There were 26 photos that fit this categorization, for an average of one post per month over the course of 26 months. The bulk of the Celebrity category posts came from the days that led to the launch of his website, when Subban had famous friends send him selfies while holding up fingers that corresponded with the number of days left until his official website launch, resembling a countdown.

It is important to note that Subban launched a first version of his website in March 2014 (Subban, 2014) but was rebranded and relaunched in 2015 by Rank Media Agency (Kelly, 2015; Rank, n.d.). The researcher decided to use the relaunch as the formal beginning point for Phase Two since the first launch of Subban’s website “lacked the sizzle his persona required to take his brand to the next level,” (Rank, n.d.). The relaunch was used as the genesis of Phase Two because it marks the point at which the new
version of Subban’s brand was released, showing his followers all the aspects of his brand (see Appendix C for the complete breakdown of Phase One).

In Phase One, the majority of Subban’s posts were about Life (30.54%) and Hockey (16.07%). Interestingly Subban also included posts that were coded as Religion (1.29%) which included photos around the Christmas holidays. It is important to note that Race, Food and Fitness all occupy less than one percent of Subban’s overall brand in Phase One. Each category from Phase One is illustrated in Table 4 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Proportionality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>30.54 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hockey</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>16.07 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrity</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>8.04 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>8.03 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>6.43 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>5.78 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teammates</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>5.14 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philanthropy</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>4.82 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>3.85 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fans</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>3.85 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>3.53 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.96 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>1.29 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitness</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.96 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.64 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As mentioned above, Religion was only represented around the Christian holidays. Subban, for example, posted photos and videos of his family around the dinner table at Christmas and wishing his fans and followers a Merry Christmas. Another noteworthy emergent category was Teammates, wherein Subban posted photos of himself and his teammates celebrating after a goal or a win or out for dinner after a game.
Additionally, each category from Phase One is organized by PPM, from the most posts per month (Life), to the fewest (Race).

Phase Two (October 16th 2015 to June 28th 2016):

Phase Two is the shortest of the three phases, lasting only eight months. This phase featured photos of higher quality photos and videos (minimal pixilation, clearer resolution) and posted more frequently than in Phase One (see Table 2 for the comparison of posting frequency between phases). In Phase Two (see Table 5), the two most popular categories were Life (14.75 PPM or 37.58%) and Hockey (6.37 PPM or 16.24%). There is an increase in the Total PPM (TPPM) between Phase One (12.04) and Phase Two (39.20) which can in part explain the elevated posting levels exemplified by the Life category between Phase One (3.65 PPM) and Phase Two (14.75 PPM). In contrast to Phase One, the third most frequent category of Phase Two was Business (3.25 PPM or 8.28%). Although Business replaced Celebrity in Phase Two as the third most frequently communicated category, Celebrity remained a large portion of his brand (7.32%) and was less than one percent behind Business (8.28%).

Each category from Phase Two is illustrated in Table 5 below, and organized by PPM, from the highest (Life) to the lowest (Media). As was briefly mentioned above, Subban’s Life category jumped significantly from 3.65 PPM in Phase One to 14.75 PPM in Phase Two. This is not the only category spike in the transition between these two phases: 12 out of 14 categories (excluding Media and Fans) increased in PPM from Phase One to Phase Two. This increase can be attributed to Subban’s increased self-marketing efforts that immediately followed the re-launch of his website that was
designed to capitalize on his business ventures and the increased popularity of Instagram as the timeline of Subban’s use of the app progressed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category Frequency &amp; Proportions for Phase Two</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hockey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philanthropy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teammates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Phase Three (June 29th 2016 to January 31st 2018):*

The total duration of Phase Three is 19 months. The researcher decided to use Subban’s trade to the Predators as the point of origin for Phase Three because it had the potential to be a brand-altering transition. The trade not only changed Subban’s life and his career but impacted his brand as well, as it clearly had an influence on what he was posting. While Subban remained consistent in keeping *Life* and *Hockey* at the forefront of his brand, *Race* and *Philanthropy* increased exponentially between Phase Two and Phase Three (see Table 6 below for the breakdown of Phase Three). Much like the transition between the first and second phases, the progression to Phase Three yielded similar results in terms of posting frequency. Subban’s posting frequency increased again in
Phase Three (see Table 2 for the comparison of posting frequency between phases) and the style of his posts became more consistent and professional in terms of photo quality. His photos were no longer over-edited or over-exposed (too bright), they all seemed to have a professional finish.

Once again, the researcher uncovered similarities to the previous phases in that *Life* (10.15 PPM or 26.19%) and *Hockey* (7.05 PPM or 18.18%) still topped the list of pillars in Phase Three. However, as Subban’s career circumstances changed, so did his brand. *Philanthropy* was third on the list of pillars in Phase Three with 4.78. This rise can be attributed to Subban’s implementation (Bratten, 2017) of his Blueline Buddies program (further explained in the next section). Additionally, *Philanthropy* almost doubled in value (from 6.69% to 12.35% between Phases Two and Three) in terms of phase proportionality. The *Race* category PPM was much higher in Phase Three (1.10 PPM) than in Phase One and Two (0.14 and 0.12 respectively) and its’ proportionality grew considerably from being virtually nonexistent in Phase One and Two (0.64% and 0.31% respectively) to 2.85% in Phase Three due to Blueline Buddies. Due to the racial nature and the history of Subban’s Blueline Buddies (further explained in the following section), the researcher categorized any post about Blueline Buddies in *Philanthropy* as well as *Race*.

Each category from Phase Three is illustrated in Table 6 below organized by PPM, from the highest (*Life*) to the lowest (*Religion*).
Overall, as time lapsed Subban’s posting frequency increased in almost every category across each phase (illustrated in Table 4 and in Appendix F) with the exception of Life, Business, Style, Food, Teammates and Religion. Although his posts remained mostly consistent in content and focus (Life and Hockey), the increased posting frequency in almost every category and the dominant posting of certain categories over others demonstrates shifts in emphasis and the evolution of his brand through the phases to incorporate more aspects. Subban had all the elements in place to form the essence of his Instagram posts in Phase One but made subtle tweaks along the way as his brand and career further developed. It is in this phase where Subban presents the most nuanced version of his brand to date, in that each category was represented in this phase.

In summary, Subban remained mostly consistent with his brand throughout the entirety of the dataset. Life and Hockey were consistently the two most frequently communicated as well as the two most prominent categories within his brand throughout
all three phases. In Phase One, when Subban first began his Instagram account in 2013, his brand was comprised of 15 categories, of which all but one (*Religion*) remained a part of his brand consistently through the five-year timeline.
References:


Chapter IV: Discussion

The researcher gathered the results presented above and, in keeping with the three phases, analyzed the information by phase in order to discuss the various elements, frequencies, and consistencies uncovered about Subban’s posts. By applying some of the relevant literature, the researcher aims to provide a more thorough understanding of Subban’s brand and his brand strategies. The discussion will focus on the key themes present across the three phases; Subban’s consistency throughout the communication of his brand, the constant juxtaposition of frontstage and backstage performances through his posts under the Life and Hockey categories, the increase of Race and Philanthropy in Phase Three of his brand, and finally, the consistent appearance of Celebrity throughout his brand.

Consistency

Subban remained consistent in the content he posted over the course of this study. Of the 15 categories represented throughout his brand, Religion was the only category to disappear from his brand after Phase One only to reappear in Phase Three. According to authors Moulard, Garrity and Rice (2014) “consistency is defined as the perception that the celebrity’s personality and characteristics have not changed” (p. 179). In their research surrounding brand equity, authors Beverland, Wilner and Micheli (2015) adapt Bengtsson, Bardhi and Venkatraman’s (2010) definition of brand consistency as the preservation over time of messages, meanings and themes. Additionally, according to existing research brand consistency is an element of authenticity (Moulard et al., 2014). In their study on celebrity authenticity, Moulard and colleagues (2014) uncovered that when a brand is stable and consistent in the messages that are being communicated, the
celebrities’ perceived authenticity increases. People often use consistency to judge the authenticity of brands, other individuals and therefore human brands (Moulard et al., 2014). In applying Moulard and colleagues’ (2014) framework for consistency and authenticity, Subban’s consistency in the 15 categories he communicates through his Instagram account can lead consumers to believe he is authentic as a brand.

According to Keller (2008) and Delgado-Ballester, Navarro and Sicilia (2012) brand consistency creates high brand awareness and favourable associations with a brand. In their review of brand consistency and meaning for global brands, Bengtsson and colleagues (2010) found that consistency within brand communication and the messages shared by the brand increased clarity and credibility of the brand in the minds of consumers (Erdem & Swait, 1998). As proven throughout the existing literature, Subban’s consistency in the message he constantly shared with his audience through his Instagram posts increased his brands’ credibility, authenticity and awareness among consumers.

As mentioned above, Subban remained mostly consistent in the communication of his brand’s message through his Instagram posts; however, Religion was a category that was in flux (although only slightly) within his brand. Religion was a category found in Phase One, but disappeared from Subban’s brand in Phase Two, only to reappear in Phase Three. Much like Religion’s appearance in Phase One, the category’s reappearance in Phase Three once again surrounded the Christian holidays. Subban posted a photo of a cartoon version of himself dressed in a Santa costume with the caption, “Merry Christmas Y’all”. Religion’s reappearance could represent an attempt by Subban to ingratiate himself with the Predators’ fan base, given that Tennessee is part of the Bible Belt in the
southern United States, known for its staunch Christian religiosity. According to geographer Wilbur Zelinsky, the Bible Belt is a “region stretching from West Virginia and southern Virginia to southern Missouri in the north, to Texas and northern Florida in the south” (Rosenburg, 2018). Subban’s inclusion of the frequent southern phrase, “y’all” is his way of expressing his new southern lifestyle and links his newfound southern fan base.

The reappearance of Religion as a category in Phase Three could be attributed to Subban’s ability to evolve his brand and be proactive to engage Southern fans, rather than reactive (Monfort, 2012). Brands should be able to evolve and stay relevant among their consumer base in any given environment (Monfort, 2012; Rindell & Strandvik, 2009). Subban’s brand evolved to fit within his various environments (parts of his brand were different with Montreal than with Nashville). Subban’s ability to adapt and proactively evolve his brand allows him to stay relevant with his followers, keeping his consumers or consumers of his product (either his on-ice product or his merchandise such as Subban-branded apparel) engaged.

Self-Presentation

As mentioned above, Subban remained consistent in the content he posted throughout the course of his brand. In fact, Subban was so consistent that throughout all three of the phases in his brand, Life and Hockey were the two most frequently communicated as well as the two most prominent categories within his brand. This finding may be somewhat predictable in that the Life category is quite broad and can include a variety of posts from Subban’s Instagram such as posts of Subban’s friends, from vacations, and of his everyday life. The consistency of Subban’s brand in
communicating these categories as his most prominent brand message is demonstrative that Subban wants to show his followers that he is more than just a hockey player.

As Goffman (1956) notes, “the individual offers his performance and puts on his show ‘for the benefit of other people’” (p. 10). Goffman (1956) proved that the individual putting on this frontstage performance can only do so if he or she has the right audience. In this case, Subban has the audience in the form of his Instagram followers. Goffman (1956) argues that individuals create the best version of themselves through frontstage performance, but Subban seems to be curating his frontstage performance with backstage content by posting so much in the Life category. This online behaviour provides followers with access they would not have outside social media, leading his audience to believe they are witnessing a backstage performance. Just as there is a juxtaposition between the frontstage and backstage content on Subban’s Instagram account, Hull (2014a) found that PGA golfer’s use of Twitter yielded similar results. He determined the golfers were able to balance front and backstage themes in the content of their tweets. Additionally, Geurin-Eagleman & Burch’s (2016) study of Olympians’ self-presentation on Instagram prompted authors to note that visual self-presentation tactics such as those used to communicate via Instagram can have positive implications on an athletes’ brand, making them more appealing to sponsors and stakeholders as well as audience members. Subban is successful in communicating this constant juxtaposition of frontstage and backstage performances throughout his Instagram account.

Additionally, the increase in proportionality in the Life category between Phase One (30.54%) and Phase Two (37.58%) could be attributed to the fact that Subban and his management team have determined that he has a personality that people are drawn to
and it has become a marketable feature of his (Proudfoot, n.d.). His personality and lifestyle (all included within the Life category) make up a large portion of his brand and Instagram has enabled Subban to showcase his backstage content and personality in order to leverage sponsorship opportunities and business relationships, making him even more popular. As stated by Geurin-Eagleman & Burch (2016), “visual self-presentations can have great implications on athletes’ personal brands [...] and sponsorship and other business/promotional opportunities” (p. 143). Subban’s ability to communicate not only his business ventures, but his backstage persona and personal life through his Instagram makes him more appealing to potential sponsors and endorsers providing him with even more opportunity for growth as a brand.

Not only is Subban communicating his personal life, providing a backstage view to his life but he is simultaneously showcasing his personality through photos. While Subban keeps followers engaged through the use of backstage footage in the Life category, it can be argued that Hockey is his frontstage performance. Subban’s career is what he is most known for, and it is the version of Subban that the majority of hockey fans or the general population see. Subban juxtaposes these front and backstage performances on his Instagram account, allowing fans glimpses into the behind-the-scenes of the hockey star’s life, making him seem more real and authentic to consumers (Armstrong et al., 2016; Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly, 2013).

**Athlete Activism**

Subban’s trade was obviously an important event for him, and the change in his environment from the Canadiens to the Predators had a slight impact in the prominence of certain categories within his brand. Race and Philanthropy became much more
prominent categories in Subban’s brand after his trade to the Predators. This change can be attributed not only to Subban’s penchant for community outreach, but also the implementation of his Blueline Buddies program he created in Nashville. This program was the result of Subban’s willingness to address the highly publicized racial conflicts in the United States between African-American youth and law enforcement officers in recent years (Bratten, 2017; Willis, 2018). Subban created the Blueline Buddies program, which aims to bridge the gap between law enforcement and underprivileged youth in Nashville. He partners up a member of the Metro Nashville Police Department with a community mentor or representative from a local organization, and an underprivileged youth to provide the trio with a unique game-night experience (Bratten, 2017; Willis, 2018).

Subban’s involvement in race-related issues is not atypical in the modern athletic landscape and many sports personalities (i.e. athletes, owners, etc.) have used their athletic prominence to protest racial inequality. Miami Dolphin’s owner Stephen Ross, for example, began a non-profit organization called “Ross Initiative in Sports for Equality (RISE) dedicated to harnessing the unifying power of sports to improve race relations and drive social progress” (RiseToWin, n.d.; SportsBusiness Daily, 2015). Professional athletes often use their own personal platforms (either social media or public appearances) to protest racial inequality. Basketball superstar LeBron James often receives public and media attention for his protests against racism and social injustice (Chan, 2016; Scott, 2018; Strauss & Scott, 2014). These protests and opinions on social issues can polarize a sports star but athletes such as James and Colin Kaepernick have assumed the risk (Blake & Taylor, 2017). Subban is not engaged in protest like
Kaepernick or James but his goals align with theirs and he is attempting to alleviate racial tension in his community through his Blueline Buddies program.

Naturally, after Subban launched Blueline Buddies in November of 2017, Race became an important part of his brand after being virtually non-existent in Phases One and Two. This initiative was an important one for Subban (Bratten, 2017; Willis, 2018) and consequently, it featured prominently within his brand through Instagram. Subban wanted to show his followers he was making an attempt to enact social change and making a difference in his community. This “strategic morality” was clearly planned and successfully inserted into Subban’s brand after his move to not only the United States, but a southern state, where racial tension tends to be higher (Tisby, 2017). This finding from the current study is echoed throughout previous research as more and more athletes are using social media for activism. There exists a large body of literature surrounding athlete activism through social media and according to this research, social media is the ideal vehicle for athlete activism (Hull, 2014b; Schmittel & Sanderson, 2012; Yan, Pegoraro & Watanabe, 2018).

Schmittel and Sanderson (2015) note in their textual analysis of African American NFL players’ tweets surrounding the Trayvon Martin—George Zimmerman Case that took place in 2012, that Twitter and other social media can be important vehicles for African American and other minority athletes to have conversations about societal culture and to perform activism and social justice. In Hull’s (2014b) examination of student-athletes use of Twitter at UNC-Wilmington (UNCW) to raise awareness to save their swimming and diving team by tweeting constantly and becoming opinion-leaders in the flow of communication through social media. Finally, Yan, Pegoraro and Watanabe
(2018) focused on the strike organized via Twitter by University of Missouri football players to protest racial inequality at their institution. Athletes are able to have their own voice and create their own dialogue through social media, enabling them communicate their rationales to the greater public (Yan et al., 2018). Yan and colleagues (2018) also note that the everyday use of social media encourages and provides athletes with an outlet upon which they can build relationships, assert narratives and resist.

*Celebrity Co-Branding*

Another consistency within Subban’s brand was the prominence of *Celebrity* (remaining between 7.73% and 8.04% through each of the three phases). Posts within this category include photos of Subban with well-known celebrities. This can be attributed to the fact that Subban has many friends that are celebrities that were present on his Instagram quite a bit during the first phase of his brand. Subban also attended events where celebrities were present, prompting him to post photos with them as well. Posts in this category were not limited to sport celebrities such as Bobby Orr and Willie O’Ree, but also show business celebrities such as Kelly Ripa, Steve Aoki, Seth Rogan, Jack Black and Vin Diesel to name a few. Additionally, Subban posted selfies from celebrities such as Celine Dion, Seth Rogan and George St. Pierre holding up the number of days left until the launch of pksubban.com. This countdown further justifies the researchers’ decision to use the re-launch of pksubban.com as the starting point for Phase Two since it was such a monumental moment for his brand.

Subban was a hockey star from the day he was drafted, but he lacked celebrity status in the early stages of his career. One can speculate that one of Subban’s most common categories in Phase One was *Celebrity* because he wished to gain celebrity
status and brand power that he lacked. Ohanian (1990) uses the Source Attractiveness Model to measure celebrity and notes, “trustworthiness of the communicator” leads to celebrity status. Existing research also demonstrates that posting with well-known celebrities adds to an individuals’ credibility as a celebrity himself (e.g., Besharat, 2010; Wasburn, Till & Priluck, 2000). Referring back to Washburn et al. (2000), Subban utilized a co-branding method to increase his celebrity status. He attached himself to already-established celebrities to transfer the positive associations of the larger and more established celebrity figure. He used photos of himself with celebrities and famous friends to build up his followers to increase the magnitude of his online community and his credibility as a celebrity. According to Washburn and colleagues (2000) and Besharat (2010) co-branding is beneficial to all parties involved, whether or not the original brands are perceived as having high or low brand equity (their brand equity simply increases if it was already low when paired with a high-equity partner).

In their research on celebrity co-branding, Ilicic and Webster (2011) found that even when a celebrity is associated with a product or brand, consumers sometimes construct relevant relationships between the celebrity and the brand. Within the current study, as Subban co-branded himself with celebrities who have no relation to hockey or Subban’s overall brand (e.g., Kelly Ripa) consumers can draw parallels and construct relevancy of the celebrity with Subban’s brand by drawing on information they may already have in their memory of Subban and Ripa.

In summary, Subban’s brand remained mostly consistent over the course of this study which increased his brands’ authenticity, he successfully juxtaposed frontstage and backstage performances through the categories within his brand enhancing his appeal to
consumers. In addition, Subban joined a legion of athletes who are already using social media for activism, and finally Subban increased his brand equity through co-branding with celebrities throughout his Instagram profile.
References:


Chapter V: Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

One of the most important limitations acknowledged by the researcher for this particular study is the decision by the researcher to double and triple code Subban’s posts. In order to attempt to fully understand Subban’s brand on Instagram, the researcher opted to code posts in multiple categories if they had to do with several categories rather than eliminating the possibility of cross-category coding. Within the current study, 63.43% of the posts were coded within multiple categories. A future direction for social media research as well as Instagram research when using a-prior and emergent coding in particular would be to clearly identify mutually exclusive categories rather than cross-category coding. One is unable to speak confidently to the trends and consistencies when posts are coded in several different categories.

Another limitation of this study was that of accessibility. The researcher was only able to access the data that was readily available online, in the form of Instagram photos and videos. A situation could have occurred where an individual, either Subban or another party, could have deleted a post that may have been relevant to the current research; however, since it was no longer online, the researcher was not be able to use the post. The timeline of the study also created a limitation for the current research. This research took place from September 2017 to April 2018 and data was only be collected within the parameters of the timeline (from August 2013 to January 2018). There could have been posts outside the timeline, subsequent to January 2018, that could have impacted the findings.
Another limitation of this research project is that the findings are not necessarily transferrable to other athletes or platforms. The data collected and analyzed for the present study is focused on Subban as an athlete, although some findings may prove to be somewhat beneficial to other athletes from different sports and leagues. Similarly, the analysis of the content on Subban’s Instagram account is only applicable to Instagram as a platform (i.e., the findings will not be transferrable to other platforms such as Twitter due to the text-based content of the social media).

Additionally, the researcher has acknowledged that it is possible that Subban was not in complete control of his Instagram or social media channels. It is possible that he could have a professional, or team of professionals working on his brand image through his social media channels – particularly after P.K.S.S. Management was created. They could equally have been controlling or considerably influencing his Instagram posts, dictating what he posted and when he posted his content. There was no way to determine whether or not Subban himself was posting his own content.

Additionally, it is important to note that the researcher did not have access to Subban and did not know precisely what he wished to share with his followers via his Instagram account. The researcher used Subban’s website as a proxy to determine the important categories of his brand. Without communication with Subban himself there is no possibility to speak to the motivations or reasons for which he posted under certain categories more than others on Instagram.

Finally, the researcher opted to segment Subban’s brand into three phases in order to better understand the various stages of Subban’s brand. Each phase came to a conclusion at the occurrence of a turning point in Subban’s brand development, for
example, the official re-launch of his website, and his trade to the Nashville Predators. These two events were influential in Subban’s brand and therefore the researcher felt that they would be the most effective moments at which to end the phases.

**Delimitations**

The researcher had put in place certain delimitations to narrow the scope of the study, as well as to put in place boundaries pertaining to time. First, the researcher decided that Subban is the ideal subject for this study because of his level of activity on his social media channels. Subban actively showcases the various parts of his life as an athlete, a family man, a businessman and a philanthropist. Subban is among the most active players on social media, even if he is not the league’s most talented player. While the researcher recognizes that no one single player or athlete can provide universal knowledge on the topic of athlete human branding, studying Subban is a starting point, and perhaps a segue into online self-branding within individual hockey athletes.

Next, the researcher deemed Instagram the most appropriate platform for data collection because of its visual nature and the versatility of the app. Subban was very active on Instagram, posting approximately five times per week which provided a suitable amount of data for the study. The rising popularity of Instagram among Millennials is a draw for those who wish to study social media and online communications. Though the selection of only one social media platform for this study may have narrowed the scope of the research as well as the content covered in this study, it did provide the researcher with an in-depth perspective of how Instagram in particular, can be used as a tool for human branding.
Lastly, the researcher put in place a timeline for the current study. The data was collected via Instagram, in the form of photos and videos, and was collected between December 2017 and February 2018. The posts date from Subban’s first Instagram post in August of 2013 to January 2018. The researcher studied a five-year time period in order to track changes and consistencies throughout Subban’s human brand.
Chapter VI: Conclusion & Future Directions

The purpose of this research was to explore the ways in which P.K. Subban uses Instagram to communicate his brand to his followers through a self-presentation lens as well as determine the various elements of his brand. Through a case study of P.K. Subban’s Instagram account, the researcher determined the various elements of Subban’s brand, as well as his brands’ shifts from 2013 to 2018. The researcher determined that Subban’s changing circumstances influenced his human brand by changing what he posted about in each phase.

The researcher began with the six categories present on Subban’s website (Life, Philanthropy, Style, Business, Fitness and Press) as the foundational pillars of Subban’s brand. These categories acted as the starting point for the a priori coding process and each additional element that was found in Subban’s brand was categorized as emergent. By separating Subban’s brand into three phases, each defined by a significant life or career event, the researcher was able to compare phases to determine the evolution of how he depicts his brand on Instagram throughout his career.

Each of the three phases yielded different results, each noteworthy in their own ways however over the course of this study, Subban’s brand remained consistent in content. The consistency he exemplified throughout his brand is beneficial to his branding efforts in that brand consistency ensures perceived authenticity from consumers (Moulard, Garrity & Rice, 2014). Subban was consistent in communicating Life and Hockey throughout each of the phases of his brand which juxtaposed his frontstage and backstage personas which appeals to consumers. In addition to remaining consistent throughout his brand, Subban also took part in athlete activism through social media.

through the communication of his Blueline Buddies program. Lastly, Subban enhanced his brand image and brand equity through associating himself (or co-branding) with celebrities and posting photos or videos with them.

Due to the limitations and parameters of this study there are some elements of Subban’s human brand that might remain uncovered. For example, with a larger study there is an opportunity to examine additional social media (e.g. Twitter) to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Subban’s human brand, and to determine whether or not the findings from the current study are transferable to additional forms of communication from Subban’s human brand. A future direction for this study or any study similar to it would be to interview the athlete directly about his or her motivations for posting on Instagram. It may yield different results than simply studying the content, or it may reinforce speculation and assumptions about posting motivation and reasoning.

Additionally, Subban’s brand has evolved yet again since the conclusion of the data collection for this study. Subban has publicly announced his romantic relationship with American Olympic skier Lindsey Vonn and now frequently posts about the Olympian on his Instagram account. Much like in Phase One, this celebrity association can influence his brand significantly, adding to his own celebrity status. The two have since graced the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* Fashionable 50 issue, walking hand-in-hand, wearing formal attire (Lisanti, 2018).

The current state of sport is in need of more research in athlete branding. Michael Jordan for example, still earns $100 million a year from Nike and other brand partners, 15 years after his retirement from professional basketball (Badenhausen, 2015). The Jordan brand represented over half (58%) of the shoe market in 2014 and his brand has
shown a blend of consistency and evolution (Badenhausen, 2015). Athlete promotion does not benefit only the athlete and their corporate sponsor, as has been mentioned previously, but also the affiliated leagues and teams. In July 2018, Major League Baseball (MLB) Commissioner Rob Manfred discussed All-Star Mike Trout’s missed opportunities in self-branding: “I think we could help him make his brand very big” (Dickey, 2018). Manfred and other leaders in professional sports want star players to engage in self-branding efforts to establish a co-brand relationship between the league and its players, benefiting both parties. Athletes can begin this by building their online presence and therefore, creating the foundations for their human brands. Branding’s present and foreseeable future shifted from older mediums to the online world, with a heavy emphasis on social media. Subban has joined this movement and his brand thrives in this environment. Although he remained mostly consistent in the content of his brand throughout this study, the posting patterns that emerged from the various phases in his brand demonstrated that the focus of his brand shifted with each change in his environment, particularly when it came to athlete activism. Subban communicates each part of his brand to his followers through his Instagram account and serves as a prime example of how athletes should be using social media to communicate their brand.
References:


Chapter VII: Literature Review

Carlson and Donovan (2013) found that consumers viewed athletes as brands with unique personalities. Through their research, they determined that “brand personality” (or brand image) increases consumer identification with, or attachment to, an individual athlete and therefore, increased team-related consumption behaviours (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). This research suggests the ways in which fans view individual athletes has altered; they are no longer simply athletes or even entities that are part of a larger whole that is the sports team, and league. Athletes can be their own brands with very unique brand personalities. In order to grasp this ever-evolving concept of the athlete as a brand, literature from various fields was analyzed and thematically grouped, including the foundations of marketing and branding, communications and social media branding, as well as literature pertaining to athletes as individual brands, and more specifically, P.K. Subban.

Brands/Branding:

Understanding the foundations of marketing and branding is crucial to comprehending the athlete as a human brand. These foundations have been applied (purposefully or not) by individual teams as well as athletes in building their brands. According to Shank (2009), the branding process allows organizations to distinguish themselves from others in the marketplace. This differentiation aims to impact consumer habits, including increasing attendance, merchandise sales or participation. Within the branding process, there are various pillars that allow organizations to impact consumer behaviour; these include, brand awareness, brand image, brand equity and brand loyalty. Brand awareness ensures that consumers in the desired target market are
conscious of the brand and remember the name. Brand image includes the consumers’ thoughts and feelings surrounding the brand. The brand image is considered the “personality” of the brand. Brand equity refers to the perceived value (value of the product or good in the mind of the consumer) of the brand itself. In most cases, the perceived value of a branded product is much higher than its generic equivalent. Finally, brand loyalty refers to the loyalty of a brands’ consumers and their likeliness to repurchase from the brand. Ross, James & Vargas (2006) and Shank (2009) note that entertainment, authenticity, fan bonding, and history and tradition are all determining factors of brand loyalty. Through his or her social media channels, an athlete may enhance loyalty among his followers in communicating factors of authenticity and increase the bond that followers feel towards him through his posts.

As previously noted in this review of the literature, brand awareness is the first element of the branding process. Aaker (1991), Miloch (2010) and Shank (2009) refer to brand awareness as the ability of a potential buyer or consumer to recognize or recall a brand or brand name in the marketplace. Brand awareness can be thought of as a continuum with three levels of awareness. The first and lowest level of awareness is recognition. The next level, recall, exists when consumers can recall the name of a brand unaided. This level is associated with a much stronger brand awareness than the previous level. The third and final level is top-of-mind and it is the highest level on the continuum. Top-of-mind brands have one of the most important aspects of brand recognition; familiarity, which is something not every brand can achieve (Aaker, 1991). In the sport setting, athletes, teams and organizations should strive to be a top-of-mind brand when consumers think of a certain product. For example, if a consumer were to think of the
New England Patriots of the National Football League (NFL), the first player that would come to mind naturally will, in all likelihood, be Tom Brady. Although Brady can be top-of-mind when consumers think of the Patriots, this is more than likely due to his talent on the field rather than his efforts in developing his human brand through social media.

In the case of products, familiarity can influence the consumers’ decision (Aaker, 1991). In the sport setting, fans are often drawn to a team or athlete that has strong similarity to them rather than an athlete who exemplifies opposite or conflicting values and characteristics (Carlson, Donovan & Cumiskey, 2009). According to Griffitt (1966), personality similarity has a significant impact on interpersonal attraction. In his study based on self-comparisons, he concluded that a celebrity’s similarity and/or dissimilarity to ones’ own personality has a significant impact on ones’ degree of attraction to said celebrity or individual. Social attraction also plays a role in the attraction of an athlete. In their study of fan motivations for following athletes on Twitter, Frederick, Lim, Clavio and Walsh (2012) found that when an athlete appears more approachable in his or her social media presence, followers view that athlete as someone who could fit into the fans’ social circle, or someone with whom they can have a relationship (Frederick et al., 2012).

Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer and Exler (2008) highlighted the importance of brand image for fan loyalty in a professional team sport setting. To ensure fan loyalty, the authors argue that first, a strong brand image is necessary. Brand image also consists of product and non-product related attributes (Bauer, et al., 2008; Miloch, 2010; Ross et al., 2006). **Product-related brand attributes** are the ingredients that make up the core product or brand (i.e. star player, other players, head coach and staff). The **non-product related brand attributes** are external aspects of the core product that relate to its
consumption, which may include team history, traditions, logo colours and stadium
(Bauer et al., 2008; Ross et al., 2006).

Increasingly, sport organizations realize the importance of brand management
and apply strategies to increase their brand equity to remain competitive in the
marketplace (Miloch, 2010). These strategies apply to organizations as well as human
brands. According to Parmentier and Fischer (2012), a strong professional image can
create substantial brand equity for the athlete or celebrity, without the need for a strong
public and mainstream media presence (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012; Walsh & Williams,
2017). David Beckham is one of the most globally recognized athletes and has developed
a successful human brand through his professional image as well as the proliferation of
his brand in mainstream media and he has strong brand equity due to his sustained
visibility and uniqueness in the eyes of soccer and media consumers (Parmentier &
Fischer, 2012). By using the branding process (or elements of the process), knowingly or
not, and carefully crafting and successfully managing his professional brand image,
Beckham has become one of the most recognizable human brands in sport (Parmentier &
Fischer, 2012).

Scholars who study brand loyalty note that it may also help to secure an
organizations’ fan loyalty, even when the core product’s (or team’s) performance
struggles (Aaker, 1991; Gladden & Funk, 2001). Furthermore, it creates the opportunity
for product extensions, beyond the main product; these can come in the form of, for
example, merchandise and special events, and reduces the product’s or team’s
vulnerability to competitive action (Aaker, 1991; Gladden & Funk, 2001). According to
Bauer and colleagues (2008), there are two dimensions of fan (or brand) loyalty. First, the
attitudinal dimension of fan loyalty refers to the fans’ psychological commitment and emotional attachment to a team or organization. Fans show a high level of **attitudinal loyalty** if their commitment to a team is unrelenting and immune to the criticism of others. Bauer et al. (2008) note that within the attitudinal dimension of fan loyalty is a fans’ concern for the future well-being of their team. Second, the behavioural dimension of fan loyalty is comprised of **behavioural loyalty** and behavioural intentions. Some of these activities include “attending the favourite club’s games live in the stadium, watching the favourite club’s games on television, consuming other club-related media, purchasing club merchandise, wearing the colours or logo of the favourite club, and trying to convince others that the favourite club should be supported” (Bauer et al., 2008, p. 208). These behavioural aspects of fan loyalty also include positive word-of-mouth and informal communication concerning all aspects of the favourite team (Bauer et al., 2008).

The behavioural aspects of fan loyalty are significant because they keep fans engaged with the brand, sharing information with others via word-of-mouth about the brand or individual, and purchasing merchandise from said brand or individual (Bauer et al., 2008). Part of an athletes’ popularity and success as a human brand can be attributed to his or her loyal fans. Individuals who fall within the behavioural dimension of fan loyalty exemplify behavioural intentions, wherein the fans purchase merchandise related to the brand, purchase tickets to attend games in which the athlete plays. On the other hand, those who have a strong emotional attachment to the athlete and his or her human brand fall into the attitudinal dimension of fan loyalty, wherein they support the brand regardless of critics, from others, and wavering team or individual athlete performance (Bauer et al, 2008).
The foundations of branding have been applied to North American professional sport, in particular, through the example provided by Fortunato (2008) from the NFL. Fortunato (2008) found that Pete Rozelle, commissioner of the NFL from 1960 to 1989, applied elements of the branding process (later materialized by Shank [2005; 2009]) to the league in order to expand the NFL’s overall brand awareness and increase fan loyalty for the NFL brand (Fortunato, 2008). Later in his career, Rozelle developed NFL Charities in 1973, which according to him, was one of his most meaningful achievements. Non-sport entities have taken to the sports world to create new advertising opportunities with sport leagues, teams, and even athletes. These mutually beneficial partnerships in the form of sport sponsorships “can often lead to significant revenue generation opportunities for both parties and have a lasting impact on consumers’ brand perceptions” (Miloch, 2010, p. 8). In addition to creating an NFL branded charity, Rozelle found that association with sponsors enhanced the league’s brand image and brand personality. He fostered a partnership between the NFL and the United Way, which began a mutually beneficial relationship between the two brands; creating positive publicity for the NFL and the leagues’ star players and creating a gateway into the sports world for the United Way charity (Fortunato, 2008). The same way that Pete Rozelle applied elements of the branding process to the NFL as a brand, athletes and individuals have been applying this process to their personal brands. By ensuring that fans are aware of them, following them on social media, purchasing their products (or the products of their teams), individual athletes and celebrities can enhance their human brand awareness, brand image, brand loyalty, brand equity.
Social Media Branding:

Social media is a way in which consumers can communicate and interact with brands, teams, athletes, celebrities, and everyone in between. Consumers can comment, reply, mention (@username), direct message, and like and share posts from their favourite brands or celebrities. Social media scholars have defined social media as the various platforms and digital communities upon which fans can create and share their own content within the given network and interact directly with their favourite teams and athletes, due to the two-way nature of social media (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010; Billings, Butterworth & Turman, 2015).

“Social media, by accident more than anything else, is providing this new dialogue that is counterintuitive to the basic tenets of marketing. Fans are beginning to expect their favourite teams and athletes to communicate via these channels” (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010, p. 397). Athletes use social networking sites such as Twitter to communicate directly with fans rather than have their messages altered by public relations or other departments within the organization or media entities (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2010). Individual athletes and celebrities are not the only ones using social media as a vehicle for communication; brands use social media to interact with consumers, rather than to them, which changes the relationship between producer and consumer (Hambrick et al., 2010). This two-way communication between consumers and brands strengthens the brand community surrounding the organization.

Social media is not only a place for communication between consumers and brands, “but as a space for a brand or organization to be real, just as its consumers or fans are” (Armstrong, Delia & Giardina, 2016, p. 146). Armstrong et al., (2016) mention that
brands can now be seen as being “real” thanks to social media. Brands and organizations now have a voice and can interact with the consumer on a casual platform. In the past, a team would be covered by a set of reporters who would follow the team regularly and document press releases or special statements to report to the fans. However, recently, sports teams (such as the NHLs’ Los Angeles Kings) have been able to become a part of their own brand community using social media. In 2015, the Kings organization used Twitter to communicate with fans and followers and has since created a vast online community that supports its brand, stretching far beyond the confines of Twitter (Armstrong et al., 2016). By being authentic and demonstrating brand personality through its tweets, the Kings organization was able to forge relationships with current and potential Twitter followers and fans (Armstrong et al., 2016). Authenticity, in this case, pertains to the consumers’ perception that the webpage with which the interact is the official team or brand site (Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly, 2013). The most successful brands and organizations use social media to focus more on being relatable and truthful rather than promotional, as well as to interact directly with consumers (Armstrong et al., 2016).

While social media presence can add to popularity, an athlete’s followers can be attributed to the Source Attractiveness Model (McGuire, 1985). The model suggests that the effectiveness of a message is accredited to the similarity, familiarity and liking of the source, or celebrity endorser. In particular, an athletes’ online activity, interaction and communication with fans through social media can make him or her familiar and likeable to fans. Furthermore, scholars have used this model (McGuire, 1985) and others with great success (Ohanian, 1990; Simmers, Damron-Martinez & Haytko, 2009) to determine
the effectiveness of an endorser as well as the likeability of the source. Although scholars have found that this method of assessing credibility and likeability has been proven successful in the past due to a general measure of physical attractiveness, researchers agree that this method is flawed due to the subjectivity of physical attractiveness. This method of research has its downfalls, however one could assume that Subban’s physical attractiveness (Chen & Stryker, 2014; Daily Hive Staff, 2017) has likely impacted, if not minimally, his credibility as a source and his popularity as a human brand.

“Instagram currently has more robust targeting capabilities, and the channel thrives from high-quality photos, typically taken from a unique perspective” (Patel, 2016, para. 13). The Millennial sports fan continually checks social media feeds and keeps updated with his or her favourite sport team on Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and other social media websites and apps (Wang, Niiya, Mark, Reich & Warschauer, 2015). This generation of sports fan communicates through the visual language of photos, videos, emojis and memes. They prefer to consume bite-sized highlights, short videos and humourous content that can be viewed and shared on the go, wherever they may find themselves (Cobb, 2015). This generations’ preference for personalized content creates massive opportunities for sports leagues, teams and even individual athletes (Cobb, 2015).

Social media is a tool that individuals, and more specifically, athletes, can use to build their individual brands, foster relationships with current and potential sponsors as well as actively interact with current and potential fans and followers (Geurin, 2016). In a study conducted on the social media consumption surrounding the 2016 Rio Summer Olympic Games, the SportBusiness Group (2017) concluded that in the United States,
53% of individuals that followed with the Olympics, followed the competition and results via Facebook. Seventy percent of the individuals who followed along on Facebook were between the ages of 18 and 24. The numbers are similar across the board for Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat as well, and of those that followed the Games via Instagram, 45% were between the ages of 18-24 (SportBusiness Group, 2017). Having stated this, one can conclude that young people, in particular Millennial sport fans, have a certain reliance on social media. If one wishes to target Millennials as a group, social media and especially Instagram, have proven the most effective. Perhaps this targeting capability is one reason why brands and athletes manipulate social media to self-brand.

Geurin (2016) suggests that athletes should develop a personal brand on social media that will allow them to promote their sponsors as well as create a bond with their followers and fans, increasing their brand equity. Researchers have proven that sponsor-related posts receive roughly the same amount of post engagements as non-sponsor-related posts, proving that followers were not opposed to sponsor-related posts (Geurin, 2016; Geurin-Eagleman & Clavio, 2015). Athletes can use social media to promote their own brands and sponsors, as well as those that sponsor the team and league for which they play.

According to Watkins and Lee (2016), the use of social media can increase brand awareness and communicate a brand’s identity to its social media followers. Watkins and Lee’s (2016) study examined how a large collegiate athletic program in the southern United States used text-based social media (Twitter) and visual-based social media (Instagram) to communicate with fans and followers. Through this study, the authors identified Instagram as a social media platform better suited for communicating the
organizations’ **brand identity** and respondents were more inclined to react to Instagram content over Twitter content. In addition, visual-based social media platforms like Instagram are more successful in communicating brand personality (Patel, 2016; Watkins & Lee, 2016). With more than 1 billion users, 165 million of those users are sports fans, meaning they follow at least one sports-related account, with the average Instagram sports fan following eight sports accounts, six being individual athletes (Patel, 2016).

Visual-based social media is the ideal platform to share athlete and team authentic experiences, communicate personalities, and engage with fans (Patel, 2016).

**Athlete Brands:**

Human brands differ from object brands due to the feelings that they invoke. A human brand is intangible and replicates a human being, while an object brand is simply an inanimate object, making it more difficult for the organization to create an attachment between the brand and the consumer (Thomson, 2006). While object brands are representations of the object and the images and values that an organization wishes it to convey, “a person brand can be considered to be the set of associations identified with a particular person” (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012, p. 107). Athletes and celebrities can build their human brands to distinguish themselves from others and provide them with opportunities they would not have normally received, such as endorsements. Walsh and Williams (2017) and Kristiansen and Williams (2015) found that athletes who create a strong brand can shape the perceptions of consumers, creating a connection, or bond, between the athlete and the consumer (Walsh & Williams, 2017; Kristiansen & Williams, 2015). Consumers are more likely to identify with athletes who have a strong public image and who are unique within their sport or who stand out from other athletes within
and outside of their sport (Walsh & Williams, 2017). This bond can often transfer to the organization and strengthen the connection between consumer and the organization (Walsh & Williams, 2017).

While most celebrities are in public and receive much media attention, not every celebrity is seen by consumers as appealing; some are more appealing and welcoming than others (Lunardo, Gergaud & Livat, 2015). The authors suggest this is due to the celebrities’ personality, either having a positive or negative impact on the celebrities’ appeal with the public. While sophistication, sincerity, competence and excitement contribute positively to the celebrities’ appeal, rudeness impacts it negatively (Lunardo et al., 2015). When looking at athletes or celebrities as human brands, we can identify these qualities as part of their brand personality. The positive qualities of a human brands’ personality can lead to increased consumer behaviour (Carlson & Donovan, 2013).

Lunardo et al. (2015) found that sophistication had no effect on the likeability of famous athletes, and sincerity does not impact television personalities. While television and movie personalities’ appeal was found to increase over time, that of famous musicians remained consistent over time, and famous athlete’s appeal decreased over time (Lunardo et al., 2015).

According to Moulard, Garrity and Rice (2014), an individuals’ perception of authenticity has an impact on a celebrities’ likeability as well. They define authenticity as “the perception that a celebrity behaves according to his or her true self” (Moulard et al., 2014, p. 175). Although researchers mention it is impossible for one to know when an individual is being truly authentic, it is the perception of authenticity that will either positively or negatively impact a human brand (Moulard et al., 2014). Authors note that
rarity and stability have significant positive impacts on the individuals’ perceived authenticity. Rarity, being “the degree to which the celebrity is seen as uncommon,” (Moulard et al., 2014, p. 177) and stability referring to “the degree to which the celebrity is perceived as unwavering” (p. 178). Each of these categories is comprised of three sub-dimensions; for rarity, they are talent, discretion and originality, and for stability, they are consistency, candidness and morality. Interestingly, the study in question determined that younger individuals are more concerned with rarity than older individuals, who tend to rely more on stability (Moulard et al., 2014).

There exists a significant gap in the literature surrounding athletes as human brands and their efforts in marketing themselves as such. Research exists on athletes as human brands in European football, with David Beckham and Ryan Giggs as the focus (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). Parmentier and Fischer (2012) conducted a case study on two European football players and their efforts to build brand equity through their personal image (e.g., biographies, autobiographies, postings from official websites, etc.) and their mainstream media persona (e.g., media coverage of the athletes such Sports Illustrated, tabloid coverage, etc.). While Parmentier and Fischer (2012) attempt to uncover Beckham and Giggs’ brand equity through media outlets that are out of the players’ control, the study lacks in that the content was not curated by the athletes. There is a gap in the literature when discussing the ways in which athletes present themselves from a marketing standpoint. Additionally, there is a lack of literature on North American (in particular, Canadian) professional sport leagues and athletes. The researcher will aim to begin to bridge this gap while bringing the human branding research into the hockey world.
Performances and The Presentation of Self:

As theorist Goffman (1956) famously put, “the individual offers his performance and puts on his show ‘for the benefit of other people’” (p. 10). Within his concept of the presentation of self, he mentions two extremes. First, the performer can be completely convinced that the reality he or she is presenting is the real reality, where they believe they are being sincere. On the other hand, the performer may not believe the presentation is real at all. When this occurs, the individual typically has no belief in the act they are performing and has no concern for the beliefs of the audience, in which case, Goffman (1956) calls this individual cynical. Though this theory may be dated, it has been applied to many studies concerning social media and the performance of self (Colapinto & Benecchi, 2014; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Marshall, 2010; Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Tseëlon, 1992). Often, individuals will post content on social media that they know their audience wants to see or is expecting from them.

To better illustrate this, it is necessary to invoke Goffman’s (1956) theory of front and backstage performances. Goffman (1956) refers to the activity of an individual during the presence of a particular audience, as a ‘performance’. The front part of the individual is the public region that defines the situation and performs for a set audience (Goffman, 1956; Tseëlon, 1992). This performance cannot take place unless the individual has set the scene and gathered the appropriate audience. Goffman (1956) provides the example of a house to illustrate his theory. The living room of a house can be seen as the ‘front’. Individuals spend time preparing the front section of a house when expecting visitors, while the kitchen, second floor or bedrooms do not get nearly as much attention in preparation. People tend to keep audience members, or in this case visitors, in
the front portion of the house in order to project and present a desired performance. In this day and age, this particular setting can be social media, and the individual’s followers can be seen as the audience. Once an individual displays a performance belonging to a specific social class or role, there are stereotypical expectations from the individual to perform and to continue to perform during the remainder of his or her time before the audience.

Contrary to the front, the back region is a private space where an individual fosters the performance they wish to present to the audience (Goffman, 1956; Tseëlon, 1992). This is where the individual can relax and step out of the role they are playing for the audience. Goffman (1956) mentions that parts of the front can be adjusted and edited to remove flaws or imperfections when no one is present to see them. In the back, or private region, the performer can “step out of character” (Goffman, 1956, p. 70). In the present, parallels can be drawn between Goffman’s version of the back region, and the social media back region. This editing and perfecting of the performance and presentation can take place on an individuals’ mobile phone, where they are constantly editing and perfecting photos and posts before they release them to their audience. Marshall (2010) draws parallels between the props and costumes used on stage to the posts, images and messages of a social media account such as Twitter or Instagram. These mediums become ways to construct a “character for a kind of ritual of the performance of the self” (Marshall, 2010, p. 40). Constant touch-ups and edits ensure that the performer presents the best version of themselves to their audience, as they adhere to stereotypical expectations from the audience due to social classes or roles they are playing.
Pre-existing literature (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Lebel & Danylchuck, 2012; Smith & Sanderson, 2015) applying Goffman’s (1956) self-presentation theory to sport often analyzes collective groups of individual athletes (i.e. professional athletes, Olympians, etc.) through a gendered lens (male vs. female performances). While Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) and Smith and Sanderson (2015) examine a gendered analysis of professional and Olympic athletes’ self-performance through the use of Instagram, Lebel and Danylchuck (2012) examined Twitter as a platform for gendered self-presentation in tennis stars. Lebel and Danylchuck (2012) found that while athlete image construction was similar between genders, female athletes were more likely to present themselves as the brand manager and male athletes present themselves in the role of a sport fan. Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) found complimentary findings; female athletes were more likely to present themselves in private settings, while male athletes were more likely to be photographed in a variety of settings, encouraging greater fan engagement. While authors Colapinto and Benecchi (2014) narrow the scope of their study with one individual athletes’ use of Twitter and the presentation of self, the study focuses on crisis or reputation management tactics on behalf of the athlete. There is limited research in terms of individual athletes’ use of social media platforms combined with Goffman’s self-presentation theory to examine athlete brands.
References:


Appendix A

Figure 1: P.K. Subban in a banner advertisement on the RW&CO. website (rw-co.com, n.d.)
Appendix B

Figure 2: P.K. Subban and his father, Karl, showing off Subban-branded apparel (Subban, 2017c)

Figure 3: Example of Subban-branded apparel (Subban, 2017b)
Appendix C

Figure 4: Break Down of the Categories in Phase One
Figure 5: Break Down of the Categories in Phase Two
Appendix E

Figure 6: Break Down of the Categories in Phase Three
Appendix F

Figure 7: PPM Frequency, Phases One Through Three
Appendix G

“IT’S IMPORTANT THAT EVERYONE SEES THE DIFFERENT PARTS OF P.K”

Figure 8: Photo taken from pksubban.com (pksubban.com, n.d.)
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