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Football players' perceived trustworthiness as an influencer when endorsing competing brands and the relationship with their personal brand value

Bachelor Thesis
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Abstract

Introduction: Nowadays, football players are particularly useful for brands to use as influencers in order to present their products to their consumers due to the huge amounts of online fans and followers of these football players. However, since the personal sponsors of a football player often differ from the sponsor of the club they are playing for, these football players endorse competing brands on their social media. Therefore, the trustworthiness of football players as influencers can be questioned.

Objectives: This research aimed at creating new qualitative insights into how football players are perceived to be trustworthiness as an influencer when endorsing competing brands via their social media. Additionally, since star players in the football industry often develop their own personal brand based on their popularity and likability, this study also aimed at discovering the relationship between a football players' personal brand value and their perceived trustworthiness as an influencer.

Method: 16 semi-structured interviews with online followers of football players were conducted. 50% of the participants were, next to an online follower of football players, also an active football player him- or herself. During the semi-structured interviews examples of social media posts of football players endorsing congruent, incongruent competing, and incongruent non-competing brands were shown to the participant. Next to that, in order to explore the relationship between football players' personal brand value and their perceived trustworthiness, the Sportstar Influencer Index of Sportstar Influencer was used.

Conclusion: The findings of this research show that endorsing competing brands on social media has a negative to neutral influence on the perceived trustworthiness of football players as influencers. However, endorsing congruent brands does contribute to a higher perceived trustworthiness. Next to that, the player's personality and expertise as well as brand image can also lead to a higher level of trustworthiness. Regarding the relationship between football players' perceived trustworthiness and their personal brand value, this research did not find a significant relationship between these two concepts. This research contributes to a better understanding of how football players can develop trustful relationships as influencers with their followers on social media by giving insight in the elements perceived to be important by the football players' followers in developing trust. Additionally, this research provides an understanding of how the endorsements of different types of brands influences the trustworthiness of football players which helps them in choosing brands to collaborate with while maintaining their followers' trust.

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1. Introduction

In order to introduce the research that is conducted, this paragraph will provide background information about the study. It will explain the theoretical and practical relevance of the research, the problem setting, the research questions that are central in this report, the research objectives and novelty of the research as well as the general outline of this report.

The rise of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube and plenty of other platforms has created a marketplace where brands easily can connect with their customers (Shirisha, 2018). Due to the popularity of social media, sport brands invest significant time and resources to maintain and improve online customer engagement and online relationships (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). The football industry is one the sport branches illustrating this. Events such as the FIFA World Cup; professional teams such as Real Madrid and Manchester United; and players such as Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo intensively integrated social media into their marketing strategies (Filo et al., 2015). Social media have become a place for brands to implement cost-efficient marketing activities through personal interaction with consumers in order to create brand-consumer relationship based on trust (Delgado-Ballester & Luis Munuera-Alemán, 2001). In this process of building trust, brands have started to use the influence of a third party to create brand awareness, which is also known as influencer marketing (IM) (Delgado-Ballester & Luis Munuera-Alemán, 2001).

IM is a collaboration between a brand and an influencer that enables the brand to present itself on the social media channels of the influencer (Aguiar & van Reijmersdal, 2018) and can be seen as an online form of word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing. WOM refers to the informal communications about the evaluation of goods and services between private parties (Anderson, 1998) and is known as an effective marketing strategy for brands (Misner, as cited in Trusov, Buckling, & Pauwels, 2009). When making purchasing decisions, consumers rely on informal and personal communication sources instead of formal and organizational communication which makes WOM marketing an effective and persuasive strategy for brands in order to present their products to their consumers (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996; Wu & Wang, 2011). This also explains why IM is used by many brands and is one of the fastest growing marketing strategies nowadays (Dahlqvist & Preiksaite, 2018).

However, according to Woods (2016), the perceived trustworthiness of an influencer is the biggest pitfall of IM. Influencers are not always fully trusted since they get paid for expressing their opinion and therefore it is questioned whether the expressed opinion is truly genuine or that the brand controls the content of it (Woods, 2016). The trustworthiness of football players as influencers can also be questioned since their personal sponsor often differs from the sponsor of the club they are playing for. These players thus endorse competing brands on social media which could lead to credibility issues (Dahlqvist & Preiksaite, 2018). In order to gain more insight into this problem of trust, this research aims to create a deeper understanding of how football players are perceived to be trustworthiness as an influencer when endorsing competing brands via social media. Next to that, star players in the football industry often develop their own personal brand based on their popularity and likability (Guschwan, 2016). Since social media are used to extend these personal brands, it is interesting to investigate the impact of football players' personal brands on their perceived trustworthiness as influencers. So, to elaborate and deepen the research on the perceived trustworthiness of

football players as influencers, the relationship between the football players' perceived trustworthiness and their personal brand value (PBV) will be investigated as well. The following research question has been formulated:

What is the relationship between a football player's perceived trustworthiness and endorsing competing brands?

Two sub-questions have been formulated in order to optimize the structure of the study and to provide a deeper understanding about the topic:

How is trust towards football players perceived by their followers when football players endorse brands as influencers?
&
How does a football player's personal brand value influence his perceived trustworthiness as an influencer?

According to Dahlqvist and Preiksaite (2018), IM is a popular research topic nowadays but is often studied through quantitative research designs. Therefore, this study aims to create new qualitative insights regarding this topic. Since, credibility and perceived trustworthiness of influencers has been studied by multiple researchers (Dahlqvist & Preiksaite, 2018; Djafarova, & Rushworth, 2017; Liu et al., 2015; Xiao, Wang, & Chan-Olmsted, 2018), also in relation with endorsing competing brands (Dahlqvist & Preiksaite, 2018), there is little novelty in this particular aspect of the research. However, investigating influencers endorsing competing brands in relation with perceived trustworthiness within the perspective of the football industry has not been studied before. Therefore, this research provides new insights into how these concepts relate to one another within the perspective of football players as influencers. Next to that, the concept of football players' PBV and its relation to their perceived trustworthiness is yet an uninvestigated relationship. Hence, this research aims to discover this relationship and tries to explain the influence of football players' PBV on their perceived trustworthiness as an influencer.

The full process of investigating football players' trustworthiness as influencers when endorsing competing brands will be further discussed in this report by answering the research questions that were just introduced. The first section of this report will consist of a theoretical framework that was written to review the main concepts and theories of social media, WOM, IM, and PBV that are relevant to the research question. Thereafter, a methodology section follows in which the full research process will be explained. It includes the study's research design; the participants and which techniques were used to sample the participants. Additionally, it will be explained how in-depth interviews were used in this study, as well as how the data is processed and analyzed. The section after that will show the results of this research in which the most striking findings of the study are discussed. Lastly, a conclusion and a discussion are written in which conclusions will be drawn from the gathered data and the research question will be answered. Next to that, suggestions are made for future directions and further research.

2. Theoretical framework

The following section of this report will discuss the relevant literature related to the concepts of social media, WOM, IM, trust and PBV. This eventually leads to a theoretical framework in which these concepts will be explored. A literature study log has been documented to exemplify the way how the literature was obtained for this theoretical framework (Appendix A).

2.1 Social media

The impact of social media on peoples' lives has significantly increased during the past years. The use of social media applications has become an important part of peoples' daily lives and most of their social interactions take place on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter (Alalwan, Rana, Dwivedi, & Algharabat, 2017). The huge expansion of social media usage created a variety of opportunities for communication and marketing activities among users, companies and organizations (Zinonos, Tsirtsis, & Tsapatsoulis, 2018). Social media have for instance opened up new dimensions of marketing in terms of customer involvement, customer relationship management and communication (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015; Saxena & Khanna, 2013) and are particularly useful for organizations to enhance a two-way communication with their customers in order to attach the customers to the organizations' brand (Alalwan et al., 2017). Additionally, it enables organizations to easily present themselves visually, verbally as well as textually towards their customers (Okazaki & Taylor, 2013). As a result of all the opportunities social media offer, according to Filo et al. (2015), about 93% of all business firms worldwide adapted their traditional marketing towards a strategy that is more focused on social media activities.

Studies into the antecedents, effects and general impact of social media on the sports landscape are still in their early stages. However, it can be stated that social media has clearly penetrated the sports industry as it did with nearly any other facet of the entertainment business (Clavio, 2011). Due to the increasing popularity of social media, sport brands invest significant time and resources to maintain and improve online customer engagement and online relationships (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). The football industry illustrates this with events such as the Fifa World Cup; professional teams such as Real Madrid and Manchester United; and players such as Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo actively using social media (Filo et al., 2015). Social media are mostly used to interact and engage with their youngest fans in order to encourage positive reactions and opinions (Siguencia, Herman, Marzano, & Rodak, 2017).

2.2 Word-of-mouth

The significant impact of opinions that are expressed on social media platforms has led to a rising popularity of WOM. Traditionally, WOM is defined as the face-to-face communication between consumers about a product, brand or service (Arndt, as cited in Gosh, Varshney, & Venugopal, 2015) and is one of the oldest still-existing marketing tools (Gosh et al., 2015). WOM is based on the creation of relevant content by consumers for brands, also referred to as user-generated content (UGC) (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011). Essentially, it is free advertising for organizations and brands triggered by customer experiences. Although brands lose control over their marketing with the increased influence of WOM, most brands see it as

a powerful marketing source and try to influence the process of it (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Kumar & Benbasat, 2006; Malthouse, Calder, Kim, & Vandenbosch, 2016; Weisfeld-Spolter, Sussan, & Gould, 2014). WOM marketing is perceived to be effective because purchasing decisions of consumers mostly rely on informal and personal communication sources, such as WOM messages, instead of formal and organizational communication (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Bickart, & Schindler, 2006). This makes WOM marketing an attractive and persuasive strategy for brands to present their products to consumers. The personal communication between consumers is perceived as trustworthy and credible because it is believed that fellow consumers have no vested interest in the product and have no intentions to manipulate other consumers (Bickart & Schindler, 2006; Wilson & Sherrell, 1993). Every year, brands still spend large sums of money on multiple types of advertising although WOM is perceived to be the most effective marketing tool and is actually cost-effective to use (Misner, as cited in Trusov et al, 2009).

WOM marketing is also a prominent feature on the internet and is known as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Along with the advancement of the internet and social media, the purchasing decisions of consumers are increasingly affected by eWOM messages (Trusov et al., 2009). Technically speaking, eWOM is any WOM communication facilitated by electronic means such as e-mails, instant messaging, blogs or social media (Ghosh et al., 2015). Nowadays, consumers have the opportunity to share their views, preferences, and experiences with others in an online environment (Trusov et al., 2009) enabling them to review brands, products and services at any time. The expressed opinion by a consumer through the internet, whether positive or negative, influences purchasing decisions of other consumers and is regarded as most effective when buying a product for the first time (Weisfeld-Spolter et al., 2014). Therefore, online consumer reviews have become of great importance for brands and organizations. Chen and Xie (2008), argue that brands should encourage positive reviews and eWOM messages as well as try to incorporate it as a new element in their marketing communication strategy.

Wakefield and Bennett (2018) explain why WOM is such an important element in the football industry. The researchers argue that sports fans use social media to express their personal experience with others not in attendance. It is therefore of great importance for football teams to provide a quality experience to fans in order to develop positive WOM on social media. According to Cuban (as cited in Wakefield & Bennet, 2018): "we [in the sports business] don't sell the game … we are in the business of selling fun and unique experiences" (p. 151). However, selling this unique fan experience to others not in attendance of the event itself has become more difficult for sport organizations, because WOM messages from peers, fans or other consumers are more trusted compared to the marketing intentions of the sports organization (Wakefield & Bennet, 2018).

2.3 Influencer marketing

IM has been developed as an extension of the (e)WOM marketing approach where brands and organizations try to engage with consumers through people with a strong base of followers on social media (Dahlqvist & Preiksaite, 2018). According to Williams (as cited in Aguiar & van Reijmersdal, 2018) IM is "the act of identifying, monitoring, engaging and measuring the role

of influencers in the market perception of a brand and its products" aiming at "building organic relationships with influencers based on a value exchange and partnership between the brand and the influencer where the goal is to deliver value to your target audience through influencers' networks" (p. 14). Aguiar and van Reijmersdal (2018) distinguish two different approaches towards IM, an advertising approach and a relationship approach. The first mentioned approach focuses on short-term marketing objectives through stimulating eWOM, product endorsement or native advertisements, whereas the goal of the second mentioned approach is to build longer and mutual relationships in order to deliver value to the target audience (Aguiar & van Reijmersdal (2018). IM is beneficial for both companies as well as the influencers. From the perspective of the companies, IM is considered as a rather inexpensive marketing strategy while at the same time directly reaching a broad and specific target group using the network of the influencer (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In exchange, the influencer receives often valuable goods or could even earn money with these social media activities (Ewers, 2017). Therefore, brands refer to IM as a mutual partnership with influencers functioning as brand ambassadors (Aguiar & van Reijmersdal, 2018).

There are several reasons for companies to use IM and based on the advantages in terms of reach, efficiency and trust. First of all, an IM campaign enables brands to reach a desired audience that is often not reached with the use of traditional marketing activities (Trusov et al, 2009). The reach of an influencer is usually measured by the number of followers they have on their social media accounts (Aguiar & van Reijmersdal, 2018). However, it is important for a brand to take the influencer's reach/engagement ratio into account since having a greater following result in lower engagement on social media posts of the influencer (Aguiar & van Reijmersdal, 2018). This means that an influencer can have a great reach but that only a few followers actually engage with the content. Secondly, the original influencer-generated content is considered as an effective marketing tool (Aguiar & van Reijmersdal, 2018). It is a cost-efficient strategy for brands when looking at the capacity of reaching a large scale of customers (Dahlqvist & Preiksaite, 2018; Shirisha, 2018; Woods, 2016) and the extensive increase in return of investment (Dahlqvist & Preiksaite, 2018; Woods, 2016). Lastly, brands can use IM in order to integrate and use the trusting relationship developed between the influencer and its audience to eventually present their brand or product to their customer in a trustworthy way (Aguiar & van Reijmersdal, 2018). The element of trust is important in IM and will therefore be further explored and separately discussed in another section of this theoretical framework.

According to Aguiar and van Reijmersdal (2018), the objectives of brands using IM can be divided into three different categories: cognitive, affective and behavioral. When brands focus on the cognitive objective, IM can be compared to pushed advertising where the main goal is to just show the brand or product and to create positive associations with it. In case of a behavioral objective, the main goal is to create a bond with the audience and let them engage with the brand or product. This can be done by encouraging the customer to perform a certain behavior by for example using activation strategies such as discount codes or sales links (Aguiar & van Reijmersdal, 2018). Next to these three objectives, Gardner (2005) argues that influencers can be utilized by brands in order to generate interest, drive action, create goodwill, establish expertise, and create dialog with consumers.

Today's IM is often linked to young and creative social media users, but this has not always been the case (Aguiar & van Reijmersdal, 2018). Before the existence of social media,

people also had an influence on the opinions and decision-making processes of others. These influential people often were celebrities because of their attractive and likeable qualities and were used by companies in order to endorse their product (Atkin & Block, as cited in Erdogan, 1999). Celebrity endorsement already took place during the late nineteenth century. During those days, the supply of celebrity endorsers was limited since it was perceived as inappropriate for stars to invest their prestige as mere brand presenters (Erdogan, 1999). This resulted in a lack of available of suitable persons willing to offer their services for commercial purposes (Kaikati, as cited in Erdogan, 1999). During the 1970's the shame in commercial exploitation faded away when the number of film and television roles expanded and the number of celebrities in commercials has reached such a level that it has been accepted as a common marketing strategy. (Erdogan, 1999).

2.3.1 Diffusion of innovation model.

The role of an influencer as opinion leader can be explained with the use of the diffusion of innovation model, shown in Figure 1. According to Uzunoğlu and Misci Kip (2014), this model argues "that an innovation is diffused through certain communication channels among different individuals over time" (p. 593). These individuals are categorized into the following five groups: innovators, early adaptors, early majority, late majority and laggards (Rogers, 2003). According to the diffusion of innovation model, influencers are the early adaptors of an innovation and are influential in spreading their positive or negative ideas to the early majority, late majority and laggards (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). From a marketing communication perspective, as an early adaptor, an influencer is particularly useful for brands and organizations in order to launch new products or introduce existing products to new markets because of their functioning as digital opinion leaders (Rogers, 2003; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). They act as role models who inspire imitation among those who observe their purchasing and consumption behavior (Flynn et al., 1996).

Flynn et al. (1996) made a distinction between the concepts opinion leadership and opinion seeking which fits within diffusion of innovation model. Opinion leadership occurs when individuals try to influence the purchasing decision of others whereas opinion seeking happens when one imitates the purchasing and consumption behavior of people they admire and seeks advice from others (Flynn et al., 1996). Opinion leaders cannot exist without opinion seekers (Flynn et al., 1996). In other words, the great influence of the early adopters, nowadays known as the digital influencers on social media, would not have existed without opinion seekers such as the laggards, late majority, and early majority.
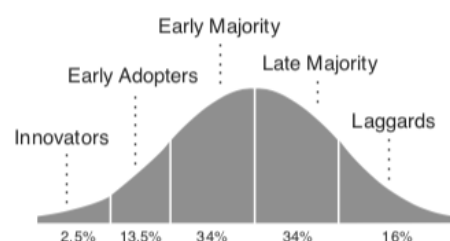

Figure 1. Overview of the diffusion of innovation model (Rogers, 2003).

2.3.2 The two-step flow theory.

Next to the diffusion of innovation model, IM corresponds with the principle of the two-step flow theory, also known as the two-step flow of communication. This theory implies that information first reaches opinion leaders who, in turn, pass the information on to those for whom they are influential (Katz, 1957). In other words, information and messages are filtered by opinion leaders and afterwards are forwarded to the public. Carr and Hayes (2014) argue that the two-step flow theory is applicable to the concept of eWOM and connects the brand with the consumer through the opinion leader. The main goal of the two-step flow theory for brands is thus to let opinion leaders, nowadays also referred to as influencers, act as intermediaries for brands in the web of social interactions between customers (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). Because the customers are interested in the influencer's content, it enables brands to communicate in a more authentic and natural way with their customers than with formal interruptive marketing messages (Aguiar & van Reijmersdal, 2018). Brands try to shape the conversation between consumers by using influencers in order to create positive associations with the brand or product (Carr & Hayes, 2014; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). However, questions can arise about the true judgements of influencers when these positive opinions are expressed about promoted products, especially when compensation is involved (Carr & Hayes, 2014). Therefore, in the following section the element of trust will be used in order to further explore the relationship between influencer and consumer, and its influence on consumer purchasing decisions.

2.4 Trust

Trust is a leading element on which a strong relationship between consumer and brand is based (Dahlqvist & Preiksaite, 2018) and is defined as a feeling of assurance or confidence that a certain performed behavior will not exploit another's vulnerability (Delgado-Ballester & Luis Munuera-Alemán, 2001). IM is often presented as being based on the 'economy of trust' by emphasizing that the audience easily can unfollow the influencer when they doubt their credibility or authenticity (Weinswig, as cited in Aguiar & van Reijmersdal, 2018). This indicates that trust is an important element in IM. Especially for brands, the perceived trustworthiness of an influencer is of great importance since customers try to reduce their perceived risk when making purchasing decisions based on their trust in the influencer endorsing the product (Aguiar & van Reijmersdal, 2018). The maximization of trust established through IM thus has a major effect on the purchasing decisions of consumers. Delgado-Ballester and Luis Munuera-Alemán (2001) state that high involvement in a consumer-brand relationship creates consumer commitment and trust which eventually leads to increasing consumer purchasing decisions. Moreover, trust established through IM can even cause impulse buying (Baird & Parasnis, 2013). For consumers to trust a brand it means that there must be a high expectancy that the brand will result in positive and good outcomes for the consumer (Delgado-Ballester & Luis Munuera-Alemán, 2001). Since IM is about creating positive associations with a brand and to encourage positive (e)WOM (Aguiar & van Reijmersdal, 2018), this marketing strategy is particularly useful to create that high expectancy of good outcomes.

According to Moore, Yang and Kim (2018), the most effective and trusted influencers are the non-celebrities. This type of influencer is explained as a knowledgeable individual in a specific niche with the power to appeal to peers (Moore at al., 2018). Their opinions are more believable since they provide consistent, useful and honest information instead of thriving on a celebrity status (Moore et al., 2018). This is substantiated by the research of Wei and Lu (2013) in which they found out that people tend to distrust celebrities as influencers because people already assumed that these celebrities get paid for endorsing the product and therefore would not express their own honest opinion. Aguiar and van Reijmersdal (2018) add that a trustworthy influencer is perceived as honest and sincere and that these characteristics are positively linked to customers' buying behavior. However, due to scandals in the past few years, the true intentions of marketing messages from brands and influencers are doubted (Moore et al., 2018). These scandals were based on consistent marketing messages that had given consumers a false sense of trust in the companies for years (Moore et al., 2018).

The relationship between the perceived trustworthiness of an influencer and endorsing competing brands is one which has been studied by only a few researchers. Two of these researchers are Dahlqvist and Preiksaite (2018) who argue that an influencer loses his or her personality when endorsing too many different brands. This results in lower levels of relatedness which eventually decreases their trustworthiness and leads to an impaired customer-relationship. Despite the fact that endorsing competing brands happens on a daily base in the football industry, there were no studies found that focused on this particular branch. Within the football industry, it is common that the personal sponsor of a football player is different than the sponsor of the team they are playing. This is the reason why these football players often endorse competing brands as influencers and, therefore, this bachelor thesis is written with the aim to create new insights into this issue. Next to that, the differences in terms of perceived trustworthiness between endorsing congruent or incongruent brands is also an uninvestigated relationship.

2.5 Personal brand value

"A brand is considered to be a set of differentiating promises that link a product to the consumer through a bundle of identifiable attributes, physical marks, emotional markers and triggers to memories of prior product experience or the assumed experience based on the reputation of the product, provider or service" (Dann & Jenssen, 2007, pp. 1636). Sports teams are good examples of brands. They try to combine disparate products such as game tickets, TV subscriptions, and merchandise with concepts like nostalgic history, local pride, performances and personalities of players as well as triumphs, in order to give these products meaning (Guschwan, 2016). Merging these concepts will form a brand where people can identify with. The more people identify with a specific club, the more desirable this club looks to others which increases the club's brand value (Parganas, Anagnostopoulos, & Chadwick, 2015). Sports teams thus use branding to promote the corporate identity of the club. However, the brand of a sport team, to some extent, also relies on the individual player brand (Guschwan, 2016). Players use branding in the form of personal branding which is about how a specific person intends to differentiate him- or herself from the competitors through a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of these (Hughes, Dann, & Neal, 2008). Personal branding

often occurs in the football industry since star players develop their own brand based on their popularity and likeability (Guschwan, 2016). It is an activity which allows them to make more money but, at the same time, also gives them the opportunity to promote themselves. Nowadays, top football players are not only part of the football event machinery but also play major roles in the advertising media and show business industry. Consequently, the power of footballers' personal brand strongly impacts their football clubs, leagues and countries of origin because of the huge fanbase they have gathered (Kucharska, 2018). Probably the best player exemplifying this nowadays is Cristiano Ronaldo, also known from his famous brand name CR7. Krooshof (2017) developed a measure to specifically calculate the PBV of football players. This measure consists of two components: the offline and online PBV. The offline PBV includes five dimensions – excitement, sophistication, ruggedness, competence, sincerity – to which different items were assigned. Based on experts rating these items, the measure creates an average score for offline PBV. This is combined with football players' online Twitter statistics, representing the online PBV of football players, eventually leading to an end score for the PBV of a football player.

Whereas for marketeers, brand value is often expressed in its economic value determined by the brand, fans think more in familial terms of it (Guschwan, 2016). Therefore, the value assigned to sports brands, whether it is a corporate entity such as a football club or a specific player, is not just rational but is also influenced by the emotional associations with the club or player. "Being a fan fulfills the needs of sharing, feeling and belonging" (Bridgewater & Stray, 2002, pp. 5-6) and thus creates a strong and loyal relationship between the fan and the brand. However, according to sport psychologists, being a sports fan is of relatively low risk. When the team or player someone is supporting performs well, the fan shares in the success of that team or player. Despite the fact that they did not contribute to this success, the tendency of such fans is to claim for themselves that they are part of the glory. However, in case of no success the fan tends to blame the players, manager or other external agents which makes being a fan as good as riskless (Bridgewater & Stray, 2002). This also indicates that the value of sports brands is highly influenced by club or player performances.

Due to the familial associations of a fan with a football brand, the football players have an unconditional steadfast online following on social media and are, therefore, particularly useful for organizations to collaborate with. It is interesting to see how this loyal relationship between football player and fan, which is based on their personal brand, influences their trustworthiness as influencer for other brands and organizations. Therefore, this study combines these concepts in order to investigate the relationship between football players' PBV and their perceived trustworthiness as influencers.

3. Methodology

In the following chapter, the methodology of the research will be discussed. This chapter will consist of an explanation of the research design, population and participants, sampling technique, procedure and data processing as well as data analysis.

3.1 Research design

The purpose of this study is to investigate football players' perceived trustworthiness as an influencer when endorsing competing brands. In order to get the most valuable data out of this study, the decision was made to make use of a qualitative research design. This type of research aims to investigate persons' lives, life experiences, behaviors, emotions, feelings, social movements and cultural phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Trust is a personal concept and the perception of it can differ per person. Therefore, a qualitative research suits the purpose of this study since it is able discover the underlying causes and reasons why someone is or is not perceived as trustworthy.

3.2 Participants and sampling technique

The population that is central in this research are the online followers of football players. The participants who are part of this research are people actively following one or multiple football players on social media. The study includes 16 participants of which 50% is, next to an online follower on social media, also an active football player him- or herself. All the participants were selected with the use of convenience sampling which is "a kind of non-probability or nonrandom sampling in which members of the target population are selected for the purpose of the study if they meet certain practical criteria" (Farrokhi & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, 2012, pp. 785). The researcher selected friends, acquaintances and peers to participate in this study because they fit the population and were easily available. In order to provide more information about the participants, a short background of each participant is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Overview participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Education/work
Participant 1	20	Male	Communication Science
Participant 2	54	Female	Secretary
Participant 3	54	Male	Manager
Participant 4	22	Male	Communication Science
Participant 5	20	Male	Communication Science
Participant 6	20	Female	Communication Science
Participant 7	20	Male	Social worker
Participant 8	20	Male	Accountancy
Participant 9	21	Male	Business Administration
Participant 10	22	Male	Communication Science
Participant 11	23	Male	Communication Science
Participant 12	23	Male	Communication Science
Participant 13	21	Male	Communication Science

Participant 14	21	Male	IT Business
Participant 15	22	Male	Sport Education
Participant 16	21	Male	Biology

3.3 Procedure

To conduct the research, an appropriate method for data collection and the design of the study was selected. The instrument that was used to study the trustworthiness of football players as an influencer when endorsing competing brands is the in-depth interview. This method was used because it is a discovery-oriented method "which allows the researcher to deeply explore the respondent's feelings and perspectives on a subject" which fits the research purposes of this study (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2001). The most important topics and questions of the interviews were made beforehand in a topic list, as shown in Table 2. To ensure the conversational nature of the interview, a semi-structured format was used. This flexible approach enables the researcher to ask questions which are not planned beforehand and are flowing from previous answers of the interviewee whenever needed. The flexibility that semi-structured in-depth interviews offer without losing the focus on the most relevant questions is valuable, as the interviewee will feel more comfortable in a semi-structured setting than in a completely structured setting because the interview will feel like a real, natural conversation. It is important that the interviewee feels comfortable, especially when keeping the sensitive topic of trust in mind. Moreover, semi-structured in-depth interviews offer the chance for probing - that is, verbal or non-verbal reactions of the interviewer to specify or make an answer clearer.

During the interviews three different examples of football players endorsing brands as an influencer were shown to the participant. In each example two social media posts of the same football player were shown to the participant. As illustrated in Figure 1, the first example contained a football player endorsing the same congruent brand in both social media posts. The next example, shown in Figure 2, contained a football player endorsing two incongruent competing brands in two different posts. In Figure 3 the last example is presented which contained a football player endorsing two incongruent non-competing brands. These different examples were discussed with the participant in order to explore the attitude towards endorsing competing brands compared to endorsing congruent brands or non-competing incongruent brands. Additionally, these examples were used to explore the relationship between football players' PBV and their perceived trustworthiness. In order to discover this relationship, the Sportstar Influencer Index (SSI) of Sportstar Influencer was used. In 2018, this platform created an influencer score for the most influential football players by using an algorithm that calculates a football player's influential score (Sportstar Influencer, n.d.). Contact with Sportstar Influencer was established to get more insights into this algorithm (P. Halfpenny, personal communication, 26 March 2019). The goal of the algorithm is to "produce a final ranking that reflects fans' perceptions of the players and which is sensitive both to the short-term impact of specific performances and to the underlying trends that characterize a players career". Sportstar Influencer derives its data for the algorithm from open-source intelligence, research-based information as well as data that is commercially available. This data mainly consists of social metrics such as followership, activity and sentiment and is modified by

individual modifiers such as players' international status, recent form and fitness as well as team modifiers such as national club tournament, top team status and recent team form. Based on this data the algorithm builds a score which will function as a representation of the construct of the PBV of football players in this research. After introducing the participants to the SSI, they were asked to estimate the SSI of the football players that functioned as an example during the interviews. This was discussed with the participant to explore the reasons behind this estimation and to see what influenced their assessment. Next to that, it was discussed whether there is a relationship between the football players' SSI, as a representation of their PBV, and their perceived trustworthiness as an influencer.

Before every interview started, the participant signed an informed consent form (Appendix B) in which the participant agreed to be subject of research and agreed with the interview to be recorded. Additionally, the informed consent form clearly stated the confidential and anonymous treatment of the recordings as well as the data extracted from the interview. The interviews were conducted personally, which means that the ratio of interviewer and interviewee is 1:1 at all times to increase the interviewees' level of trust (Boeije, 2010). Due to the semi-structured way of interviewing, there was no time limit set for the duration of the interviews. However, the interviews lasted around 25-45 minutes each.

Table 2

Topic list

Topic	Questions
General introduction	Age
	Education
	What is your relationship with football and footballers?
Influencer marketing	Social media usage
	Do you follow influencers/football players? Who and why?
	Familiarity with influencer marketing
Trust	What are aspects where you pay attention to when it comes to trusting an influencer/footballer online?
Examples	What attracts your attention?
	Would you trust this football player? Based on what?
	Do you see similarities/differences in both social media posts?
	How do these posts impact the trustworthiness of the football player?
	Do you think the football player is a trustworthy influencer and why?
	What would you do if you were an influencer?
	What kind of image do you have of the brands that are endorsed by the football players?
	Does this image influence the football player's trustworthiness?
	Do you think it is important that a football player chooses brands that he endorses based on whether the brands fits with him or not?

Personal brand value	Can you estimate the personal brand value of the football players that functioned as an example in this interview?
	Do you think that these personal brand values are right?
	Do you think that the concept of personal brand value is linkable with the perceived trustworthiness of a football player as an influencer?

Figure 1. Example of a football player endorsing congruent brands (Pogba, 2019).
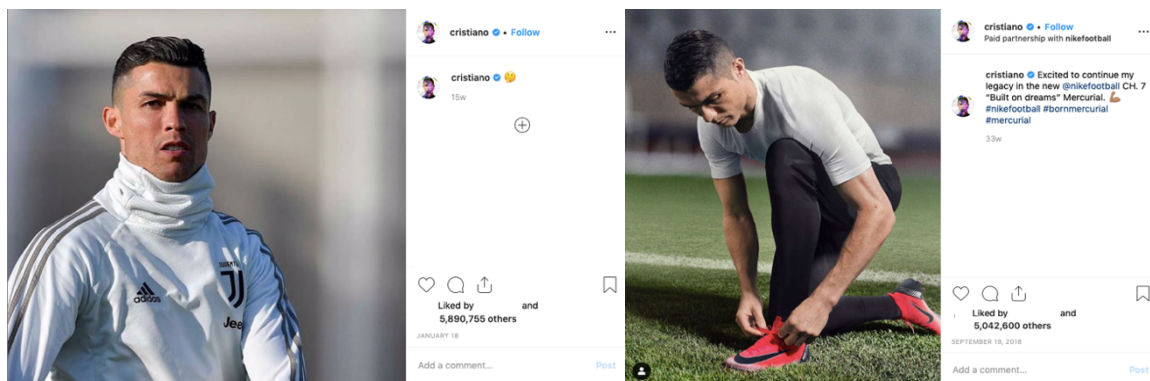

Figure 2. Example of a football player endorsing incongruent competing brands (Ronaldo, 2018; Ronaldo 2019).

Figure 3. Example of a football player endorsing incongruent non-competing brands (Messi, 2018).

3.4 Data processing and analysis

After the interviews were conducted and the data was gathered from the participants, the data that was retrieved was processed. The recordings of the interviews were replayed and transcribed. In order to ensure confidential and anonymous treatment of the gathered data, the transcripts do not contain any personal information of the participants such as for example names and birth dates. Eventually, the transcripts were coded with the use of ATLAS.ti. First the data was coded with open coding in order to identify the major categories and core phenomena of information. From this coding, axial coding emerged to create sub categories around the core phenomenon determined with open coding in order to further shape and finalize the coding scheme which is presented in Appendix C. After designing the coding scheme, 10% of the transcripts was coded by a second coder in order to assess the reliability of the coding. To ensure an adequate inter-coder reliability, the Cohen's Kappa was calculated with the use of SPSS. It turned out to be .79 which indicates a substantial agreement. The information that was gathered from the different participants will be compared and the most striking results will be discussed in the 'Results' section in the next part of this report.

4. Results

The following section will show the results of this research. To draw a clear picture of the perceived the trustworthiness of football players as influencers, quotes from the interviews that were conducted will be used to support the interpretations of the results. First the participants' relationship with football and their social media usage will be discussed whereupon the results concerning IM, trust and PBV will be addressed.

4.1 Relationship with football and social media usage

The interviewees were first asked to introduce themselves and to specify their relationship with football. There were multiple similarities between the participants regarding their relationship with football. For example, the majority of the participants indicated that he or she watches football games on TV. Additionally, all participants follow the game on social media in the form of following social media accounts of football clubs, football players or football news accounts. However, there were also some differences between the participants. For instance, multiple participants had a specific favorite club they tend to support such as AFC Ajax, PSV, Liverpool FC, FC Barcelona and FC Twente indicating that the relationship with football can be personal. Furthermore, eight participants stated that they were actively playing football of which two were also playing indoor, whereas others already stopped playing football a few years ago or even never have played the game before.

Next to their relationship with football, the participants were also asked to explain their social media usage and to specify the social media platforms they use. 15 participants indicated that they use Instagram and Facebook which makes both social media channels the most used platforms in this research. Also, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn were mentioned and used by some individuals.

4.2 Influencer marketing

Eleven participants indicated that they were familiar with IM and were able to explain the concept. Most of them referred to IM as a mutual partnership between organizations and celebrities in which the celebrities promote products or services of a specific organization in exchange for money so that the organization is seen by a big audience. For example, participant 4 explained: "*When I hear about IM, I think about famous people with a lot of followers and influence who then endorse products or services by telling that it is very good so that other people will start using it too. It is beneficial for the influencer as well as the organization since the influencer gets paid for the endorsement and the organization easily reaches a certain target group*". Participant 13 added that IM is about creating an association: "*I think IM is picking someone with a well-known name and connecting that person to a special product in order to create an association between these two. So, when you see that specific person or the product you will immediately think about the other*".

All the participants were required to follow at least one football player on social media and therefore it is important to understand the reasons why these participants decided to follow a football player. The three reasons behind following football players that are recognized with this research are the football players' personality, the players' activities in daily life and the club the football player is playing for. First of all, according to the majority of the participants,

following a football player on social media depends on the personality of the football player. As participant 12 said: "*It is purely the content they post and their personality ... when someone is very arrogant, I would not follow that person*". Additionally, an important aspect of a player's personality that was mentioned by multiple participants is the level of relatedness. When the participant could easily relate to the football player, for example in terms of age, the player became more interesting to follow. This was clearly emphasized by participant 5 by stating the following: "*I am curious about the players that are similar to me*". Secondly, the participants indicated that they were interested in football players' daily lives. According to participant 9 "*it is just interesting to follow these people and to see what they do in daily life*". Participant 8 elaborated on this by stating: "*When these celebrities, sporters or influencers show something about their personal life it is interesting to see. I think it is interesting how their day looks like, what they do and with whom they hang out*". Lastly, the participants indicated that the football club the player was playing for is also important in the decision whether to follow this player on social media or not. After asking participant 1 if the football players he follows must be playing for a specific club, he said: "*Yes PSV. I don't follow football players from AFC Ajax, often it is PSV related*". Participant 3 also addressed the importance of the football player's club. After asking why he follows two specific football players he answered: "*They play at Liverpool FC, that team appeals to me and I am a fan of this club*".

Despite the fact that every participant follows football players on social media, six participants indicated that he or she did not follow influencers. This discrepancy can be explained by the fact that eight participants did not perceive football players as influencers. As participant 7 said: "*No I see these persons more as football players and myself as a fan of them. I do not see them as influencers*". Furthermore, participant 5 indicated that the football players he follows do not endorse that much on their social media: "*I think these players could be influencers, but I must say that the football players I follow actually post very few endorsements. It could be that, from time to time, they show their new football shoes but even these posts I have not seen a lot*". However, the opinions were divided, since the other eight participants clearly perceives them as influencers. According to participant 3 "*these players have a lot of value for brands. I think that a lot of boys, football players and kids are influenced by these players. They have a lot of followers and a lot of influence*". Participant 10 even calls football players unique influencers because of their great influence on the younger generation: "*Sporters are a unique kind of influencers, I think. Look at the videos of Messi and Neymar running through Brazil and Argentina showing their huge effect. These kids almost start crying as soon as they see a picture of their heads in some kind of supermarket*". Three other participants also specifically addressed that football players are particularly influential for the youth. Participant 15 exemplifies this based on his own experience: "*When I was young, for me Messi was always a player whom I really liked and if you saw him on TV in commercials of Adidas, I always thought I want that too*". Participant 9 added: "*I think some target groups, especially the younger generation, are easily excited when for example Messi uses a product or wears clothes from a specific brand. I think this could be very interesting for them*".

4.3 Trust

4.3.1 Personality.

Fourteen participants emphasized that when a football player possesses an appealing personality it positively contributes to his trustworthiness as an influencer. Participant 8 exemplified this by stating: "*I think that the trustworthiness of a football player mainly has to do with how that person is and how he communicates*". Eight of these 14 participants mentioned that the trustworthiness of a football player increases when the football player possesses personal characteristics such as sympathy and sincerity. Next to personality, five participants based their trust on the status of the football player. Participant 9 for instance mentioned: "*I would trust him, merely because he is Ronaldo. He is a pretty big name in the football industry and when he posts stuff that is less trustworthy it would have negative effects for his own name, so I assume that his information is trustworthy*".

However, personality can also have a negative influence on the trustworthiness of a football player. Especially during the second example of the interview in which social media posts of Cristiano Ronaldo were shown, seven participants negatively expressed themselves in terms of his trustworthiness as an influencer based on his personality. The participants perceived Ronaldo as a money-grubber and associated him with arrogance. Participant 3 said: "*I have got the impression that he is into everything that passes by and that generates money which makes him untrustworthy*". Next to that, his appearance on the pitch also contributes to the fact that the participants think that he is arrogant. As participant 1 indicated: "*It is a personal issue with Ronaldo since, with respect to his personality, he is not a very friendly person which makes him less trustworthy for me. He is an arrogant man who cares a lot about money*". Furthermore, he also adds: "*I know that he donates a lot of money to charities which I really like about him. However, if you cannot properly behave on the pitch, I cannot attach a lot of value to this*".

4.3.2 Brand image.

Six participants indicated that endorsing big and well-known brands with a good reputation enhances the trustworthiness of the football player endorsing the brand. This is clearly exemplified by participant 13 saying: "*Products such as Nike and Adidas are well-known, so it contributes to the football player's trustworthiness*". However, when asking whether endorsing smaller brands then negatively affects the trustworthiness of a football player, participant 12 explained: "*No, I think this just reinforces because, I guess, there is less financial incentive to endorse a product, so the endorsement is probably more natural instead of being forced to do so by a sponsor*", indicating that the impact of brand image on the trustworthiness of football players is personal.

Eleven participants indicated that the image of a brand must be in line with the person who is endorsing it in order to be trustworthy as an influencer. This became clear during the interviews when, in a particular example, Messi endorsed Lays. "*Actually, it is pretty weird that such a football player, a professional football player, with such a specific diet and such a healthy lifestyle, otherwise you cannot perform at such a high level, that he endorses chips. I think this is very contradictory. This is weird.*" participant 2 said. Participant 7 added: "*Of course, he is a sportsman and as a sportsman I believe that you cannot endorse a chips brand*

such as Lays. I think that as a sportsman you must set a good example and that you do not present yourself with bags of chips on your Instagram". So, when the perceived image of a brand does not fit with the football player endorsing it, for a large majority of the participants it decreases the trustworthiness of the football player. However, five participants reacted neutral and how they perceived a brand did not had any influence on the trustworthiness of the football player endorsing it.

4.3.3 Experience experts.

Twelve participants explained that their trust in football players as influencers was based on whether the football players endorsed brands and products of which he can be considered as an experience expert. As participant 1 said: "*They have a good claim to be trustworthy since they are football players and athletes. If they share something that is sports related, for example shoes from Adidas, then I often trust it very quickly*". Additionally, participant 11 stated: "*I would trust the things he says about football or about good football shoes because of course he is a kind of guru. Someone with authority*". However, when football players endorse brands of which they are not an experience expert, it also decreases their trustworthiness as an influencer for seven participants. As participant 2 explained: "*I assume that he, as a football player, does not eat chips, otherwise you cannot perform at such a level ... And he expresses as if Lays chips is very healthy. That is how I see it, and everybody knows that this is not true. So, I think this is very untrustworthy*".

4.3.4 Paid partnership.

Concerning the difference in terms of trustworthiness regarding paid and unpaid IM, 13 participants expressed that paid IM activities were less trustworthy. "*Of course, they get paid for talking about a product because the producer or seller wants to hear that, so it is not completely objective and, in a sense, not 100 percent trustworthy*" as participant 8 said. Participant 12 substantiated this by stating: "*There is a bigger chance that he does not completely support the product when he gets paid for presenting it compared to when he presents the product on his own*". However, two participants indicated that paid IM can also contribute to the trustworthiness of a football player as an influencer. When the football player transparently communicates about the fact that he gets paid for promoting a product, the participants associate the football player with transparency and honesty which enhances his trustworthiness. "*As I indicated earlier, he clearly communicates that this is a paid partnership and that he gets paid for this. I really appreciate this. Especially because these influencers are being followed by a lot of young kids who cannot defend themselves against advertisements ... I always appreciate it when people are transparent*" as participant 11 indicated. Participant 6 said: "*I think it is only fair to communicate that it is about an advertisement*". A minor group of participants also expressed neutral feelings about paid partnerships and did not felt influenced by the fact that football players get paid for endorsing products. According to participant 9 "*you know that they get paid by brands for endorsing their products but that does not change their level of trustworthiness for me*" and participant three calls it "a part of the deal". However, this attitude towards paid partnerships changes when the football players post too much endorsements. "*If it is constantly these kinds of marketing pictures with him*

endorsing products and that his whole Instagram is full of it, I would not even follow this player because it is not interesting to see and then trustworthiness would not even be a question" according to participant 10.

4.3.5 Type of brands.

With regard to the type of brands the football players are endorsing, there were no negative associations expressed by the participants about endorsing congruent brands indicating that it does not affect football players' trustworthiness in a negative way. For 13 participants endorsing congruent brands even positively influenced the trustworthiness of football players as influencers. Participant 13 mentioned: "*Pogba is really consistent and it is good to see that he is loyal to a brand which increases his trustworthiness*". Furthermore, participant 1 indicated: "*He wears everything from Adidas on the pictures, that makes him more trustworthy of course*". However, two participants indicated that they had neutral feelings about endorsing congruent brands and expressed that it did not influence the football players' trustworthiness. Participant 9 addressed it is just coincidence that the personal sponsor of a football player resembles with the sponsor of the team they are playing for: "*He is just lucky that Adidas is also the sponsor of Manchester United*".

When it comes to endorsing incongruent competing brands, only one participant positively expressed himself. "*I think it just makes him stronger because he shows that he just does what he wants which makes him authentic*" according to participant 10. Eight participants indicated that endorsing incongruent competing brands had a negative influence on the trustworthiness of football players. The majority of these participants associated it with strangeness and contradiction leading to lower levels of trust in the football player. As participant 1 stated: "*Actually this is a bit contradictory if you think about it, since these are two of the biggest sports brands. Often you choose one or you choose the other, so the idea that he posts pictures on his Instagram with Adidas T-shirts of the club and in the meantime endorses Nike shoes, I think that is a bit contrary*". "*If you are loyal to one brand but then two weeks later you post a picture with another brand, you are not authentic*" according to participant 10. However, five of the participants who expressed negative feelings about endorsing incongruent competing brands, along with eight other participants, also expressed neutral feelings. They mentioned that there could be a difference between personal sponsor and club sponsor as well as that the football player has little influence on this process. As participant 6 said: "*I can imagine why some people think 'huh what is this?' but the fact that he wears an Adidas kit has not been his choice. He cannot say now that I am playing for Juventus, I only want to wear Nike*". Participant 14 substantiates this: "*Personally, I do not think this is problematic. He cannot help it; it is just from his club, so he is obligated to wear it*".

Thirteen participants indicated that endorsing incongruent non-competing brands negatively influenced the trustworthiness of a football player as an influencer. The majority of these participants based their opinion on the type of product the football player was endorsing. At one of the examples during the interviews, Messi endorsed Lays chips which the participants perceived as not done because of his status as a professional football player. Participant 2 stated: "*It is very weird that Messi endorses chips. It does not even fit at all with his life as a professional athlete*". Participant 4 said: "*It is odd that as a professional athlete advertises for*

chips. Of course, it is not the healthiest food that exists, so for that matter his trustworthiness decreases". However, 11 participants also indicated that endorsing incongruent non-competing brands had little to no influence on the trustworthiness of a football player as an influencer by expressing neutral feelings. As participant 6 said: "*I do not really care. I would not perceive him as less trustworthy because he eats chips*". Next to this, three participants expressed positive feelings about football players endorsing incongruent non-competing brands. By endorsing products outside of the football and sports branch, the participants indicated that the relatedness of the football players increased which in turn had a positive impact on the football players' trustworthiness as an influencer. "*Through this advertisement he is closer to the normal people than the professional athletes*" according to participant 8.

4.4 Personal brand value

Whereas most of the participants were familiar with IM, from the 16 persons that participated in the interviews, only two were familiar with PBV. The other 14 participants indicated that they were not familiar with PBV or did not know exactly what it involved. After introducing them to the concept of PBV, the participants were asked to estimate the personal brand values of the football players that functioned as an example during the interviews. There were four aspects that the participants took into account and had a positive influence on the PBV of a football player. These four aspects were the player's performance, personality and online fan base as well as endorsing congruent brands. Twelve participants based their PBV estimation on the performance of the football player. As participant one said: "*Nowadays, Messi and Ronaldo are seen as the best football players and we possibly will not see such quality again in the upcoming 20 years, so both have achieved quite a status in the football industry. They are respected and I think that really helps for your personal brand value because brands want to connect themselves to people who can do something great and are in the spotlights*". Also 12 participants mentioned that personality contributes to a higher perception of football players' PBV. According to participant 10: "*Ronaldo has a bigger brand value, not because he is a better football player or that is known by a lot of people, but because he is a better celebrity. He is easy to write about; he is more sensational and strongly expresses himself*". Furthermore, five participants indicated that their estimation was based on the size of the football players' online fan base. As participant 8 said: "*Ronaldo has more followers and thus has more value for brands. He reaches a larger target group which is exactly what brands want*". Participant 9 adds: "*I think that currently, especially in the last couple of years, the number of followers someone has, has become pretty important*". Next to that, four participants addressed that endorsing congruent brands had a positive influence on their estimation of the PBV of a football player. Endorsing congruent brands as an influencer leads to a higher level of trustworthiness which in turn leads to a higher PBV.

Seven participants were convinced that a football player with a high PBV was more trustworthy as an influencer. Participant 12 indicated: "*I think that the more your name as a football player is positively associated with brands, the more people will trust you*". Two participants indicated that they believe there is no relationship between football players' PBV and their trustworthiness as an influencer and seven participants expressed neutral feelings about it. This was mainly caused due to a lack of insight into the topic and how a football

player's PBV is calculated. This was clearly exemplified by participant 10 saying: "It depends how personal brand value is calculated".

4.5 Difference actively playing football

In order to see whether there are differences in opinions between followers of football players that are also active football players and followers that are not actively playing football, the interviews of these two groups were compared. Despite the fact that the sample of this research consisted of an equal distribution between participants who are actively playing football and participants who are not playing football, there were no remarkable differences found between these two groups of participants. In fact, only participant 8 referred to his own experiences as a football player. His statement was related to the brands he uses when playing football: "*I played a while on football shoes from Adidas, but the studs constantly broke off. Within one season I needed three pair of football shoes, so I started to play on Nike again*". He indicated that it negatively influenced the way how he perceives Adidas: "*I will never buy Adidas again, only because of what happened*".

5. Conclusion

Based on the results that were discussed in the previous chapter, this section will provide an answer to the research questions that were addressed in the introduction of this report. This research aimed at creating a deeper understanding of the relationship between football players endorsing competing brands via social media and their perceived trustworthiness as an influencer. This research intended to identify this relationship by examining how trust towards football players is perceived by their followers and how football players' perceived trustworthiness relates to their PBV. Therefore, this chapter will first answer the two sub-questions introduced at the beginning of this report. Afterwards, the answer of the main research question will be addressed.

5.1 Perception of trust

This section will provide an answer to the following sub-question:

How is trust towards football players perceived by their followers when football players endorse brands as influencers?

The foremost reason why a person follows a football player on social media is his personality. People are interested in a football player's daily life when that specific football player has an appealing personality and especially when the follower is able to relate to the football player. When the personality of a football player generates a certain level of relatedness, it can lead to the development of trust. Furthermore, trust is also developed by football players endorsing brands that are sports related. When the image of a brand matches with the football player endorsing it, the brand has a positive impact on the followers' development of trust in the football player. It also increases when the football player is perceived as an experience expert of the product he endorses. This increase is mainly caused by the football player developing authority which makes him legitimate to express his opinion about a product. However, when football players endorse brands that do not fit them, it can also decrease their perceived trustworthiness. Also, paid partnerships decrease the followers' development of trust in football players as influencers since these kinds of partnerships are perceived as less sincere as unpaid IM activities.

Despite the recognition of the previous mentioned aspects influencing the perceived trustworthiness of football players as influencers, trust is still a personal concept and can differ per person. What is perceived as trustworthy by one, can be contradicted and perceived as untrustworthy by the other.

5.2 Relationship perceived trustworthiness and personal brand value

The sub-question that will be answered in this section is:

How does a football player's personal brand value influence his perceived trustworthiness as an influencer?

The results regarding the relationship between a football players' perceived trustworthiness as an influencer and their PBV show that there is no significant relationship between these two concepts. Due to a lack of insight and knowledge about the PBV of football players, the participants were not able to explain its relationship with their perceived trustworthiness. However, when estimating the PBV of the football players that functioned as an example during the interviews, four aspects were recognized that positively influenced the participants' estimation of football players' PBV. These aspects were a football player's personality, his performance, the size of his online fan base and the fact that the football player endorses congruent brands. Out of these four aspects, personality and player performance were the most influential ones.

5.3 Relationship perceived trustworthiness and endorsing competing brands
This section provides an answer for the main research question that was central in this report:

What is the relationship between a football players' perceived trustworthiness and endorsing competing brands?

The results of this study indicate that endorsing competing brands on social media has, for some participants, a negative effect on football players' perceived trustworthiness. However, the majority of the participants, including the ones who also negatively expressed themselves, indicated neutral feelings about endorsing competing brands. This can be explained by the fact that, despite the arousal of associations such as strangeness and contradiction, the participants were able to put it into perspective and to determine that the football players do not have a say in the sponsor of the club they are playing for. The participants understood the inequality regarding the different sponsor types of football players; however, it did not contribute to higher levels of perceived trustworthiness. According to a minor group of participants it still negatively affected football players' trustworthiness as influencers.

With regard to endorsing incongruent non-competing brands similar results were found. Most of the participants indicated that this type of endorsement had a negative influence on the perceived trustworthiness of football players. However, when elaborating on this topic during the interviews, the participants showed a greater understanding and expressed neutral feelings about it. Despite this high degree of understanding, the impact of endorsing incongruent non-competing brands is related to the type of product and image of the brand. As stated earlier, when football players endorse brands or products that do not fit their lifestyle, it decreases their perceived trustworthiness.

In contradiction to endorsing competing and incongruent non-competing brands, endorsing congruent brands did contribute to a higher perceived trustworthiness. Participants associated it with loyalty which had a positive impact on their development of trust.

6. Discussion

This chapter is written to evaluate the results of this study and how it was conducted. Because some factors may have influenced the results, the limitations of this research will be addressed in the first section of this chapter. Afterwards, recommendations will be provided how to improve the research that was conducted. Next to that, the theoretical contribution of this study will be discussed, and the key findings will be contextualized within previous research. Also, the practical implications will be explained. Lastly, this chapter will discuss the possibilities this study opened up for further research and future directions into topic of football players' perceived trustworthiness as influencers.

6.1 Research limitations

First of all, most of the participants were not familiar with the PBV of a football player. The participants were not able to give a substantiated opinion about this topic because of a lack of knowledge. Especially when asking about their opinions regarding the SSI of football players and how this relates to their perceived trustworthiness as an influencer, the participants stated that without access and insight into the algorithm that calculates football players' SSI, it was hard to say something about it. This implies that the participants had to have an idea what IM, PBV and the SSI of football players actually entail. Therefore, this may have influenced the results regarding the relationship between the perceived trustworthiness of football players and their PBV and possibly could explain why there was no relationship found in this research.

Another limitation of this study are the interview skills of the researcher. As this was one of the first times the researcher conducted a study based on in-depth interviews, a more advanced set of interview skills could have led to a more in-depth conversation with the participants and a deeper meaning of the data that was gathered. Better interview skills could be an advantage when striving to get the optimal results out of a research and to gather a dataset with sufficient detailed meanings. Therefore, a more advanced set of interview skills could have provided better and more in-depth results for what this research intended to discover.

Furthermore, this research did not recognize clear differences in the perception of trust, perceived trustworthiness of football players and the relationship of perceived trustworthiness with PBV between the participants playing football and the participants that did not play football. This could be caused by the sample being too small to discover differences. When a bigger sample was chosen, possibly evident differences were found. However, due to a limited amount of time and resources the researcher was not able to include more participants in this research.

Lastly, a large majority of this study's sample consisted of men that were in a comparable age group of 20-23 years old and were from the same Eastern region in the Netherlands. The choice to use such a similar sample caused that participants with other backgrounds did not take part in this study, This could have caused that other perceptions of the trustworthiness of football players and the relationship with their PBV were excluded from this research and, therefore, using a more diverse sample may have prevented that the participants yielded a similar perspective on the topic.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the limitations of this research, as addressed in the previous section of this chapter, recommendations for further research will be discussed. As stated earlier, what is perceived as trustworthy by one, can be contradicted and perceived as untrustworthy by the other. Since trust is personal, there is a high chance of people expressing specific opinions. In order to discover a general tendency in the perceived trustworthiness of football players as influencers, it is recommended to use a more diverse sample than the sample that was used in this research. In such a similar sample that was used in this study, where most of the participants were men in the age group of 20-23 years old and were from the same Eastern region in the Netherlands, it is possible that these participants' perception of trust and their attitudes towards the relationship between football players' perceived trustworthiness and their PBV were similar. Therefore, it is recommended to use a more diverse sample since this possibly does not exclude participants that yield other perspectives on the topics this research focused on.

Additionally, since this research did not find any differences between participants that played football and the participants that did not, a larger sample could also provide significant results whether the perception of trust in football players as influencers differs when someone plays football or is only an online follower of a football player.

6.3 Theoretical contribution

As previously mentioned, this research was conducted because of the lack of qualitative insights into IM. Since IM is a relatively new marketing concept, it is important to understand its main elements in order to correctly apply it. The results of this study confirm the findings of Dahlqvist and Preiksaite (2018), since the answers of the participants differed per person because trusting influencers turned out to be a personal phenomenon as was also concluded by these two researchers. However, this research identified a general tendency that endorsing competing brands had a negative to neutral effect on the perceived trustworthiness of football players as influencers. Most of the participants reacted negatively at first but showed their understanding a few moments later.

Furthermore, this research contributed to previous research into IM in a way that the context of this research was never studied before. Football players are becoming increasingly attractive for brands and organizations to use as influencers, but there was a lack of insight regarding IM in this specific context. This research fills this gap by providing insights into how trust is perceived by the football players' followers and how these followers perceive football players endorsing different types of brands such as congruent, incongruent competing and incongruent non-competing brands.

6.4 Practical implications

IM is a rather new concept and has quickly grown as an influential marketing strategy among organizations. The football industry is becoming increasingly attractive for brands to implement IM because of the large number of online fans of football players. It is therefore important to understand, from a player's perspective, what makes an influencer trustworthy. This research contributes to a better understanding of how football players can develop trustful relationships as influencers with their followers and customers on social media by giving

insight in the elements perceived to be important by the football players' followers in developing trust. This is important for the football player since high levels of perceived trustworthiness as an influencer increases consumer purchasing decisions (Delgado-Ballester & Luis Munuera-Alemán, 2001) and enhances the likelihood of impulse buying (Baird & Parasnis, 2013). Football players with a high level of perceived trustworthiness thus become more attractive for brands to collaborate with because there is a higher chance that consumers will buy the products these football players endorse. As a result, these football players develop a stronger position in contract negotiations and can be more demanding when making contracts with brands. Additionally, since this research provides an understanding of how the endorsements of different types of brands such as congruent, incongruent competing and incongruent non-competing, influences the trustworthiness of football players, it helps them in choosing brands to collaborate with while maintaining their followers' trust.

6.5 Future research

This thesis opened up new possibilities to conduct future research into the topic of the perceived trustworthiness of football players as influencers. First of all, since women football has become increasingly popular in the last few years, this specific context could be an option for future research. This study only brought up the perspective of men on this topic because the football industry is mostly dominated by men. Therefore, it would be interesting to study this topic from a women's perspective. Specifically looking at the trustworthiness of female football players as influencers may possibly discover similarities or differences compared to men. Next to that future research could concentrate on the perceived trustworthiness of football players as influencers at a younger age group. As multiple participants stated that, throughout the years, they are less influenced by advertisements and marketing activities then a few years ago. Therefore, studying a younger age group might be interesting since this generation may not have this persuasion knowledge which could provide new insights into the perceived trustworthiness of football players and thus would be interesting to study in future research.

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8. Appendices

8.1 Appendix A: Literature study log

Relevant terms

Concepts	Related terms	Smaller terms	Broader terms
Trust	Credibility, trustworthiness, perceived trustworthiness, reliability, belief, vulnerability	Online trust, offline trust	Relationships
Personal brand value	Personal brand, value, branding, personal branding,	Content, positioning	Public relations
Influencer marketing	Influencer(s), celebrities, online marketing, word-of-mouth, endorsement, social media, brand ambassadors	Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, opinion, paid, unpaid	Marketing strategy, online, digital content

Search actions

	Date	Database	Search action	Total hits
1	27-03-2019	Scopus	Influencer marketing AND trust*	20
2	27-03-2019	Google Scholar	Influencer marketing AND trust*	18.300
3	27-03-2019	Scopus	Competing brands AND trust AND influencer marketing	0
4	27-03-2019	Google Scholar	Competing brands AND trust AND influencer marketing	19.300
5	02-04-2019	Scopus	Personal brand value AND football	4
6	02-04-2019	Scopus	Influencer marketing AND football	2
7	02-04-2019	Scopus	Branding AND football	87
8	02-04-2019	Scopus	Football AND social media	283
9	03-04-2019	Scopus	WOM AND marketing	478
10	03-04-2019	Google Scholar	WOM AND marketing	46.400
11	03-04-2019	Google Scholar	Trust AND football	339.000

12	03-04-2019	Scopus	Celebrity endorsement AND marketing	174
13	03-04-2019	Scopus	Celebrity endorsement AND influencer marketing	10
14	03-04-2019	Google Scholar	Trust AND football AND competing brands	14.000
15	03-04-2019	Google Scholar	Competing brands AND football	23.300

Reflection on search terms

Via Scopus, a lot of useful articles were found. Almost every search action led to relevant articles related to the research topic which I eventually could use for my theoretical framework. Unfortunately, it often did happen that after searching and determining an article as a potentially useful one, it was not accessible for me and thus could not be used in this report. Via Google Scholar the quality of the articles in terms of its relevance was less good. A lot of useless articles not even related to research topic appeared, but still it was a good source when searching specific. In my case it helped to filter the articles based on the publication date, since influencer marketing is a concept which has mostly been developed during the last decade. Excluding all the older articles thus helped me in finding relevant literature on Google Scholar. Next to that, useful articles were found by searching in the reference list of articles that were already found.

8.3 Appendix B: Informed consent form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title
Football players' perceived trustworthiness as an influencer when endorsing competing brands and the relationship with their personal brand value.

Purpose of the Study
This research is being conducted by Jaap Grondman. I am inviting you to participate in this research project about the perceived trustworthiness of football players as influencers when endorsing competing brands. The purpose of this research project is to create a deeper understanding of how football players are perceived to be trustworthiness as an influencer when endorsing competing brands via social media and to investigate the relationship between the football players' perceived trustworthiness and their personal brand value.

Procedures
You will participate in an interview lasting approximately 25-45 minutes. You will be asked questions about the concepts of influencer marketing, trust and personal brand value. Sample questions include: "What are aspects where you pay attention to when it comes to trusting a footballer online?"

Potential Risks and Discomforts
There are no obvious physical, legal or economic risks associated participating in this study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time.

Potential Benefits
Participation in this study does not guarantee any beneficial results to you. The broader goal of this research is to understand the relationship between football players' perceived trustworthiness as an influencer and endorsing competing brands.

Confidentiality
Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. No personally identifiable information will be reported in any research product. Moreover, only trained research staff will have access to your responses. Within these restrictions, results of this study will be made available to you upon request. As indicated above, this research project involves making audio recordings of interviews with you. The transcripts will be anonymized in order to ensure your privacy. The audio recordings, forms, and other documents created or collected as part of this study will be stored on the researcher's password-protected computers and will be destroyed when the research is completed.

Compensation
There is no compensation when participating in this study.

Right to Withdraw and Questions

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify. The data you provided before you stopped participating however will be processed in this research; no new data will be collected or used.

If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the primary investigator:

<div align="center">

Jaap Grondman (1795104)
j.r.grondman@student.utwente.nl
+31653628185

</div>

Statement of Consent

Your signature indicates that you are at least 16 years of age and you are an active online follower of one or multiple football players; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree that you will participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.

I agree to participate in a research project led by Jaap Grondman. The purpose of this document is to specify the terms of my participation in the project through being interviewed.

1.   I have been given sufficient information about this research project. The purpose of my participation as an interviewee in this project has been explained to me and is clear.

2.   My participation as an interviewee in this project is voluntary. There is no explicit or implicit coercion whatsoever to participate.

3.   Participation involves being interviewed by one researcher from Communication Science, BMS Faculty, University of Twente. The interview will last approximately 25-45 minutes. I allow the researcher to take written notes during the interview. I also may allow the audio recording of the interview. It is clear to me that in case I do not want the interview to be taped I am at any point of time fully entitled to withdraw from participation.

4.   I have the right not to answer any of the questions. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to withdraw from the interview.

5.   I have been given the explicit guarantees that, if I wish so, the researcher will not identify me by name or function in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure.

6.	I have been given the guarantee that this research project has been reviewed and approved by the BMS Ethics Committee. For research problems or any other question regarding the research project, the Secretary of the Ethics Commission of the faculty Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences at University Twente may be contacted through ethicscommittee-bms@utwente.nl.

7.	I have read and understood the points and statements of this form. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

8.	I have been given a copy of this consent form co-signed by the interviewer.

_____		_____		_____
Name participant			Signature				Date

_____		_____		_____
Name researcher			Signature				Date

8.4 Appendix C: Coding scheme

Category	Code	Sub code	Description	Example
1. General	1.1 Introduction	1.1.1 Relationship with football	Participant explains his/her relationship with football	I have never played football, but I actually watch every game. I am a big fan of PSV.
		1.1.2 Social media usage	Participant explains his/her social media usage	Facebook, Instagram and sometimes Twitter.
2. Influencer marketing	2.1 Familiarity with IM	2.1.1 Familiar with IM	Participant is familiar with IM and can explain the concept	Yes, it is about celebrities who are used to endorse brands and they get paid for it.
		2.1.2 Not familiar with IM	Participant is not familiar with IM	Unfortunately, I am not familiar with it.
	2.2 Following influencers	2.2.1 Following influencers	Participant does follow influencers on social media	Yes, a couple. Tim Hoffman and a lot of DJ's of course for music stuff. Also, on LinkedIn some marketing influencers but not really those beauty stuff except it is a very beautiful woman.
		2.2.2 Not following influencers	Participant does not follow influencers on social media or does not	No not really. I follow more group accounts, but not specifically personalities on Instagram.

				perceive them as influencers	
	2.3 Following football players	2.3.1 Following football players	Participant does follow football players on social media	I follow two of them. Van Dijk and Henderson.
		2.3.2 Not following football players	Participant does not follow football players	-
		2.3.3 Reason of following football players	Participant indicates why he/she follows football players on social media	They must be nice football player of course and not posting too much pictures every day.
	2.4 Football players as influencers	2.4.1 Football players are influencers	Participant perceives football players as influencers	Yes. They have a lot of followers, so they have a lot of influence.
		2.4.2 Football players are not influencers	Participant does not perceive football players as influencers	No, I see them more as football players and myself as a fan of them. I do not see them as influencers.
3. Trust	3.1 Impact personality	3.1.1 Positive	Participant states that the personality of the football players has a positive influence on his trustworthiness as influencer	I would trust him as an influencer, also a bit because of the same reason I trust Ronaldo, he is a great name in the football industry.
		3.1.2 Negative	Participant states that the personality of	It is of course a very good football player,

			the football players has a negative influence on his trustworthiness as influencer	but it is also a douchebag.
		3.1.3 Neutral	Participant states that the personality of the football players has no influence on his trustworthiness as influencer	-
	3.2 Impact brand image	3.2.1 Positive	Participant states that his/her image of the brand that is being endorsed by the football player has a positive influence on his trustworthiness as influencer	It is indeed based on the reputation of the brand. It is weird when he endorses a brand that recalled some products a week ago.
		3.2.2 Negative	Participant states that his/her image of the brand that is being endorsed by the football player has a negative influence on his trustworthiness as influencer	I think as a sportsman you need to set an example and you cannot endorse bags of chips on your Instagram.

		3.2.3 Neutral	Participant states that his/her image of the brand that is being endorsed by the football player has no influence on his trustworthiness as influencer	No that does not influence me. I just look what I think fits me best.
	3.3 Impact paid partnership	3.3.1 Positive	Participant states that getting paid for endorsing brands enhances the trustworthiness of the football player as influencer	As I indicated earlier, he clearly communication that this is a paid partnership and that he gets money for endorsing the brand. I always appreciate this.
		3.3.2 Negative	Participant states that getting paid for endorsing brands decreases the trustworthiness of the football player as influencer	Yeah you get an image that it is not only about sharing knowledge about a product, but that money plays a role too. That makes it less trustworthy.
		3.3.3 Neutral	Participant states that getting paid for endorsing brands has no influences on the	No that's part of the deal.

			trustworthiness of the football player as influencer	
3.4 Impact experience experts	3.4.1 Positive	Participant states that being an experience expert enhances the trustworthiness of a football player as influencer	Because they are in that specific branch. So, when they endorse football shoes I trust them because they are football players.
	3.4.2 Negative	Participant states that endorsing brands without being an experience expert decreases the trustworthiness of a football player as influencer	It is weird that as a professional athlete he endorses chips. It is not the most healthy food that exists, so in this case it decreases his trustworthiness.
	3.4.3 Neutral	Participant states that being an experience expert has no influence on the trustworthiness of a football player as influencer	For me it does not have an influence on their trustworthiness.
3.5 Congruent brands	3.5.1 Positive	Participant states that the trustworthiness of a football player as influencer	So, he wears clothes and shoes in which he sports, it suits him. 1 brand,

			increases when the brands that the football players endorses are congruent	congruency, he shows that, well that trustworthy for me.
		3.5.2 Negative	Participant states that the trustworthiness of a football player as influencer decreases when the brands that the football players endorses are congruent	-
		3.5.3 Neutral	Participant states that the trustworthiness of a football player as influencer is not influenced by endorsing congruent brands	I do not really care. I do not really pay attention to the brands he endorses.
	3.6 Incongruent competing brands	3.6.1 Positive	Participant states that the trustworthiness of a football player as influencer increases when the brands that the football players endorses are incongruent and competitive	I think it just makes him stronger because he shows that he does what he wants. It proofs that he cares less about the deals he made which makes him authentic.

		3.6.2 Negative	Participant states that the trustworthiness of a football player as influencer decreases when the brands that the football players endorses are incongruent and competitive	It is a bit contradictory if you think about it. Two of the greatest organizations in the sports industry.
		3.6.3 Neutral	Participant states that the trustworthiness of a football player as influencer is not influenced by endorsing incongruent competitive brands	It does not stand out. It does not influence his trustworthiness, I think.
	3.7 Incongruent brands	3.7.1 Positive	Participant states that the trustworthiness of a football player as influencer increases when the brands that the football players endorses are incongruent	Maybe because of that people will recognize themselves more in him. Maybe people quickly relate to him because he eats chips.
		3.7.2 Negative	Participant states that the trustworthiness of a football player as	I am still annoyed by that Lays picture of Messi. It really

			influencer decreases when the brands that the football players endorses are incongruent	stands out and decreases his trustworthiness.
		3.7.3 Neutral	Participant states that the trustworthiness of a football player as influencer is not influenced by endorsing incongruent brands	No, I don't think so. I can see that separately from each other. It is the same Messi you see at multiple brands.
4. Personal brand value	4.1 Familiarity with PBV	4.1.1 Positive	Participant is familiar with PBV and can explain the concept	It is not about an organization but then more about a person as a brand. So your own image and how you extend it and what you are associated with.
		4.1.2 Negative	Participant is not familiar with PBV	No, maybe I can guess, but no.
	4.2 Impact player performance	4.2.1 Positive	Player performance positively influences the PBV of a football player	Because of the things he has achieved in the football industry.
		4.2.2 Negative	Player performance negatively influences the	But I rank him thirds because he is the worst footballer of these three.

			PBV of a football player	
		4.2.3 Neutral	Player performance does not influence the PBV of a football player	-
	4.3 Impact personality	4.3.1 Positive	The personality of a football player positively influences the PBV of a football player	It is the contradiction from Ronaldo's side plus his unappealing personality why is shift towards Messi.
		4.3.2 Negative	The personality of a football player negatively influences the PBV of a football player	It is the contradiction from Ronaldo's side plus his unappealing personality why is shift towards Messi.
		4.3.3 Neutral	The personality of a football player does not influence the PBV of a football player	-
	4.4 Impact congruent brands	4.4.1 Positive	Endorsing congruent brands positively influences the PBV of a football player	But I think that his brand loyalty also contributes which makes him also more trustworthy.
		4.4.2 Negative	Endorsing congruent brands negatively influences the	-

			PBV of a football player	
		4.4.3 Neutral	Endorsing congruent brands does not influence the PBV of a football player	But if that makes him more valuable as an influencer? I don't know.
	4.5 Positive impact online fan base		Participant states the greater the online following of the football player the greater his value personal brand value	I took into account his followers on social media. I think that, especially in the last couple of years, has become very important.
	4.6 Relationship trust	4.6.1 Positive	Participant states that having a high personal brand value enhances his trustworthiness as an influencer	Yes, that could make him more trustworthy.
		4.6.2 Negative	Participant states that having a high personal brand value decreases his trustworthiness as an influencer	No, I would say Messi is more trustworthy, but that is more my personal feeling.
		4.6.3 Neutral	Participant states that having a high personal brand value does not influence his trustworthiness	I think it depends how personal brand value is calculated.

			as an influencer	
5. Examples	5.1 Interpretation social media posts		Participant explains what he/she sees at the social media posts of the football players that functioned as an example	On the first image I see Pogba with Adidas football shoes. The image below is a picture of him at the training of Manchester United with his teammates.
	5.2 Interpretation PBV scores		Participant explains what he/she thinks about the PBV scores of the football players that functioned as an example	I think Ronaldo is by far the most valuable player … Messi of course number 2 and Pogba number 3. However, it could also be the other way around since Pogba has a more selective group of followers.