



# Score a tweet and post a goal: Social media recipes for sports stars

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**Abstract** Sports performance is not the unique ingredient of a sports star's market value. Some gifted players are undermined by weak media exposure while some less talented players who actively engage in social media and attract fans in millions benefit from exorbitant contracts. This research conceptualizes the effect of social media in the sports business and analyzes the recipes that lead to high market value for sports stars. This study uses qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) on a sample of 95 top soccer players in Europe. The empirical results reveal that sports performance and social media activity are both necessary but insufficient conditions for a high market value condition. This research provides a roadmap for managers and sports stars to navigate in the social media arena.

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## 1. World's highest paid athletes on social media

In November 2014 *Forbes* published a list of the world's highest paid athletes. Cristiano Ronaldo, a Portuguese soccer player who plays for the Spanish club Real Madrid, is second on the list behind Floyd Mayweather, an American professional boxer. Ronaldo is, however, the unquestionable social media leader with 110 million followers (Badenhausen, 2014a). Kobe Bryant, an American professional

basketball player for the Los Angeles Lakers, is also one of the top five on the list. Born in 1978, Bryant is close to the end of his basketball career, yet his salary is almost eight times higher than any other basketball player (Badenhausen, 2014b). Interestingly, he also takes fifth place on the list of the most popular players on social media, where he regularly posts updates on Facebook and tweets on Twitter. In comparison, Derrick Rose, a basketball player for the Chicago Bulls who was born in 1988, has less than half the number of social media followers of Bryant and only 46 tweets compared with Bryant's 871 (as of March 2015). Rose ranks no. 13 among the 100 highest paid athletes. Bryant and Rose have similar field performance, and despite the fact that Bryant seems to be overpaid by sports standards, the

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athletes' online popularity is an asset that leads to a higher salary.

Social media (SM) is an excellent pension plan for retired stars. Old athletes—at least in soccer terms—can still profit from advertisement contracts and a social media facelift. Dewhurst (2015) reports that David Beckham is the most popular individual on Instagram ever. The retired English captain was the fastest to earn 1 million followers in his SM debut. In addition, his account was the fastest ever to reach 5 million followers, doing so in just 3 days.

Presence and awareness in social media ensures soccer players a global reach. Similar to large corporations, athletes are able to use online networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to interact with their current fans as well as to attract new ones. Sanderson (2011) argued that the role of social media in the sports business needs further research and better understanding. A majority of athletes, managers, and media advisors have a long way to go before they can develop an effective social media strategy.

This study addresses the relevance of social media and sports performance in the market value of global sports stars. We present an empirical analysis to reinforce our argument that social media and professional performance are both relevant for the contract value of public figures. As a global phenomenon, soccer is one of the most popular disciplines on social media. Therefore, we analyzed a sample of approximately 100 worldwide soccer players with respect to their media activity (number of Twitter and Facebook followers), professional achievements (assists and goals), and contract value (dollars).

Regression analysis provides hardly any practical hints for field practitioners because it is insufficient to unravel the complex relationships of social media. In today's interconnected world, the paths of the social media labyrinth are often inscrutable; different and often contradictory data lead to similar outcomes. This phenomenon is palpable in sports, but it is not exclusive to sports management. Just as less talented players are often media darlings, average CEOs can compensate for their corporate weakness with active social engagement. This article focuses on sports, specifically soccer; however, the lessons learned from our study may be easily translated to a more general business horizon.

This research contributes to a new perspective on social media. The study presented herein provides practical recipes for social media management in the sports business. To formulate the suggestions, we leaned on complexity theory through fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) to study the role of social media in contract value creation. The player's value is often subjective, asymmetrical,

and complex, leading to multiple paths for the same solution. Some excellent players are poorly paid while some mediocre players gain high contracts. QCA allows for explaining an outcome with various complex solutions. This qualitative analysis complements the one-size-fits-all solutions of traditional regression analysis.

## 2. Three powers of social media

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) state that SM serves as a branding tool not only for large corporations but also for small- and medium-size companies, non-commercial organizations, and governmental institutions. However, some researchers have noticed that social media also plays an important role for individuals who build their personal brand through online social networking (OSN) (Harris & Rae, 2011). SM experts argue that it is crucial to control online identity (Schawbel, 2009). Through SM platforms, a post, tweet, or comment published in an online network and easily popularized by a number of users may influence one's image and sometimes even cause damage to a business or professional, or social marginalization. A reputation built for years may be undermined or lost with a single tweet; furthermore, an image far from reality can be created.

Researchers have dissected different areas of SM engagement and participation. Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011) argued that OSN platforms support seven functional areas: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. Parent, Plangger, and Bal (2011) referred to the six levels of progressive participation: viewing, forwarding, commenting, creating, moderating, and arbitrating. Drawing on these concepts, we develop a framework of three powers of social media that might prove useful for leaders, influencers, and global athletes.

### 2.1. Power of informing on social media

As our study concerns global stars, virtual settings should serve as a very good tool to show where these actors are and what they will do in the near future. For example, on Ronaldo's Facebook profile, posts about past meetings with fans and future events in which Ronaldo will participate collect the highest number of likes—usually more than 1 million.

Top sports stars need to find a balance between protecting their identity and sharing interesting news from their private lives. Scholars point out that online fans avidly expect information about athletes' personal lives on SM (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2014; Pegoraro,

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