

A Qualitative Study Analyzing High Profile Student Athletes and Student Athletes on a  
High Profile Team's Twitter Use

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## Abstract

Given how “context, audience, and identity intersect is one of the central challenges people face in learning how to navigate social media” (boyd, 2014, p. 30), the purpose of this study was to understand how six freshmen student athletes on a high profile team (men’s basketball) from a major Midwestern university used Twitter to interact with their team members, university students, and fans of their respective sport. As these six student athletes on a high profile team made the transition from high school and underwent their freshmen year they took on new roles and identifies, such as a representative of a university, beyond that of their non-athlete peers. At the beginning of the study, only one participant entered the university as a high profile student athlete, two others became high profile during the course of their freshman year, and the remaining three remained student athletes on a high profile team. Because of the high number of student athletes who used Twitter during this time of transition, it is important for universities to pay heed, due to the amount of attention these student athletes garner. The study followed the six student athletes’ use of Twitter, which was the student’s social media of choice, from the time they became a university student (i.e. their arrival on campus) through the fall of their freshmen semester and until the end of the spring semester. The subjects were interviewed about their Twitter use to try to understand their expressed reasons for how they used Twitter, whom they interacted with, how they viewed themselves on Twitter, and how they perceived their audience. The final component of the study was an analysis of their tweets to try to identify themes. The study attempted to understand the Twitter experience for high profile student athletes, using qualitative methods. This study looked at what their use of Twitter suggested about how they negotiated their various roles with their followers on Twitter.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

As entering freshmen, men's basketball student athletes must grapple with new roles and confront demands unlike those of their student peers, which create different expectations regarding how they navigate their use of social media and how those new roles influence their identity formation. Men's basketball, at the studied university, is a high profile sport, which places such student athletes in a more public role than their counterparts in less visible sports. Within this context, there are some student athletes that are high profile student athletes (HPSA) while others are student athletes on a high profile team. The differences being that student athletes on a high profile team are simply associated with their sport; while HPSAs are high profile either prior to becoming a member of their respective high profile team or during the course of their time at college. For example, some student athletes garner attention for their athletic abilities in high school, and therefore enter college as a high profile athlete. Others gain attention for their athletic abilities while in college, and also become a high profile athlete. These high profile athletes either arrive or earn greater athletic expectation and a large following on social media. Both groups assume distinct roles, but are naïve about the consequences of such roles, particularly given their use of social media to navigate them. Use of social media in general, and Twitter in particular, enables HPSAs and student athletes on a high profile team to positively and negatively engage with different and large personal and public audiences and to knowingly and unknowingly shape an online identity.



Identity is a construct that consists of both internal and relational factors, and fluctuates as messages are exchanged between people (Hecht et al., 2003). The communication theory of identity (CTI) (Hecht et al., 2003) suggests that identity is formed, maintained, transformed, and expressed through communication and is composed of four inter-connected layers: (a) personal; (b) enacted; (c) relational; and (d) communal (Hecht et al., 2003). The personal component is shaped by one's self-concept and is influenced by messages received from others. The enacted frame occurs when identity is manifested directly or indirectly through social roles and cues. The relational aspect details how identities take shape with respect to one's interaction and negotiation with relational partners. The communal component results from collective memories and associations from a social network (Hecht et al., 2003). These incoming freshmen not only adopt a new role as a college student, but also as a student athlete. For this study, student athlete refers specifically to college athletes and is not used for high school athletes. Since their relations and roles changed from their first formal contact with the university in the summer through the end of their freshmen basketball season, this study broke down the six freshmen student athletes' first year into the following time periods; 1) Preseason (June 1-October 31), 2) Regular Season (November 1-March 15), 3) Tournament Time (March 15-April 3), 4) Post Tournament (April 4-May 30). The researcher will explain in more detail in chapter 3 and will justify the categorization in chapter 4. The six freshmen continually were defining and operationalizing relations and roles throughout the different time periods as they adapted to their different audiences or "followers." Their individual, team successes and shortcomings, were all part of the dynamic nature of their Twitter relationships along with their online identity.

## **Statement of Problem**

Student athletes receive many unique opportunities compared to non-student athletes such as priority enrollment, meals provided, access to weight training and dieticians, travel opportunities, and tutoring. Some first year men's basketball student athletes arrive on campus already exposed to the life of a high profile basketball players due to high school athletic success, while others arrive on campus as a basketball player on a high profile team. All but a few truly understand the nature of a high profile student athlete on a high profile college team, which traditionally are men's basketball, football, and women's basketball. High profile teams are traditionally men's and women's basketball and football (due to the amount of revenue they generate and television exposure). They are labeled as such due to their visibility on campus as well as in the media.

There are two types of student athletes; those who are considered to be the stars of their respective teams and who are very visible in the media and were high profile student athletes (HPSA) upon arrival to campus, as well as in competition, and those student athletes who are simply members of a high profile team. The former definition has been borrowed and altered from Shulman and Bowen (2001). The less public freshmen are not high profile student athletes; however, due to being a member of such a high profile sport, these student athletes receive public attention, while HPSAs gain greater public attention due to their athletic abilities and performance on the team.

In this study, the researcher will focus on first year men's basketball student athletes and will analyze their use of Twitter, due to the new roles and identities they take

on. Of the focus population surveyed, 100% of the participants reported that they had never received advice or education on how to use social media. Therein lies the problem, the participants are naïve about how to act on these new roles in an online environment, specifically Twitter, and put themselves in a vulnerable position at a time when their identities are evolving. One unfortunate use of Twitter could cost a participant their scholarship. All of the freshmen student athletes that participated in the study have a tool (social media, specifically Twitter) and not shown how to use it.

### **Purpose of Study**

High profile student athletes and student athletes on a high profile team are moving from high school to college and taking on new, at times contentious, roles. Via social media sites such as Twitter, for example, some fans attack high profile student athletes and student athletes on a high profile team with hostile and demeaning language (Trotter, 2012). The blinders of fandom overpower the fact that the target of the attack is an amateur; nevertheless, given the propensity with which they use social media, it is plausible that high profile student athletes and student athletes on a high profile team are quite cognizant of what is being said about them via social media. These aspersions can produce potentially negative emotional and psychological effects. Social media are not going away, and it is imperative that both academic and industry personnel keep pace with the changing social media landscape. Therefore, it is important for high profile student athletes and student athletes on a high profile team to understand how they communicate about themselves in the context of each role they play.

Given how the participants assumed different roles as a university student, university athlete, and teammate as they transitioned from high school to college, this study examined how these freshmen used Twitter to interact with their team members, those of their university, and the wider public. Unlike their student athlete counterparts in non-high profile sports, both high profile student athletes and student athletes on a high profile team have much stricter monitoring and consequences devoted to their Twitter use (Sanderson, 2011). Whereas student athletes are punished and censured for perceivably inappropriate tweets, they still maintain their ability to play—yet with one improper or inappropriate tweet a high profile student athlete or a student athletes on a high profile team can lose his or her eligibility. Therefore it is important for high profile student athletes to be aware of whom they are communicating with and how they are influenced by their interaction with the various audiences.

### **Rationale**

A student athlete is a student whose enrollment was solicited by a member of the athletics staff or other representative of athletics interests with a view toward the student's ultimate participation in the intercollegiate athletics program. Any other student becomes a student athlete only when the student reports for an intercollegiate squad that is under the jurisdiction of the athletics department (NCAA, 2012). Student athletes on most college campuses today represent a special population of students with unique challenges and needs different from their non-athlete peers. Student athletes on average spend over twenty hours per week in practice or play, sustain bodily injury and fatigue, and miss a fair number of classes when their sport is in season (Watt & Moore, 2001;

Wolverton, 2008). These students are also expected to perform well in the classroom and earn grades strong enough to maintain their eligibility for playing college sports. Such academic and athletic demands, particularly for freshman student athletes, can be difficult to balance.

In addition to these demands, as they move from high school to college freshmen, they adopt new roles that influence their ongoing identity formation. Forming an integrated and personalized sense of identity is a pivotal developmental task in late adolescence and emerging adulthood (Erikson, 1968). In college, student athletes take on the role and identity of both “student” and “athlete”, which can be harmful if a balance is not established.. Many student athletes encounter role conflict, role separation, role overload, and role interference (Settles et al., 2002). These characteristics are shared amongst student athletes, regardless of sport affiliation.

High profile student athletes and student athletes on a high profile team differ from one another, but also differ from your typical student athlete. A unique distinction of these “high profile” student athletes is their influence on social media and their potential for becoming a professional athlete. According to the National Basketball Association (NBA) less than 1% of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) basketball players go on to play in the NBA. There are roughly 900 teams in college basketball, with an average of about 12-13 players per team, not including inactive players, which means over 10,000 players per year. The NCAA permits 13 full scholarships for men’s basketball (NCAA, 2014). There are roughly 360 active NBA players (NBA, 2014). Since 2003 the university for this study has had 24 players or 5.4%

of its scholarship recipients make the NBA (NBA, 2014), which is five times the average NCAA basketball program.

The studied population and the university have a special relationship. Due to the high visibility of these student athletes, it is in the university's best interest to understand how these student athletes are presenting the image of the university. Also, the population is making the transition from adolescence to adulthood, which is typified by substantial identity development. Social media is a means for late adolescents to try out and shape their online identity.

The term social media did not exist just a few years ago but is now a common phrase, sparking the interest of researchers. Social Media “consists of (a) the information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content that has individual value but reflects shared values; (b) the content that takes the digital form of personal messages, news, ideas, that becomes cultural products; and (c) the people, organizations, and industries that produce and consume both the tools and the content” (Howard & Parks, 2012). Social media are essentially a platform that enables the dissemination of information through web-based applications like Twitter, which can include news and information that is posted by the user and can take many different forms. How the information is gathered, translated and reported has changed over the years as the information that may have taken weeks or months to gather, verify and distribute via print can now be moved instantly. The reach and swiftness of such disseminated information means though that one wrong statement or impression can be transmitted to numerous individuals who in turn can transmit the information to others, and this can

lead to unfairly damaging the reputation of an innocent or naïve individual (Needleman, 2010). However, there are benefits that can come with using social media.

Over the past decade, Internet-based technologies have become a central fixture in the social lives of many, if not most, adolescents in the U.S. and other parts of the world (Mesch and Talmud 2010). Pew Internet and American Life Project data showed that, as of 2013, more than 90 % of U.S. adolescents and young adults were regular Internet users. Social networking sites, such as Twitter, have attracted hundreds of millions of users worldwide and more than 80% of teens and young adults in the U.S. (Brenner 2012). These sites have added features that enhance their ability to help young people locate new peer affiliations, manage existing relationships, and keep abreast of social activities within their network (Lampe et al., 2006; Pempek et al., 2009; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008; Urista et al., 2009).

These features are especially useful as young people transition from home to a residential college environment, a transition that usually requires a major reorganization of one's social network. For the participants in this study, their online social network is a loosely organized collective with a common basketball interest. Investigators have reported variability not only in the social functions for which college students use social networking sites—e.g., searching for new relationships versus maintaining existing friendships (Ellison et al., 2007, 2011; Lampe et al., 2006; Pempek et al., 2009)—but also in their motivation for participating in these sites (Joinson 2008; Pempek et al. 2009; Sheldon 2008; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008; Tosun 2012). Use of social networking sites in general has been associated with students' social connectivity (Ellison et al., 2007;

Steinfeld et al., 2008; Reich 2010), but little is known about how specific use patterns or activities are associated with young people's social adjustment, how motives for use of social networking sites are related to young people's social adaptation, and what the association is among use patterns, motives, and the social outcome.

Social media offers adolescents a tool to explore possible identities and express their ideal identity they want to become (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2012). If their audiences accept the adolescent's presentation of self, they may internalize this social reception and proceed with that identity formation. If audiences reject the adolescent's presentation of self, they more easily avoid criticism and can go on exploring alternative identities (Reid & Boyer, 2013). The maintenance of friendships during adolescence highly influences identity formation. Peer groups, such as university students and teammates, become a source of self-definition and adolescents are more likely to discuss their sense of themselves and increase knowledge of self through conversations with an audience of close friends (Steinfeld et al., 2008). Adolescents are also more likely to engage in self-disclosure with close friends (especially online), which can strengthen friendships, and create a buffer to other stressors in adolescence (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). An online presence can provide an audience of like-minded individuals to serve as a support to teens that feel isolated or who lack appropriate models in their particular environment (Garrod et al., 2012). Online experiences are not separate from an adolescent's 'real life' but a part of their daily experiences, and must be given the same level of attention that any other factor affecting an individual's development. When using the aforementioned studies to apply to high profile student athlete's Twitter use, it is important to identify and understand who their audiences are.



Twitter is one of the most popular social media platforms at the present time. Twitter has experienced immense growth and is seen as an important resource for breaking immediate news and assessing public opinion (Gilbertson, 2009; O'Connor et al., 2010) and has certainly occurred with athletes (Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Athletes are arguably the most prominent celebrity group that has adopted Twitter and researchers have explored how Twitter is influencing sport (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011; Schultz & Sheffer, 2010). Since HPSAs and student athletes on a high profile team mimic their professional counterparts on the court and off, it is vital to understand how their Twitter use is shaping their identity. According to Pew Internet and American Life Project (2013) many Twitter users follow public figures such as politicians and athletes for personal comments. High profile student athletes know this and are utilizing social media to fashion their identity to the public.

These freshmen student athletes, like any student athlete, use Twitter for personal reasons, but they also have an opportunity to build their brand and make connections that give them an opportunity for future employment. Fans are new part of their Twitter following, even though many of the fans are part of their peer group. Unlike most university student athlete Twitter users, high profile student athletes and student athletes on a high profile team can also create distractions on their team or lose their scholarship for breaking the university's very non-specific social media policies. Therefore, it is important to understand as much as possible about these freshmen student athletes when they are building an identity via social media. In doing so, it might offer insight into how best to advise these freshmen on how to use Twitter and related to social media.

In addition to the number of Twitter followers, Klout score, and professional potential the determination of high profile sport status was made based upon the following factors: 1) the degree of broadcast media coverage afforded individual sports (which is directly correlated to revenue generation), and 2) the type of recruitment efforts players are subjected to during the courting phase. Although one could argue that athletes in sports such as soccer and golf face similar pressures and professional opportunities, the added public visibility and media coverage of football and basketball is more likely to result in a “fish-bowl” experience for athletes participating in these “high profile” sports. Since defining what high profile has now been established, it is important to then look at the role of social media, specifically Twitter, plays in the lives of the freshmen student athletes in this study.

One of the more compelling outcomes Twitter offers athletes is the ability to counteract perceived negative media framing (Sanderson, 2011). Athletes often have their identity constructed and disseminated by sports reporters, frequently in ways that are unfavorable to them. Twitter, then, enables student athletes to simultaneously repair their image and promote aspects of their identity that are most conducive to their image repair efforts. Twitter’s greatest benefit, the ability to shape one’s own identity, also is its greatest drawback, particularly for adolescents.

Tiger Woods and Reggie Bush, for example, attempted to use Twitter to repair their images. The potential benefits available through the appropriate use of new media outlets as image repair strategies are virtually limitless. When using Twitter specifically, athletes should make sure to find the balance in their tweets between being friendly and

over-sharing with their followers. Athletes must interact with their followers in a genuine way while being careful to not give too much personal information that might have the potential to harm their image repair progress. Today, Reggie Bush's image has not been fully repaired not only because of his NCAA crisis, but also because of his negative social media content. However, he has made great strides towards repairing his image. This is a unique benefit that athletes can capitalize upon when their public image takes a hit. According to Sanderson (2011), "social media enhance perceptions that athletes and sports figures are 'closer' to fans as they gain digital and physical access." The "computer-mediated communication" (CMC) exaggerates individuals' behaviors, resulting in both hyper-positive and hyper-negative expressions of identification. Therefore, Sanderson claims that sport organizations must assist athletes in responding to such mediated adoration and criticism. As previously mentioned the communication theory of identity (CTI) (Hecht et al., 2003) suggests that identity is formed, maintained, transformed, and expressed through communication and is composed of four interconnected layers: (a) personal; (b) enacted; (c) relational; and (d) communal (Hecht et al., 2003). CTI and CMC both support the student athletes' image within the social media context. Social media can utilize CMC in that it limits synchronicity of interaction and can overcome time and space dependencies. Both of these characteristics can work in favor of the student athlete.

CTI helps to explain and analyze the Twitter activity of the participants. CTI suggests that communication is an element rather than just a product of identity. In addition, CTI conceptualizes identity as a collective or group quality. For this study, the majority of the interactions of both HPSAs and student athletes on a high profile team fell

into three categories: 1) interactions with fans, 2) interactions with teammates, and 3) interactions with university students. As a form of social construction, there is a “shared” element to identity. Just as members in certain groups recognize or share a particular language, beliefs, norms, and culture, they also share common images of “self” or identity that exceed individual group members and are reflected in cultural products and myths.

This study will provide specific examples that connect CTI within the different roles the high profile student athletes and student athletes on a high profile team take on, which include but are not limited to: 1) university student, 2) university athlete, and 3) teammate. The subjects will be interviewed about their Twitter use to try to understand their motives, who their tweets are directed at, who they interact with, how they view themselves on social media (branding), and how they perceive their audience. The final component of the study is an analysis of their tweets to try to identify themes. The study will attempt to understand the Twitter experience for both student athletes on a high profile team and high profile student athletes (HPSA). The research questions are as follows:

Question 1: What roles do the participants adopt and act on related to identity via their Twitter use, within the designated time periods throughout their freshman year?

Question 2: Given the relationships and communities that occur because of the participants’ use of Twitter, what do their tweets say about how they interact with the members of each community, within the designated time categories throughout their freshman year?

Question 3: What does the participants' pattern of use on Twitter throughout their freshmen year reveal about the distinctions between high profile student athletes (HPSA) and student athletes on a high profile team?

The first two questions are viewed through the CTI lens. Communication theory of identity (CTI), which serves as the theoretical framework for this study and will now be discussed. Analyzing the participants' tweets and seeking clarification of their context from interviews will help answer the third question.

## Chapter 2

### Review of Literature

This section has three parts. First, an explanation of the roles adopted by the participants and connection to identity formation. Second, research on youth's use of Twitter and Twitter as a means to socialize, to act on the roles the participants adopt, and to shape identity. Third, how CTI helps to explain how the participants used Twitter to act on the roles and what such use suggested about their identity formation.

### Student athletes' roles:

The limited research on what students do with their time outside of participation in sports points out that students are hungry for experiences outside of the sports arena. Division I student athletes report viewing themselves more as athletes than students (Wolverton, 2008), wishing they had more time to pursue educational opportunities (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007), and they desire increased interaction with other students and instructors in academic-related activities (Gayles & Hu, 2009). According to the literature, role combinations for student athletes influence their desired outcomes both positively and negatively (Harrison et al., 2009; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). Many of these students enter college having more balanced academic and athletic identities; yet throughout their collegiate careers, the athletic role tends to compromise the academic role, especially in male revenue-generating sports.

**Uses of Twitter:**

Social media, specifically Twitter, has become an unavoidable part of the current college experience. Accompanying this popularity, however, are questions about the content that students are posting (Peluchette & Karl, 2009; Miller et al., 2010). College students are very free in disclosing information via social media, and this behavior appears to be driven by status needs. For example, McKinney et al., (2012) “found a significant, positive relationship between college students’ attitude about sharing information and the frequency with which they used Twitter. They further discovered that higher levels of narcissism were associated with the number of self-focused tweets. Just as their peers have flocked to social media sites, so, too, have student athletes.” Twitter has become a popular haven for student athletes, albeit one that has generated considerable controversy, as the following cases illustrate. Sometimes when a high profile high school athlete has narrowed his choices to two or three schools and makes a final decision, the fans of the schools not chosen will take to Twitter to criticize the athlete. Many of the tweets are racist. While many of the universities have a long-standing recruiting rivalry, Twitter certainly has facilitated trash talking between the high profile athletes and the fans and perhaps has a role in escalating the feud in these recruiting rivalries.

The link between these usage motives and positive outcomes has been clearly established in off-line sports settings. The question becomes whether a similar connection can be drawn between using online social networks such as Twitter and the same motives and outcomes. Yet before usage motives for Twitter can be assessed, it may be necessary

to understand what communications or information exchanges are taking place through the online social network.

Researchers have become increasingly interested in studying the phenomenon of Twitter and have tried to define and explain the online social network under the larger umbrella of social media applications (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Other studies have explored ways to use Twitter for activities such as brand management and marketing (Jansen, et al., 2009), data mining and trend monitoring (Mathioudakis & Koudas, 2010), innovation diffusion (Huberman et al., 2008), and personal identity management (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014).

Studying Twitter is important because the popularity of Twitter is unlikely to diminish in the near future (Lee, 2010; Sanderson & Cheong, 2010). In fact, younger African Americans in particular have especially high rates of Twitter use. Fully 40% of 18-29 year old African Americans who use the Internet say that they use Twitter. That is 12 percentage points higher than the comparable figure for young whites (28% of whom are Twitter users).

Twitter allows freshmen student athletes to control content about themselves instead of the reporters. Therefore, it is an outlet for the player to reach an audience without the filter of the journalists' mediated interviews (Hutchins & Rowe, 2010). However, this can be problematic if they are not aware of who their audience is and how they are perceived via their social media use. The problem becomes that these freshmen student athletes are highly visible (lots of followers) and when presenting themselves via Twitter they need to know how to distribute information and need help navigating their



newly formed identities. The benefits and drawbacks of online identity formation will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter. However, social reception and the comfort to go on exploring online identities are important factors for these freshmen student athletes' identity formation online. One drawback is social rejection. Suffering social rejection while among a group of peers is socially awkward for most people. Doing so with a following of several thousand people can add stress to their life.

The Pew Internet & American Life Project research on the use of social media (Twitter in particular) shows an overwhelming use of social media (33%) by the 19-29 demographic. Further, the Pew research shows that African Americans continue to have high rates of adoption of Twitter. Fully 25% of online African Americans use Twitter at least occasionally, with 11% doing so on a typical day. Of the athletes that I work with on a daily basis, 100% of them use Twitter. With the busy schedules of these high profile student athletes, composing a short tweet via a hand held device and having it instantly post is attractive to them (Sanderson, 2011).

Few studies have examined Twitter as it relates specifically to the sport industry. Kassing and Sanderson (2010) studied professional cyclists who used Twitter to communicate with one another and fans during the 2009 Giro d'Italia. Their study revealed that cyclists used the online social network to discuss race conditions and their personal physical condition, giving Twitter followers a behind-the-scenes look at the race as it unfolded. The authors suggested that future research explore the levels of personal interaction between athletes and their followers, as well as fan tolerance for discussing topics other than sports (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Clavio & Cooper (2010) collected

data from three populations to examine how and why individuals use Twitter. In the first data set, they studied followers of a retired professional athlete and found that respondents used Twitter to stay connected to the athlete by reading her tweets and gathering interesting personal information about her. The second data set contained responses from college football fans, and the results showed that almost 80% of the survey participants did not use Twitter. In the final data set, only 43% of college students and other media users surveyed used Twitter. Reasons for not using the online social network included limited interest or simply perceiving it as "silly." Clavio and Cooper concluded, "Twitter as a medium may be ahead of its time for sports" (p. 21). Sports organizations interested in using Twitter may need to educate their markets about its purpose and benefits before relying on the online social network for marketing purposes.

### **Communication Theory of Identity (CTI):**

CTI was developed based on theoretical and empirical data suggesting that communication is an element rather than just a product of identity. Among an emerging group of theories seeking to view identity as more sequential and layered, CTI presents a more comprehensive or synthetic view of identity integrating community, communication, social relationships, and self-concepts, while "locating" identity in all these layers.

CTI has 10 common propositions. Hecht et al., (1993), identified ten overarching propositions that helped to define identity, several of which are pertinent to this study: Identities have individual, social, and communal properties; identities involve both subjective and ascribed meaning; identities are codes that are expressed in conversations

and define membership in communities; and identities are a source of expectations and motivations. This “layered” perspective views one’s identity formation and management as an ongoing process of communication with the self and with others rather than as a simple product of communication or basis for producing communication (Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 2003). The theory suggests that individuals internalize social interactions, relationships, and a sense of self into identities through communication. In turn, identity is expressed or enacted through communication. In other words, the relationship between communication and identity is shared. From this perspective, communication helps build, sustain, and modify one’s identity.

In addition, CTI conceptualizes identity as a collective or group quality. For this study, the majority of the interactions from both HPSA and student athletes on a high profile team fell into three categories: 1) interactions with fans, 2) interactions with teammates, and 3) interactions with university students. As a form of social construction, there is a “shared” element to identity. Just as members in certain groups recognize or share a particular language, beliefs, norms, and culture, they also share common images of “self” or identity that exceed individual group members and are reflected in cultural products and myths. As a result, CTI suggests that there are four layers of identities—personal, enacted, relational, and communal layers—those interact with and are influenced by each other (e.g., Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 2003). However, for analytical purposes they often are defined and understood separately. The following subsections describe the basic premise underlying each of the four layers and the relationships among them (Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 2003).

## **Personal Layer and Participants' use of Social Media**

The personal layer refers to the individual as a locus or frame of identity. This layer may be thought of as being analogous to one's self-concept, self-image, self-cognitions, feelings about the self or self-esteem, and/or a spiritual sense of being. The personal layer of identity provides an "understanding [of] how individuals define themselves in general as well as in particular situations" (Hecht et al., 1993, pp. 166–167). Someone who says "I am athletic" (or funny, or energetic) is articulating a personal identity. Many facets of personal identity are related to social media. The different roles the high profile student athletes for this study take on are that of: university athlete, teammate, and university student. The audiences that these HPSA and student athletes on a high profile team interact with are fans, university peers and teammates. Though these two groups do tweet occasionally as a student within that role, the most commonly studied personal identities in the social media context are in sport communication (Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). For this study, both the HPSA and student athletes on a high profile team will be studied. Both groups are presenting themselves as student athletes. Although there are multiple social media platforms operating in the sports market, Twitter is at the forefront with sports stakeholders (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Indeed, athletes, coaches, and broadcasters from nearly every sport maintain a Twitter presence, which allows sports fans to obtain immediate information directly from these sports figures.

### **Enactment Layer and Participants' use of Social Media**

In this layer, identity is seen as being enacted in communication through messages. Some of these enactments have significant outcomes for high profile student athletes who use social media. Scholars have investigated how athletes use Twitter (Hambrick, et al., 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010), characteristics of athletes' Twitter followers (Clavio & Kian, 2010), and Twitter's influence on sport media production and consumption (Hutchins, 2011; Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012). These studies have all shed important light on the Twitter phenomenon in sport. However, one key voice is underrepresented from this growing literature—that of the student athlete. On one hand, this is not surprising, as it is difficult for researchers to obtain access to student athletes. While balancing both their academic and athletic requirements can be daunting, the term student athlete is one that is challenged by some scholars who contend its use (see Sack & Staurowsky, 1998), but we will employ this frequently used and accepted identifier throughout the study. As athletes at any level are arguably the reason for Twitter's popularity in their sport, their perceptions and evaluations of Twitter are essential components that must be included in the study of Twitter.

### **Relational Layer and Participants' use of Social Media**

In this layer, relationships are the locus of identity. Here, identity is seen as a mutual product, jointly negotiated and mutually formed in relationships through communication. There are three aspects of the relational layer. First, an individual constitutes his or her identities in terms of other people through social interaction with others. The formation and ongoing modification of a person's identity is influenced by

other people's views of that individual, especially ascriptions and categorizations. For instance, an individual may form a relational identity as a "good person" through being described this way by parents and friends. Second, an individual creates his or her identity by identifying through or in light of relationships with others, such as teammates. Social roles are particularly important in shaping this aspect of identity. Third, a team itself can be a unit of identity. Someone describing himself or herself as a teammate of someone is articulating a relational identity. For this study, the major different relations that take place via Twitter, includes but are not limited to: teammate to teammate, players to fans, and players to university students. Team interaction is influenced by how people define their relational identity. This interaction between teammates, fans, or even administration can generate significant media attention. Athletic departments understandably emphasize the negative aspects of Twitter and other social media tools, Sanderson (2011) analyzed the social media policies of Division I athletic departments and found that the policies overwhelmingly framed social media negatively. However, this is only one side of the story—Twitter possesses tremendous connective and identity-building capabilities (Sanderson, 2013), benefits that receive very little mention in student athlete instruction. Sanderson (2011) recommended that athletic department social media policies be more balanced and that more attention be given to the perspective of student athletes in shaping those policies by incorporating student athletes' motivations for using social media.

### **Communal Layer and Participants' use of Social Media**

As noted above, the group also is conceptualized as a frame or location for identity. While group membership (e.g., gender, race) can be the basis for personal identity, the collectivity or community, also has identities. While such a view may seem alien to the individualistic world of Western social science, communal identities are manifest in numerous ways. Group members share common characteristics, histories, and collective memories that transcend individuals and result in commonly held identities. Sometimes these identities are manifested in stereotypes, but other times they are simply the cultural code for the group members' being—namely, how the individuals are socially constructed at the group level. One reason for Twitter's popularity is the increased access it gives fans to athletes and sports figures (Sanderson, 2011, 2013). While this enhanced immediacy can be positive, it brings with it problems, particularly for student athletes. For many people, sports fandom is a significant component of their social identity (Trujillo & Krizek, 1994; Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000). This identity, grounded in attachments to teams and athletes, can provoke maladaptive behaviors (Wakefield & Wann, 2006), particularly if athletes or teams do not meet fans' expectations. Wakefield and Wann (2006) noted that highly identified fans have a greater propensity to enact dysfunctional behaviors at sporting events and are heavy consumers of sport media formats that promote confrontation (e.g., talk radio). The emergence of social media has created another realm for confrontations, especially between fans and athletes (Sanderson, 2011). Via social media, fans now have direct access to athletes and routinely direct hostile and vitriolic language toward them. Student athletes are also targets of such inflammatory language, and as noted earlier, this is perhaps more

problematic, given their age and amateur status. For example, during the 2012 college football recruiting period, ESPN.com reported on two student athletes who received numerous derogatory tweets from fans after they decommitted from football programs they initially announced they would attend (Trotter, 2012). For one of these athletes, the abuse was so awful that he turned over his Twitter account to a friend, who subsequently censured fans by tweeting (Trotter, 2012).

CTI can be applied to online social networks like Twitter and may help explain Twitter's extensive growth. Researchers have identified a variety of motives to explain online consumption. Motives consistently identified include accessing information and technical knowledge (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Ruggiero, 2000), finding entertainment and diversion (Ruggiero, 2000), and communicating with like-minded users (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Other motives are developing personal identities and keeping in touch with the larger world (Ruggiero, 2000). These studies focused on motives for general Internet use and non-sport applications. Other studies have examined online use from a sports perspective. The identified motives parallel those cited above with gathering information and technical knowledge, as well as receiving entertainment and diversion (Hur et al., 2007; Seo & Green, 2008). Hur et al., examined sport-related Internet purchases and employed the following motives definition: "Motivation for online sport consumption can be defined as an activated state within a sport consumer that leads to using the Internet for sport-related activities" (p. 524). Motives specific to these purchases are receipt of economic benefits (Hur et al., 2007; Seo & Green, 2008) and convenience (Hur et al., 2007). Other activities include using the Internet to learn about teams and athletes and express team support (Hur et al., 2007; Seo & Green, 2008).



The motives are similar to those identified for sport consumption in off-line environments such as attending sporting events and watching sports on television. The off-line sport-consumption motives include interest in the sport, team, and players; entertainment; and team support (Funk et al., 2002). Other motives are information and knowledge, escape, and vicarious achievement (James & Ridinger, 2002), along with family bonding and social opportunities (Funk et al., 2002; James & Ridinger, 2002).

The cited studies reveal the growing interest in Twitter by high profile student athletes and student athletes on a high profile team and researchers alike. Athletes are using Twitter to stay in touch with fellow athletes and fans. Researchers are trying to understand Twitter more fully in the sport environment from the perspectives of both athletes and their fans as Twitter followers.

### **Definition of Terms**

Emoji (Emoticons): Originally meaning pictograph, the word emoji literally means "picture" (e) + "character" (moji) ("Apple Support," 2014)

Favorite: To favorite a Tweet means to mark it as one of your favorites by clicking the yellow star next to the message ("About Twitter," 2014).

Follower (noun): A follower is another Twitter user who has followed you to receive your Tweets in their Home stream ("About Twitter," 2014).

Hashtag: The # symbol is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet. It was created organically by Twitter users. ("About Twitter," 2014).

Retweet (noun): A Tweet by another user, forwarded to you by someone you follow.

Often used to spread news or share valuable findings on Twitter (“About Twitter,” 2014).

Retweet (verb): To retweet, retweeting, retweeted. The act of forwarding another user's Tweet to all of your followers (“About Twitter,” 2014)

Tweet (noun): A message posted via Twitter containing 140 characters or fewer (“About Twitter,” 2014).

Tweet (verb): Tweet, tweeting, tweeted. The act of posting a message, often called a "Tweet", on Twitter (“About Twitter,” 2014).

Twitter: Twitter is a micro blogging network that allows mobile and Internet users to follow updates from other accounts in “real-time.” It is considered ‘micro’ by limiting users to 140 characters or less during updates (“About Twitter,” 2014).

Username: Also known as a Twitter handle. Must be unique and contain fewer than 15 characters. Is used to identify you on Twitter for replies and mentions (“About Twitter,” 2014).

## Chapter 3

### Methods

This study employed qualitative methods to examine themes that emerged from the participants' tweets. The researcher replaced certain parts of their tweets that might identify them or the university. Based on the themes, a semi-structured interview protocol was designed and administered to the participants (See Appendix A), at end of the study. Before the selection effort, institutional review-board authorization was obtained. High profile student athletes and student athletes on a high profile team, on the men's basketball team entering as freshmen, at a large public educational institution in the Midwestern United States at the Division I level were selected to participate in interviews about their Twitter use. The researcher asked the participants about their Twitter use, then researched their tweets to discover themes, and followed up with the participants about those themes. The researcher knew the participants on a personal level and was able to steer conversation during the interview process to create a comfortable communication environment that allowed the participants to open up and be completely honest in their responses and observations about their Twitter use.

### Participants:

In all, 6 participants on the men's basketball team entering as freshmen participated in this study. Though described in more detail later, all participants are male, aged 18-19 years old at the time of the study, 4 are black, 1 is mixed race (black and white), and 1 is white. Participants reported having used Twitter for as little as 5 1/2

months and for as long as 3 years ( $M = 20$  months). Upon entering the university, one participant had 97,000 Twitter followers, which was not used to determine the mean, due to that number skewing the mean. Therefore the remaining five participants reported having Twitter followers ranging from as few as 600 to 60,000 ( $M = 12,100$ ). Participants reported checking Twitter frequently throughout the day, ranging from twenty to hundreds of times each day (these participants shared that they configured Twitter to alert them each time they were mentioned or that they would simply look at their phone every few minutes). All participants stated they accessed Twitter on their cellular phone due to convenience, and they stated that only very rarely would they access Twitter via a computer. Two of the participants were highly visible upon entering the university.

#### **Instruments/Means of Data Collection:**

The researcher's initial analysis of the tweets with CTI suggested certain roles the participants fulfilled. Further examination suggested themes that seemed sensitive to different times of the of the 1 year study. This led to preliminary recognition of how the participants' student athlete role dominated the content of their tweets from October to March. This led the researcher to create time categories that paralleled different parts of the seasons. Once the researcher divided their tweets into time periods, the themes seemed more apparent. The researcher then reviewed the sorting in context of time periods and reapplied CTI to confirm the themes that were initially identified.

Tweets by themselves have limited to no context. Therefore, the tweets were collected, interpreted, and then paraphrased in follow up questions to seek clarification about their meaning. To help justify the following time periods, the researcher selected

the time periods based, in part, by how the participants slowly shed the student portion of the student athlete role during their freshmen year. To code tweet themes from these time periods, the researcher categorized each participants' tweet. After all tweets were categorized, themes were assigned to the time periods. What follows is a brief explanation of each time period, which are validated in Chapter 4.

**Preseason Tweets (June 1—October 31):** The participants arrive on campus. This time period is all about anticipation for the regular season. For some, this is the first time away from home. The participants are taking summer school, working out with the strength and conditioning coaches, practicing basketball, and working basketball camps. This time period is setting the foundation for their Twitter identity.

**Regular Season Tweets (November 1 – March 15):** The participants are exiting the preseason time period, which focused on the anticipation of the season to start. Reality sets in during this time period. The participants are now playing or not playing up to their anticipated potential. Some are having success and some are not, which is reflected in their tweets. Their online identity really takes shape and a lot of it has to do with their athletic success.

**Tournament time Tweets (March 15 – April 3):** Tournament time is the shortest time period and consists of the conference tournament and the post-season tournament. The participants are exiting the regular season time period and begin to interact more with their fan base. Because the bulk of the season is over, the participants who have had the most athletic success are the most active with their tweets. This time also saw the

participants being appreciative for their fans' support and promises for a better season, once their season concluded.

Post Tournament Tweets (April 4 – May 31): The participants are doing one of two things in this category. They are either moving on to a professional career or returning for their sophomore season. Those moving on to a professional career are thankful for their time at school and their fans. Those returning for their sophomore season are also thankful for their fans, but make promises of a successful season next year. Some participants return to their preseason Twitter habits and tweet about everyday life, school and workouts.

Initial review of tweets using CTI led to preliminary identification of them collectively fulfilling three roles. The researcher sought to validate these roles and how they operationalized them by applying the upper levels to CTI to their tweets. Doing so led the researcher to realize how the student athlete role dominated their tweets for most the year, which led to determine how both their roles and the content of their tweets paralleled the basketball season. Finally, after viewing their tweets from the vantage point of these time categories, the themes became clear.

The researcher then used post-tournament interviews, which were the time frame directly following the last tournament. This was selected because more than likely the participants' season ended in a loss (which was the case for this study). The goal was to capture their perception about how their social media use was altered by their tournament experience. This was the most important part of the interview process because the researcher could seek clarification. The goal of these interviews was to ask the

participants questions about the themes and experiences from the past twelve months' social media use.

All six interviews were conducted face to face by the researcher on university premises. Examples of interview questions included “Why do you use Twitter?” and “Who do you think follows you and why?” The length of the interviews ranged from 17 to 36 minutes (M = 25 minutes). Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed by the researcher. A semi structured interview format was chosen because this method enables participants to offer unprompted comments that produce rich data and increase the chances for truthful and archetypal responses (Brown, 2011; Karim, Bailey, & Tunna, 2000).

The 6 participants were interviewed using the following questions:

1. Why do you use social media?
2. Which platform do you prefer? Why?
3. How do you portray yourself? Why?
4. How do you think people view you?
5. Who are your tweets directed at?
6. Who do you interact with on Twitter? Instagram?
7. How do you perceive your audience?
8. What is your emotional connection to your following?

9. What are you hoping to accomplish by your tweets/instagrams?

10. Do you have a personal brand?

11. How do you represent KU, team and yourself on Twitter?

12. What do you consider positive and negative uses of social media?

13. How do you model the positive uses of social media?

14. Why do you want a lot of followers?

The qualitative method of follow-up questioning, helped the researcher navigate their responses and used the following question to help them elaborate: Is there anything else about your experiences you want to tell me about?

Some of the questions seemed to focus on their attitudes or beliefs (or even knowledge) about social media in general. Some questions focused on their personal experiences with social media. The researcher hoped to focus more on the latter, but needed to use the former to help set the context of their individual situation.

To answer the research questions, the researcher became familiar with the interview and tweet transcripts through careful initial reading and forming initial impressions. After this initial immersion in the data, the researcher isolated important material and classified these data into emergent categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After this initial categorization of data, the researcher returned to the data to gain insight into the usefulness of the developed categories (Suter, 2009). Through this constant comparative process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), development, clarification, and



enhancement of categories continued until new observations failed to add significantly to existing categories. The researcher then discussed themes with his advisor until reaching consensus regarding the content and nature of themes, a procedure that has been employed in other qualitative research (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010).

A pilot study, which occurred the year prior, consisted of eight high profile first year student athletes to test the logistics and gather important information about the interview questions. The participants were asked to give feedback about the interview. To check for understanding of the wording of interview questions, pilot study participants were asked to complete a pen and paper version of the interview and express any concerns they had with clarity or wording of questions. Problems about understanding interview questions and directions were reported by pilot study participants. Those included not knowing what the term ‘platform’ meant, when asking about ‘which social media platform do you use?’

Approval was obtained from the institutional Human Subjects Committee. The subjects were recruited from the men’s basketball program. The head coach and the Associate Athletic Director of Student Athlete Support Services gave support and approval for this process. The researcher administered the informed consent form, a description of the study with instructions.

### **Data Analysis and Hypothesis Testing**

Question 1: What roles do the participants adopt and act on related to identity via their Twitter use, within the designated time periods throughout their freshman year?

Question 2: Given the relationships and communities that occur because of the participants' use of Twitter, what do their Tweets say about how they interact with the members of each community, within the designated time categories throughout their freshman year?

Question 3: What does the participants' pattern of use on Twitter, throughout their freshmen year, reveal about the distinctions between high profile student athletes (HPSA) and student athletes on a high profile team?

The first two questions are viewed through the CTI lens. Communication theory of identity (CTI), which serves as the theoretical framework for this study and will now be discussed. Analyzing the participants' tweets and seeking clarification of their context from interviews will help answer the third question.

The roles of university athletes, teammates and university students for the study were those enrolled in the studied university and participating in basketball. Criteria used to identify the university athletes were those listed by the NCAA as being active members of the studied university basketball team. To determine the university athletes' Twitter use, the researcher zeroed in on tweets that dealt directly with basketball related activities. The tweets were not directly to their teammates, but more general in nature. Criteria used to identify teammates via their Twitter use, included tweets directly at their teammates and inside jokes that only a teammate would understand. These tweets were specific and targeted their teammates as their audience. To help identify university students, the researcher focused on tweets that dealt with non-athletic university related activities.

After all 46,000 tweets were categorized, themes were assigned to the time periods. The aforementioned time categories were used to help understand the first two questions. The third question required characteristics of its own to help identify the distinctions between student athletes on a high profile team and high profile student athletes (HPSA). The researcher used a Klout Score and Google Analytics to help with the distinctions.

**Klout Score:** Klout is a website and mobile app that uses social media analytics to rank its users according to online social influence via the "Klout Score", which is a numerical value between 1 and 100. The higher the Klout Score, the more influential.,

**Google Analytics Monthly Searches --** Average monthly searches are the average number of times people have searched for the exact keyword based on the location and Search Network targeting that has been selected. The number of searches for the term determines the average over a 12-month period.

### **Subjects Described:**

HPSA is a high profile student athlete in a high profile sport. The most basic formula to describe these subjects is the combination of high athletic performance and a high Twitter following. As the researcher dug deeper, Klout scores and Google Analytics monthly searches help to round out the picture.

Student athletes on a high profile team are high profile by association of the team they are on. Student athletes on a high profile team for this study do have impressive Twitter followings, Klout scores, and Google Analytics monthly searches, in comparison

to other student athletes at the university, but lack the athletic performance of their HPSA counterparts. They also lack the visibility of their HPSA colleagues. HPSA's have more airtime on television.

Participants Twitter usernames and hashtags were not included in the study to protect the identity of the participants.

Participant 1 turned 19 years old during his freshman year of college. His Klout score was 68 at the end of his freshmen year. His Google Analytics monthly name searches averaged 275,000 with his range being 110,000 to 450,000. His Twitter follower total was 275,000, which places him in the 99.9 percentile. He was the only true highly visible student athlete before arriving on campus. He was in the top 5 of all eligible recruits and was highly recruited by many top basketball programs and was used to being on the big stage. He was the National Player of the Year, a McDonald's All-American and the High School Male Athlete of the Year. The researcher was not surprised by his lack of interaction with fans on Twitter, due to his overall demeanor and plan to only be at the university for a short period of time. He started out as a HPSA and remained there throughout the year.

Participant 2 turned 19 years old during his freshman year of college. His Klout score was 61 at the end of his freshmen year. His Google Analytics monthly name searches averaged 69,200 with his range being 20,000 to 201,000. His Twitter follower total was 174,000, which places him in the 99.9 percentile. He was a top 100 recruit until he signed with the university used in this study, then his stock increased dramatically. He was sort of thrust into the limelight, and enjoyed the attention while at school. His

personality was such that his increased performance on the court correlated with this Twitter use and subsequent popularity. He began his collegiate career as an unknown prospect, but ended as an HPSA.

Participant 3 turned 19 years old during his freshman year of college. His Klout score was 59 at the end of his freshmen year. His Google Analytics monthly name searches averaged 8,400 with his range being 4,400 to 18,100. His Twitter follower total was 36,000, which places him in the 99.9 percentile. He was on the fence of being a HPSA when entering college, but was definitely a HPSA at the end of his freshman campaign. He was a top 25 recruit coming out of high school. He was a McDonald's All-American. Due to his performance on the court, visibility, and Twitter popularity, he moved into the HPSA category, rounding out the 3 HPSAs for the study. The tipping point was his performance on the court.

Participant 4 turned 19 years old during his freshman year of college. His Klout score was 41 at the end of his freshmen year. His Google Analytics monthly name searches averaged 4,300 with his range being 1,750 to 8,100. His Twitter follower total was 23,000, which places him in the 99.9 percentile. He was a top 35 recruit coming out of high school. He was the Player of the Year for his state. His performance on the court was sporadic, as was his Twitter use. He entered as a student athlete on a high profile team and remained in that category.

Participant 5 turned 19 years old during his freshman year of college. His Klout score was 40 at the end of his freshmen year. His Google Analytics monthly name searches averaged 2,900 with his range being 1,650 to 6,600. His Twitter follower total

was 21,000, which places him in the 99.9 percentile. He was a top 35 recruit coming out of high school. He was the Player of the Year for his state and the all-time leading scorer for his high school league. His performance on the court was sporadic, as was his Twitter use. He entered as a student athlete on a high profile team and remained in that category.

Participant 6 turned 19 years old during his freshman year of college. His Klout score was 38 at the end of his freshmen year. His Google Analytics monthly searches averaged 1,600 with his range being 750 to 3,600. His Twitter follower total was 18,000, which places him in the 99.9 percentile. He was not a top 100 recruit coming out of high school. However, once he signed with the university used in this study, he became a top 100 recruit. His performance on the court was limited, as was his Twitter use. He entered as a student athlete on a high profile team and remained in that category.

### **Limitations**

The participants in this study were limited to a convenience sample from one university. First year men's basketball players were invited to participate because of their accessibility to the investigator. The lack of diversity, due to the participants is only being on high profile sport, limits the generalizability to all high profile male student athletes. For example, some participants are involved in another sport. These participants might arrive at the university with a different understanding of the use of social media. Another limitation was the fact that the researcher could not follow up on tweet. It was challenging, because of the sheer volume, to see the players interaction on every tweet. Meaning with each tweet from the participants, could have anywhere from a few to a few thousand responses. The researcher did not include retweets by the participants studied,

due to the complexity of who has the ability to retweets the participant's tweets.

Mentions and instant messages were not taken into account for this study because it is extremely difficult to view all the mentions of a participant without access to their account.

The researcher's knowledge of the participants in the study, due to having worked so closely with them on a daily basis, influenced his ability to get closer to the participants and understand and create a more in depth analysis. The researcher's day-to-day contact with the participants was the designated responsibility by the athletic department. To ensure separation between academic advising and researching, the researcher made sure the participants were clear when they were entering the research portion of the relationship.

The researcher's role also could have influenced the participants in making academic related tweets, but it did not. The researcher did not tweet to the participants so they never realized that the researcher was present on Twitter. When the researcher asked the participants about something they tweeted, the participants had to be reminded that the researcher was on Twitter.

## Chapter 4

### Results

CTI was used in answering the first two research questions and was applied to the participants as a whole. In answering the first two questions, different patterns of Twitter use emerged for several participants, which led to the third research question and the need to draw distinctions on how the participants defined and acted on their student athlete role. An initial review of the content of their Tweets led the researcher to recognize what they tweeted related to what was occurring in their roles as a student athlete, which caused the researcher first to place their Tweets into the four time categories and then to apply CTI accordingly. The time pattern was identified by their Twitter use, which led the researcher to break their use into four date categories. The research questions were stated as follows:

Question 1: What roles do the participants adopt and act on related to identity via their Twitter use, within the designated time periods throughout their freshman year?

Question 2: Given the relationships and communities that occur because of the participants' use of Twitter, what do their Tweets say about how they interact with the members of each community, within the designated time categories throughout their freshman year?

Question 3: What does the participants' pattern of use on Twitter, throughout their freshmen year, reveal about the distinctions between high profile student athletes (HPSA) and student athletes on a high profile team?



This study built on the work of Sanderson and Hambrick (2012) regarding the use of Twitter to disseminate information about a sport related event. Though this study focused on student athletes' use of Twitter, as opposed to professional athletes, it went further into the student athletes' online identity. The researcher argues that through their use of Twitter, participants adopted roles that they defined, and unlike their peers in non-high profile sports, acted on those roles in a highly public online setting through the use of their favorite social media platform, Twitter. First, the researcher reviewed their tweets to gain a sense of what they were saying; doing some initial coding that caused the researcher to realize certain patterns, such as time and potential roles the participants were fulfilling. The researcher then tried to validate the time and potential roles by analyzing their tweets and categorizing representative sample of tweets. Once the tweets were categorized, CTI was applied to all tweets within each time category and then were placed into the different layers of CTI. The researcher stepped back to discern what patterns emerged within each time category and CTI layers.

CTI suggests that there was a communication process by the participants' Twitter use, so that there were features such as roles adopted by those communicating. In each role a person was communicating with a particular audience, and the role/audience suggested a certain relationship. As will be discussed later, CTI's personal/enactment layers will be paired. When analyzing the data for part I, the researcher is speaking about the participants as a collective.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Part I**

To answer the first research question, the researcher initially reviewed the 6 incoming freshmen student athletes' 46,000 tweets and was struck by a time pattern to their use of Twitter. This led the researcher to break their use of Twitter into four date categories, which were coded into the following: 1) Preseason (June 1 – October 31), 2) Regular Season (November 1 – March 15), 3) Tournament time (March 15 – April 3), 4) Post Tournament (April 4 – May 30). Preseason's dates were based on the fact that the participants are arriving on campus in anticipation of the season to begin. The Regular Season dates were based on the time that the participants were playing in regular season games. In this date category their roles take shape and their athletic performance is measured and evaluated by themselves, their teammates and their fans. The Tournament time designates both the conference tournament and a post-season tournament. In this category, the participants are the most active with their fans. The final category, Post Tournament, is the conclusion of everything. The participants are either moving on to a professional career or returning for a sophomore season. Those participants that planned to return begin to migrate back into their Preseason habits. The aforementioned dates were chosen because they served as natural markers for the participants' athletic endeavors and there was a direct correlation with athletic performance and Twitter use. Through analyzing the participants' tweets the researcher was able identify several themes related to how they operationalized their roles and interacted with others.

The researcher first needed to explore what their use of Twitter suggested about the roles that they adopted and acted on, beginning with them first reaching campus.

Looking at CTI's personal and enactment layers of identity helped to comprehend how the participants' described themselves. One has multiple identities, so for this study the researcher identified what characterized each participant's Twitter identity as revealed by their tweets. The researcher selected specific tweet examples that showed the personal layer along with the enactment layer. The two CTI layers were combined for this study due to the small population and tweets available.

**Personal/Enactment Layer Examples:**

The personal layer of identity provides an "understanding [of] how individuals define themselves in general as well as in particular situations" (Hecht et al., 1993, pp. 166–167). The different roles the participants for this study took on were that of: university athlete, teammate and university student. The enactment layer conceptualizes identity as a performance, as something being expressed. Participants are figuring out how to present themselves as a university athlete, teammate and university student. The participants in this study, embrace their university athlete and teammate roles primarily, and their student role secondarily. Some of the changes include, but are not limited to, being away from family support for the first time, academic rigor, being on a high profile team, and the physical work that accompanies a collegiate sport. The preseason was a crucial launching pad for the participants.

Preseason for participants in this study consisted of arriving on campus, taking summer school, beginning the fall semester, a highly anticipated open first practice, followed by a few exhibitions games and some high profile competitive games versus top opponents; all of which are dramatic and life changing. Many of the participants arrived on campus with high expectations. Many have never been away from their families. The

academic rigor during this time period was just one of the many time constraints for the participants. A week in the life of a preseason participant looked like the following: 8:00am – 12:00pm class, followed by a 1:00pm lift, then from 2:30pm – 4:30pm they played pick-up basketball, after that they worked a camp until 7:00pm, and then had tutoring until 9:00pm. Sprinkle in a few day trips to neighboring communities to work and all day basketball camp, and that was what the participants' preseason lives looked like. Many of the tweets seen during this time period vary. Some tweeted about the basic first time away from home experiences. Several tweets can be classified as the role of a university student, such as “I need someone to clean my room (insert sad face emoji),” or “I can't believe I locked myself out my room.” As the practice season begins, many begin to identify with the hype surrounding the season. This is when the student athlete and team member roles are prevalent. For example, “Who is ready for Late Night tomorrow?” and “It s about to be a fun night!!! CRAZY (insert team created hashtag).” The aforementioned tweets were directed to fans, university students, and teammates.

As the season begins their tweets begin to focus on the season at hand and the fans. Again, most of the tweets can be classified as a university athlete. The following tweet was a university athlete role directed to fans: “Best thing about tonight: I got to witness the chant at the end of the game... Always thought it was crazy.” This tweet, “I'm both hungry and humble. Can't wait for the season to start,” is a university athlete role directed at fans. The teammate role was also present with tweets like, “My teammates really think they can dance! (insert dancing emoji),” which is directed at the teammate audience. An example of the teammate role with the fans and teammates in mind is, “I'm in here getting up late night shots (referring to practicing shooting baskets).” Some took

to humor to enact their identity, ““Not in my house” That s what i ll be saying all season long (in reference to a commercial starring Dikembe Mutombo). As a whole, the participants go through the most change during this time period. All participants in the study think, during this time, that they all will play regularly and continue to be successful, as they were in high school. The anticipation is high for both the participants and their followers. The beginning of the preseason saw a few mentions of the university student role, but as the regular season approached, their tweets shifted dramatically to the university athlete and teammate role.

Regular Season for participants consist of tweets about conference play and accolades associated with it and the hype for the conference tournament and post-season tournament. The weekly schedule of the participants looked something like this: Class until 1:00pm, then a team lift around 2:45pm, followed by a practice until 5:30pm, directly to tutoring at 7:00pm until 8:30pm. Most of the participants eat their dinner at their tutoring session. Basketball consumes most of their day during this time period. Roles during this time are almost exclusively university athlete and teammate driven. Tweets directed at fans and teammates included, “That s how we become a team!!! Move on, learn from it and tomorrow will definitely be better (insert hashtag created by media department).” The aforementioned tweet is important because players are becoming aware of the legacy and responsibility they now have playing for the studied team. The following tweet is a student athlete tweet directed at both teammates and fans, “Good Win tonight..... What a feeling!!!!!! (insert hashtag created by media department).” University athlete tweets directed to fans included, “I’m back y’all,” and “I want you to know how competitive I am.” Several of the tweets from the student athlete role included

references to the number of conference championships the university has won. Many tweeted about their excitement for the upcoming post-season tournament. Focusing on tweets for their fans, “All we do is win!” and “Time to get focused! #dancetime (referencing a post season tournament).” The researcher noticed the participants were continuing to move away from the university student role.

Tournament time is the shortest of the four date categories, but probably the most influential time in the lives of participants. Almost all tweets took on the student athlete role and are dedicated to the post-season tournaments and their fans. The participants missed a significant amount of school due to travel for the conference tournament and the post-season tournament. Therefore, one can assume that their Twitter role was focused on that of student athlete and teammate. For example, “Sometimes, I do some stuff on the court just to make it fair for the opponent (insert an image of this participant on his knees holding the ball above his head while the opponent still couldn’t reach the ball).” Other examples include, “Best fans in the world, thanks for coming out!” and “Great win for the squad, let’s #keepdancing.” As the team exited the post season tournament earlier than expected, there was a dramatic drop off in the number of tweets, as if they were no longer interested in their high profile status, or what largely had become the dominant role, that of university athlete. However, there were still no tweets that fit the university student role.

Post Tournament time saw a decline in not only the volume of tweets but also the enthusiasm surrounding the basketball program. Initially, the participants tweeted as university athletes and teammates. Many tweets were for fans, for example, “I promise no more let downs #backtowork,” and “This won’t happen again.” Many of the players took

their tweets to comment on the weather and the excitement for the NBA draft. Tweets moved away from being for their fans to more generic tweets and those directed at teammates. “Couldn’t as for a lovelier day here in (insert the name of the city the university is located),” and “Congrats to my boy @(insert the name of a player who declared for the NBA draft).” This time period also saw a return to a few university student role tweets. For example, “Time to get these finals up off me (insert books emoji),” and “Finals over (insert wide eyed emoji).” Only as their athletic responsibilities diminished did the participants return to their university student role. However, the researcher found that in the context of their use of Twitter, the participants acted on a university student role that was quite distinct from their peers.

To answer Q1, What roles do the participants adopt and act on related to identity via their Twitter use, within the designated time periods throughout their freshman year? The researcher concluded that as the participants arrive on campus, the roles they adopt include university student, student athletes and teammate. The university student role largely can be described by the struggles of living on their own for the first time and academic themed tweets. In the university athlete role, the participants tweet about athletic success, failures, practices and personal work. The teammate role includes ‘shout outs’ to teammates and love and appreciation for teammates. As the participants move closer to athletic competition, their tweets become exclusively university athlete and teammate roles driven. Then, with the conclusion of the athletic competition portion of their calendar year, the participants return to all three roles; university student, university athlete and teammate. The personal layer of identity provides an important step in helping

to understand how the participants define themselves. How they enacted via their tweets is also important to know when looking at identity.

The time categories the researcher chose could have been more typical for a university student, that is the summer session, the fall semester and the spring semester. However, the categories emerged from an initial review of the data added support to the researcher's finding of the dominance of the university athlete role in their tweets.

## **Part II**

The Relational layer of CTI states that relationships are the focus of identity. According to Sanderson (2011) participants' identity is influenced by their interaction with others on Twitter. Meaning, the participants are creating their individual identities through their relationships with others, specifically teammates, university students, and fans.

### **Relational Layer Examples:**

Preseason for participants saw examples of the relational layer of CTI, while simultaneously building upon the roles identified in Part I. Examples directed at university students, in the role of a university athlete was, "How many of ya'll takin summer school? (insert sad face emoji)." This tweet is seeking a connection with university students, who might be in the same "sad" situation as the participant. The participants' tweets during this time showed them taking on the university student role. However, as the regular season approached, the participants continued to direct tweets at all of their audiences, but moved gradually into the university athlete role. The following tweet was directed at teammates, university students, and fans, and in the role of an university athlete, "I was taking some time off twitter but i missed y all way too much so



i m back and getting ready for the season (insert team created hashtag) (insert hashtag created by the media department).” This tweet showed a connection that the participant feels he has with his followers, even though he was being sarcastic. It also shows the awareness of the diverse audience the participant has. The participants are in a way trying to gain a sense of each audience, during the preseason, but it isn’t until the regular season that they truly cater their tweets to their audiences. The participants are novices in not only their personal identity, but also their online identity. They feed off how their audiences respond to their tweets. For example, as the regular season was approaching the participants tweeted more about the anticipation of the season saying, “It’s about that time!” and “Can’t wait to show y’all.”

Regular season for participants had several examples of the relational layer. Many of the tweets were in the university athlete role, however there were a few examples of the university student role, directed at all of their audiences. The first example of the university student role directed at university students was, “Can someone teach me how to make cookies and brownies please?” However, as the days got closer to the season’s first game, the participants moved into the university athlete role and tweeted to all of their audiences. For example, “How many more days? Are y all ready? (insert hashtag created by the media department).” The latter tweet shows that the participants know they owe their audience recognition of their allegiance and commitment to the team because of the direct and specific questions to fans.

Tournament time for participants in the relational layer was more apologetic than anything, probably due to the teams’ early departure from both the conference tournament and the post-season tournament. In fact, most of the participants were silent

following the teams departure. However, those that did recognize their audience tweeted, “Never again will I let (insert mascot name) nation down again...never.” This shows that the participants know that they are a part of something bigger than themselves and that they need to make sure their fans know how they feel when they lose.

Post-Tournament time for the participants focused entirely on their teammates and the team’s relational influence. One participant tweeted, “Congrats to my boy (insert twitter handle of a teammate who declared for the NBA draft ! Started off as competitors and became brothers, wish you the best fam.” Tweets similar to this tweet were common and show how close teammates can become after only spending one season together.

The Communal layer of CTI states that group members share common characteristics, histories, and collective experiences and memories that result in common identities. CTI depicts communication that occurs as an interactive process. The relationships are formed as a result of community. Those involved must rethink their roles and act on them accordingly. By this, the researcher means the participants are developing certain characteristics and creating new experiences, via their Twitter experience. Participants share these experiences and characteristics and express them via their Tweets. The researcher found that two communities emerge; one connected to the participants’ fans and one connected to their teammates. As the regular season of play was in full swing, the participants’ tweets focused on these two audiences.

#### **Communal Layer Examples:**

Preseason for participants in the communal layer is a time where friendships and teammate relationships are formed, but also an identity to being a part of something bigger than their team begins to emerge. Due to the participants’ busy schedules, they

spend almost every waking moment with their recruiting class teammates. They are in the same courses, lift weights and practice together, but also work camps and are in tutoring together. Therefore, it is fitting that the bulk of their tweets involve their teammates. Only one participant tweeted as a university student with their university peers in mind, “How many of ya’ll got homework tonight?” The participants demonstrated the university athlete role with fans as their audience with the following tweet: “So many fans showing so much love!! Love (insert team mascot) nation...y all loyal.” The participants also demonstrated the university athlete role with their teammates in mind with the following, “My teammates r my brothas for life #rideordie.” Both tweets emphasize the loyalty given to not only teammates, but also fans of the program. As the regular season approached more tweets focused as university athletes’ roles with their fans and teammates as the audience.

Regular season for participants in the communal layer saw a continuation of fan interaction alongside teammate camaraderie. This makes sense because of the amount of time the participants have spent together and the responsiveness to their tweets from their fan base. The participants tweeted the following as a university athlete with the fans as the audience, “Great scrimmage this morning ! Thanks to all the fans that came out this morning to support ! #NationsBestFans (insert hashtag of university’s chant for sports teams),” and “Our fans tho!” The participants tweeted as university athletes with their teammates in mind, “Don’t know what I’d do without my team!!!” This time period saw the participants focusing almost entirely on the university athlete role with their teammates and fans, as their audiences, in mind. The tournament time period saw a similar pattern.

Tournament time for participants in the communal layer saw an exclusive focus on the university athlete role with several allegiance tweets to the fan community. This time period involves a lot of travel and can be extremely short. Since there is not a home court advantage with the conference tournament and the post-season tournament, participants seem to be rallying support from their fans via the tweets. “Some many fans at our hotel tonight!! #bestfansever,” and “We won tonight cuz of the fans...y all the best #seriously.” Once the team exited the post-season tournament earlier than expected, the communal tweets turned more apologetic. “I never want to lose again as long as I’m wearing a (insert mascot name) jersey!! #hateit.” Fans and teammates were the focus during this time period and following the tournament.

Post-Tournament time for participants in the communal layer saw a small return to team directed tweets, but also had few for their fans. As mentioned, almost all tweets during this time period were from the university athlete role. One participant tweeted “(insert Twitter handle of a newly committed teammate for the following season) & (insert Twitter handle of a newly committed teammate for the following season) gone (slang for ‘going to’) let em kno (let them know) next year!” He was talking about future teammates and their projected future success as a team. Some participants were possibly gaining some awareness of the team as a community with the past, present and future. The following two tweets, “We didn’t finish the way we wanted to, but next year we beastin!” and “Hungry this off season...stay tuned!” are not only a rally cry for their future team, but also an assurance to their fan base about the forthcoming season. The researcher found it surprising that there was a drop off in the number of tweets between conference and post conference periods. Many of the tweets were university student

driven tweets to fellow students, since the participants were done with basketball and had returned to the classroom fulltime.

Identity, according to the Relational layer of CTI, states that relationships are the focus. The participants created their own identities through interaction with teammates, university students, and fans. Experiences and collective characteristics are the foundation of the Communal layer of CTI. The participants used Twitter to play out both the Relational and Communal layers of CTI.

### **Part III**

Question 3: What does the participants' pattern of use on Twitter, throughout their freshmen year, reveal about the distinctions between high profile student athletes (HPSA) and student athletes on a high profile team?

To answer the third research question, the researcher analyzed all six participants' pattern of use on Twitter to distinguish between HPSAs and student athletes on a high profile team. The researcher analyzed the tweets and interviewed all six participants. What the researcher found was that one participant came in already highly visible. Two of the six participants began the year as student athletes on a high profile team but eventually transitioned to HPSA, while three remained student athletes on a high profile team throughout the entire year. The researcher will support the transition from a student athlete on a high profile team to HPSA, through an analysis of their tweets and their responses to interview questions.

## Participants Described

All the freshmen that commit to the studied team feel that they have the opportunity to become a high profile student athlete (HPSA). However, only a few do actually transform from a student athletes on a high profile team to a HPSA. Many factors contribute to their placement: from the number of followers (the larger the number of followers, the more high profile one can be described), to Klout score (the higher the score, the more influential that person is on social media), to Google internet name searches (the more internet name searches, the more people are trying to find out information about that individual), to playing time (the more a participant plays, the more exposure they have to the program's fans, both on television and actual playing time), to game production (the more success on the court, the more positive their interactions on Twitter), to the content of their tweets (participants' volume of tweets increased with playing time, and they were more active on Twitter while they were playing with success). The first three participants set themselves apart from the last three through their twitter use and the individual interviews will be used to help support the distinctions.

Participant 1 was the most visible entering his freshman year of college. Chapter 3 lists his accolades prior to entering college. His Twitter use demonstrated his understanding of his highly visible status in that he knew he was "only going to be here for about 8 or 9 months tops, before heading to the NBA." In figure 1.1, Participant 1's initial Twitter followers, prior to entering college, are represented. 97,000 Twitter followers alone were enough to set Participant 1 aside as being the most visible Participant. 275,000 Google name searches per month was his average. This is a

remarkable statistic as well. His Klout score, or his measure of social media influence, was 55 entering his first year of college. This is much higher than where most participants, for this study, ended at their first year. His impressiveness does not stop there; he was also the national high school player of the year for his graduating class.

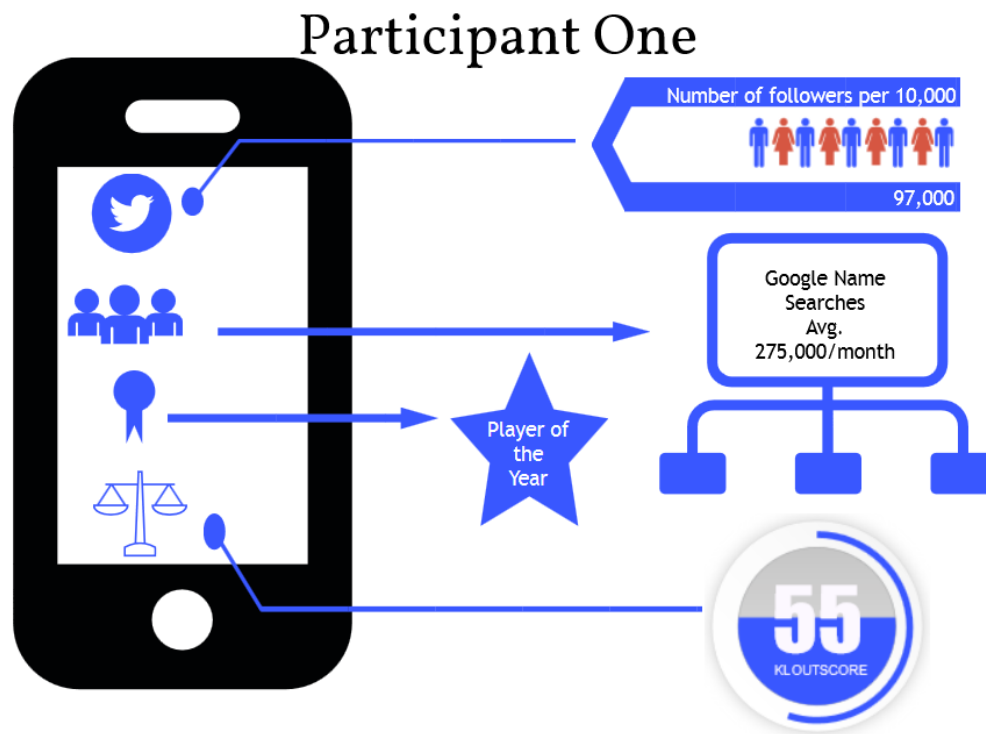


Figure 1.1

Participant 1's first tweet was, "Headin to class." When asked why he would tweet about heading to class he responded, "Most people knew I was only going to be here for a little bit and I just wanted people to know that I would be on campus and actually attending class. You know a lot of times students will tweet about seeing me on campus and I like letting people know when I'll be on campus." This particular tweet and interview answer reveals that Participant 1 was cognizant of what identity he was

portraying on Twitter. It also shows that he had a plan for his freshman year. When asked if he ever tweets about skipping class he replied, “That’s stupid, why would I do that?” Prior to the first game he tweeted, “I’ve been waiting for this moment for years and can’t wait to play.” When asked what he meant by that tweet he said, “I was just so excited to be on campus, after waiting for like a year before I could come to college. I wanted to prove myself right when I set foot on campus, you know?” Participant 1 was showing that his competitiveness was a characteristic upon which he prided himself. He was also preparing his Twitter followers for the great expectations many had placed upon his shoulder. When asked if he was aware of his visible status, he replied, “I mean its been that way since I was in middle school, I just try to be myself and not draw any attention that doesn’t benefit me or my team.”

His Twitter use even offered insight into his awareness of how his online presence affected the University. Participant 1 tweeted, “If you think campus safety awareness is an issue that should be looked at and improved then go support and look into the (insert motto of a student government organization) campaign.” When asked what this particular tweet was about, he said, “A friend of mine asked me to tweet this out for them, I was just being nice.” When pressed about the relevance or importance of campus safety, he replied, “I mean its not like I’m not for campus safety, I am, but I was just helping a friend out with trying to spread the word.” Perhaps university politics was not at the top of Participant 1’s list, but this does show that by being a public figure, he has a large audience that he can reach with just one tweet. He was also aware that if his friends needed to spread a far-reaching message that he had the largest Twitter following to do this.



His final tweet was mimicked by many teammates, but his large number of followers and his overall high profile stature made it extremely impactful, in the number of people who not only favorited his tweet but also retweeted and replied. Participant 1 tweeted, "LOVE MY TEAM." When asked about why he did not express his love for family members or significant others like they did for their team, Participant 1 responded, "Well, I guess you could say that we love our teammates more than anything else during the season." This speaks volumes about teammate relationships. When asked about how this tweet was received on Twitter, he said, "There is nothing the fans like more than showing them love and showing your teammates love, it's that simple. I also felt bad about how our season ended and my role in our loss." Participant 1's tweets reinforce the university athlete and teammate roles, and suggest that using Twitter to personally communicate with family and friends was not on his radar. Participant 1's Twitter use seemed simple, but once you factor in the emotions of the ups and downs players face throughout a season, it is also impressive that he was able to demonstrate such maturity via his tweets.

Participant 1's performance on the court was definitely special., He set the freshman scoring record, was first team all-conference, was an All-American and was a lottery pick for the NBA draft. Participant 1 lived up to the expectations placed upon his shoulders. He started as a HPSA and ended there. He maintained a steady performance on the court and in his Twitter use; he did not have drastic surges or lulls in either aspect of his life.

Participant 2 was a highly recruited player out of high school. His talent level was unproven. Participant 2 started out the season as a student athlete on a high profile team, but transitioned into a HPSA by the end of the season. In fact, he was surprised by how quickly he transitioned into a HPSA. In figure 1.2 Participant 2’s initial Twitter followers were relatively low, when compared to Participant 1. However, his Google name search average is impressive at 170,000 per month. Participant 2 was also a top 10 high school player, and ranked #1 at his position. His Klout score was 38, which is decent.

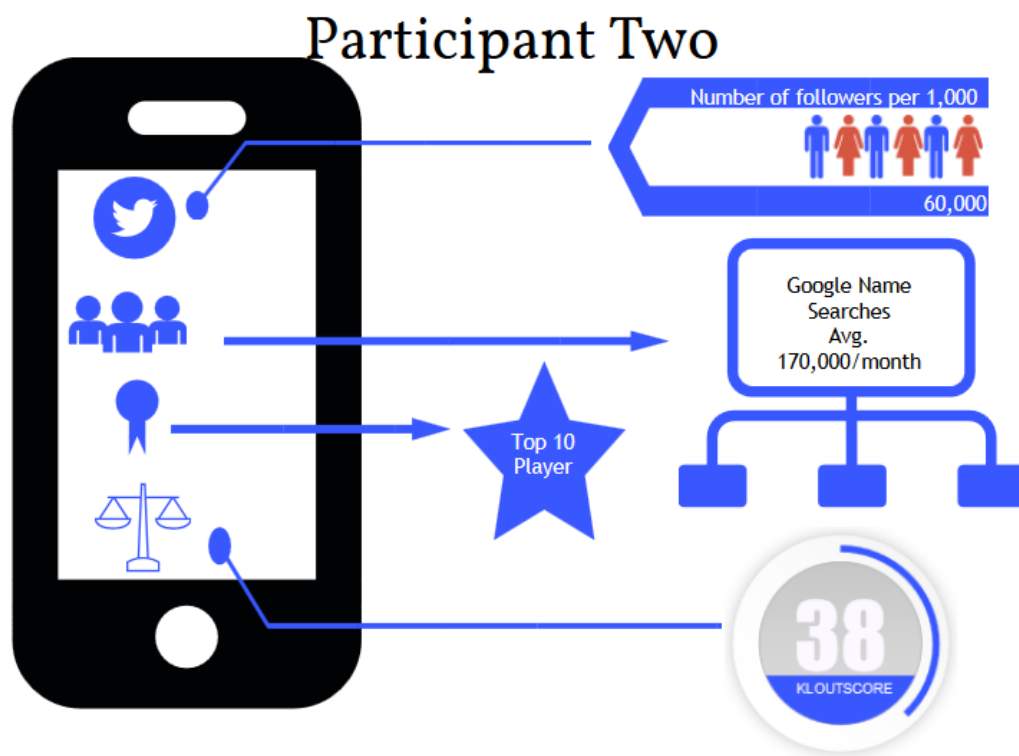


Figure 1.2

Participant 2’s early tweets show that he was testing the waters of his new followers (once signing to play at the university, Participant 2 doubled his Twitter following). Participant 2 tweeted, “These squirrels on campus are out of control (insert

emoji of a squirrel).” When asked why he tweeted that he replied, “Every time I walk on campus, I feel like I have a close encounter with a squirrel. Plus, every time I tweet about squirrels, my followers respond in large numbers.” Participant 2 shows that he is paying attention to his newfound fame and is playing up his tweets for the audience. He was not used to all the attention. Participant 2 also revealed through his tweet that he is on campus attending class. He also is attempting to point out something that he thinks his followers find humorous. Participant 2 had several tweets that cater to building a fan base, but some of the best examples include, “Should I get an Instagram account???” and “Happy Holidays y all!!! Have fun and make good decisions..... I love y all.” When asked why he tweeted about asking his followers if he should get an Instagram account, he said, “My followers love when I ask them questions. I guess it makes them feel like they are apart of my life. Plus, I see who is interested in me.” This is reflective of CTI’s relational layer, as well as building his fan base. When asked about his Happy Holidays tweet, he said, “I always tell my followers that I love them. It must make them feel good. I am just joking around, but sometimes people must think I am serious. I know the girls like it when I say it.”

As the season got closer, Participant 2 continued the trend of showing followers his eagerness to play. Participant 2 tweeted, “On a mission!” When asked what he meant by that tweet he responded, “I just wanted people to know, you know, like all the fans and stuff, to know that I was on a mission to win it all and I wanted them to know that about me from day one.” Participant 2 was also showing not only his competitive nature, but also his work ethic. Both are driving him on a mission. When asked if he felt like he owed his followers anything, he said, “Definitely. They show me so much love on

Twitter that I feel like I should give them what they want.” Participant 2 tweeted “They’re gonna love me for my ambition,” and “The first person who talked to me today was like when they see u, they see DOLLAR SIGNS so watch out (Face with eyes wide open emoji) we became friends by the way lol.” Participant 2’s attention via Twitter was increasing with each tweet. The sillier the tweet the more attention he received. His personality was perfect for his Twitter behavior. As Participant 2’s success on the court increased so did his Twitter following. In fact, he realized how influential he was becoming via Twitter. When asked when he realized he was influential, he responded, “Once I heard that I might be a lottery pick in the NBA.” Perhaps without knowing Participant 2 was actively defining his identity and constructing a fan base. But shortly after, he put his Twitter influence to the test.

Participant 2 tweeted, “Vote for Betty.” When asked why he tweeted that, he said, “Betty is a friend of mine and she was running for some office at (insert university’s initials) and I just decided to use my tweet as a show of support.” When asked if Betty had asked for him to tweet that out, he said, “No, she didn’t ask, I just knew she was running for office and wanted to help her out.” Similar to Participant 1, Participant 2 knew he had the second most Twitter followers on the team and that his tweets carried weight with his followers, which largely consisted of fellow students, because he would constantly remind the researcher during the interview process. His tweet had more to do with friendship and loyalty than it does university politics, but within the context of Twitter, his audience would have a difficult time not seeing this tweet as one that does bare political awareness and participation. Also, Participant 2 tweeted for ‘Betty’ was shortly after participant 1’s ‘campus safety’ tweet. The researcher never asked

specifically if Participant 2 was influenced by Participant 1's 'campus safety' tweet, but the assumption can be made that it was.

Participant 2's success on the court continued to rise and the silliness of his tweets diminished, especially towards the end of the regular season. It wasn't until the end of the season that Participant 2 tweeted, "Back to work...I promise next year will be better (insert team created hashtag)." When asked about what he meant by that tweet he responded, "I wanted to let all the fans know that I was going to get better in the off season and that I was gonna come back next year even better and we was gonna win it all. Plus, I didn't get a chance to play in the tournament, so I feel like I kind of let my fans down." This tweet shows not only work ethic and competitiveness, but also a realization that Participant 2's audience of fans, wanted to be assured of future success. Soon after this tweet, Participant 2 tweeted, "And that was the best choice I have made so far in life. (insert the name of the university) is the place to be (insert team hashtag)." When asked why he tweeted that, he replied, "When I came here, people were so nice to me and no one knew I'd be here only one year, including me. And I truly believe this school is the best thing that has happened to me, so I just wanted to thank everyone." Participant 2 shows a direct connection to CTI's communal layer. Participant 2's Twitter behavior changed with his success. Asked if he knew he was transitioning from a university athlete on a high profile team to a HPSA, he said, "Once we won at (insert team from conference) and ESPN was talking about me being a top five pick, I knew something was changing." Even though Participant 2 did not return for his sophomore season, he understood that he did not want to let his fan base down, so he tweeted what

he thought they would want to hear, even if he knew in his head he was not going to return.

Participant 3 was also highly recruited out of high school. In figure 1.3, Participant 3 was a top 30 in the nation recruit. His Twitter following was at 3,600 followers. He average 8,400 Google name searches and had a Klout score of 31. Participant 3 also started out the season as a student athlete on a high profile team and due to his success on the court and increase in Twitter followers throughout the season, he transformed into a HPSA.

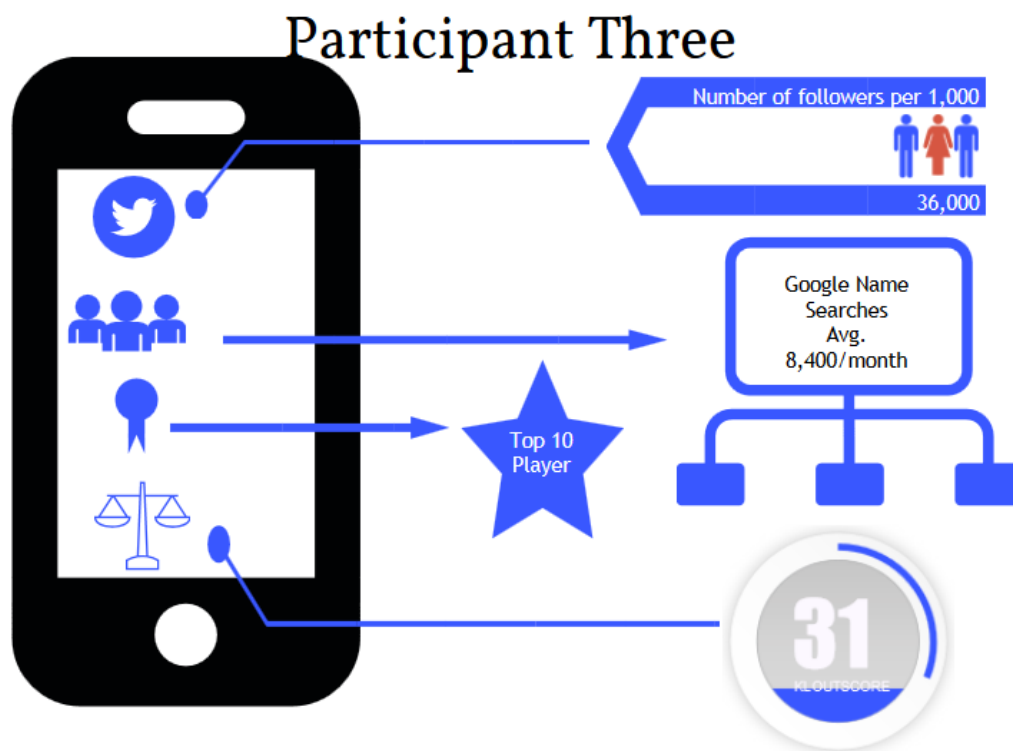


Figure 1.3

Keeping in line with the previous two participants, Participant 3 tweeted, “It’s about time!” When asked what he meant by that tweet he said, “I felt like I had been tweeting about how much I couldn’t wait to get to (insert university’s name) and show everyone my skills (meaning basketball talent).” Participant 3 is showing his competitive spirit and his eagerness to play. When Participant 3 was asked about his Twitter following once he signed with the studied university, he said, “As soon as I signed with (insert the university’s initials) my Twitter following tripled, like overnight. I knew I was beginning to gain attention.” When Participant 3 arrived on campus he regularly tweeted “follow my boy (then inserted teammate’s Twitter handle).” When questioned on why you would request that people follow your teammate on Twitter, Participant 3 responded, “It’s kind of like a way of requesting more followers. So basically I’ll ask (teammate’s name) to shout me out on Twitter and tell all of his followers to follow me and then I’ll do the same for him.” Participant 3’s understanding of building a fan base aligns with Sanderson’s (2013) study.

Participant 3 tweeted the most about the team. “Love my team! (Insert a hashtag the team created)” When asked why do you tweet your love for your team? “Its like you go through so much with your teammates, all the hard practices, all the weights, all the treatment (meaning physical therapy or rehabilitation for injuries), and so you jus wanna tell everyone how important your brothers are to you. I say brothers and I mean it.” Teammates have so many shared experiences that student athletes feel the need to show their love for one another via their Twitter accounts to all of the their followers. This is an example of CTI’s communal layer. As Participant 3’s success on the court increased, so did his Twitter following. After being named conference player of the week and scoring

the most in a game, he tweeted, “Best fans in the nation!” When asked about that tweet, he responded, “I just wanted the fans to know I appreciate them. I also started to hear more talk about NBA teams interested in me. I knew this was for real and needed to treat my Twitter more real.” Participant 3 was transitioning from participant to participant due to his play on the court and his use of Twitter. He was seeing his own Twitter use as something more important.

Participant 3’s presence on Twitter and his understanding for his following is best represented when he tweeted, “Want to let (insert the university’s mascot name) Nation know, I will be returning for my sophomore season! Cant wait to get to work & get back in the (insert the name of the home arena where the team plays) (insert team created hashtag). When asked about this particular tweet, he said, “I felt that I put in so much work and our fans are so good and loyal that I wanted to reassure them that I was not going to pursue the NBA and wanted to come back and win as many games as possible.” Along with work ethic and competitiveness, another characteristic was an awareness of his obligation to his fan base (followers). Participant 3 was probably the most astute in recognizing his Twitter following as his fan base, one that he might try to take with him when he decides to have a professional career. This dovetails nicely with the case study from Pegoraro (2010), in which she writes, “the interaction with fans, and athletes’ tweets about their personal lives also build on the work of Kassing and Sanderson (2010), who suggested that Twitter has a capacity, “to function as a medium for athletes to offer commentary and opinion and as a mechanism for fostering immediacy with fans through interactivity and insider perspectives’.” Participant’s 1, 2, and 3 all provide examples from the Pegoraro study.



As previously mentioned, all six participants felt that they are a part of something bigger than themselves. However, only a few actually transform from a student athlete on a high profile team to a HPSA. Many factors contribute to their placement: from number of followers, to game production, to playing time, to the content of their tweets. The following three participants demonstrate their twitter use as student athlete on a high profile team.

Participant 4 was a top 25 recruit coming out of high school, which is impressive but lacked the weight of being labeled high profile when compared to the first three participants. Participant 4's characteristics are presented in figure 1.4. His number of Twitter followers is 2,500, which is on par with Participant 3's followers. However, the reader will see the difference later on in the study, when it comes to where Participant 4 ends the season.

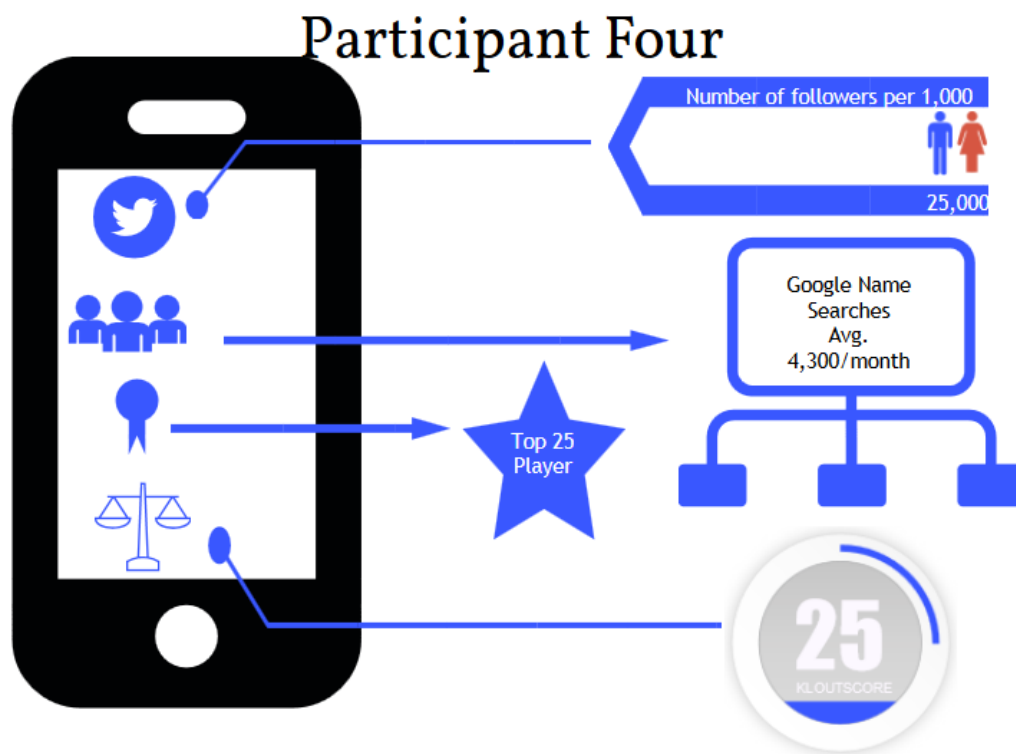


Figure 1.4

Participant 4 started out tweeting with enthusiasm about the anticipation of the start of the school year. Participant 4 tweeted, “(insert university city name) is starting to pick up now (insert winky face emoji).” When asked why he tweeted that he said, “I had been here all summer and there were not that many students in town. So when all the students started to show up for school, I was just commenting on how busy the streets where and how many kids were up walking around campus. I did the winky face cuz I noticed all the good looking girls that weren’t here during the summer.” This tweet reveals that through stating the obvious (increase in the number of students in town) he was also letting the female population know that he was looking, which translates to an interest in girls. He is nonchalantly flirting via his tweet. His enthusiasm continued up

until the start of the season. Participant 4 tweeted, “It’s my turn...let’s do this! (insert a hashtag the team created)” When asked what he meant by that tweet he replied, “They always talk about how (insert university name) always reloads on talent and how many good players have come through here. Then when it’s finally your turn, you don’t want to let people down, you want to continue with the winning.” This signals awareness of becoming part of something bigger than himself or even the current team.

Participant 4’s twitter use diminished to almost non-existent status during the season. He had one game in which he played a significant number of minutes in a game and immediately following the game tweeted, “We need a new trophy room cuz that’s what we do, WE WIN..... Now it’s time to make this season GREAT.” His role in that particular game contributed to his team’s likelihood of winning a conference championship. However, his playing time diminished following that game, and his Twitter presence did as well. In fact, he tweeted nothing more about basketball until after the school year was over. When asked why his Twitter use diminished so much, he responded, “I feel like the students and fans didn’t want to hear from somebody who wasn’t playin.” A direct correlation can be made between on the court success and Twitter use volume. When Participant 4 had a good game, he took to Twitter immediately following the game to connect.

Participant 5 was a top 100 recruit. He went to a year of prep school, in anticipation of landing a better scholarship than what he was originally offered out of high school. Participant 5’s characteristics, labeled in figure 1.5, are comparable to those of Participant 4.

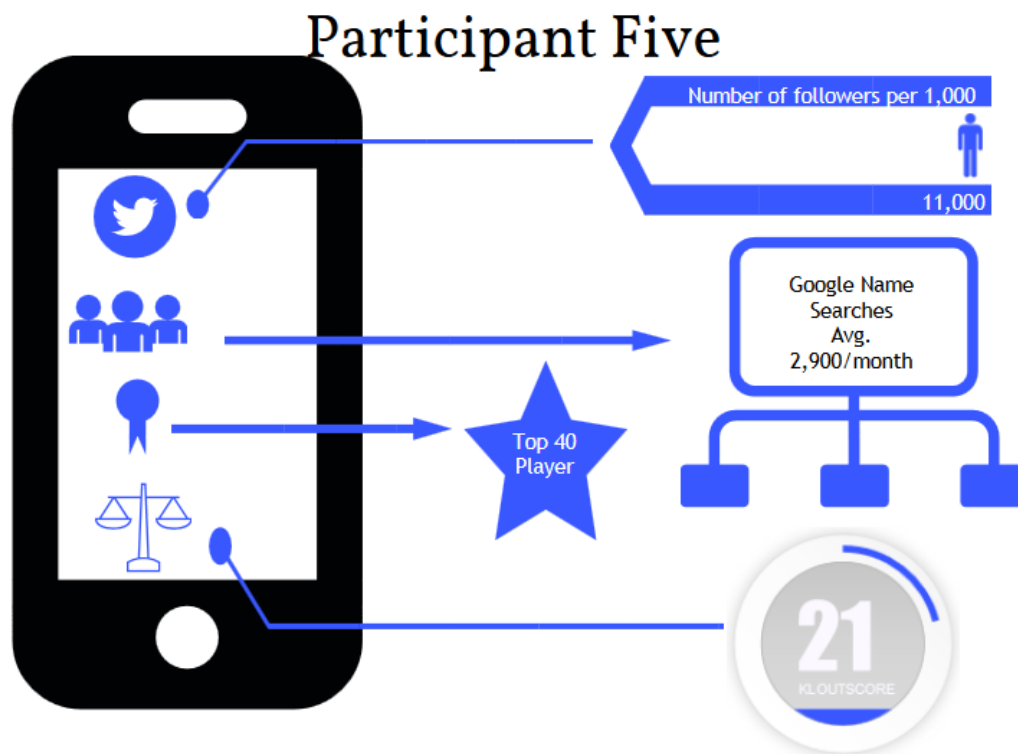


Figure 1.5

Participant 5's hunger to play was demonstrated by one of his first tweets. He tweeted, "I can't wait to play (insert angry face emoji) I'm hungry!" Being hungry is a slang term for competitiveness. When asked about why he tweeted that he replied, "I wanted my followers to know that I'm a competitive person and live for playing." Both competitiveness and an eagerness to compete come through in this tweet. However, his lack of success and playing time severely dampened his Twitter use. He had very few tweets outside of some lyrics to songs and the occasional, "I hate AT&T," tweet. When asked why he tweeted that he said, "My phone is AT&T, and it was not getting good reception, so I just tweeted my frustration with them." This is an emotional tweet. Upon further discussion about the possible ramifications of negatively tweeting

about AT&T, which happened to be a sponsor of the athletic programs, Participant 5 said, “Forreal? Well, they still suck.” This reveals an unawareness of what formal networks and organizations are connected with the university’s athletic programs. His disdain was demonstrated throughout the season. Participant 5 tweeted, “I want Chipotle.” When asked why he tweeted that he said, “I was bored and hungry.” This tweet reveals that when it comes to reporting news on twitter, boredom drives a lot of his tweets. When asked why he didn’t tweet more about basketball, he said, “Why would I? I wasn’t even playing.” Again, a direct correlation between basketball success/playing time and Twitter use is present. Participant 5 was hardly playing, so he was not tweeting as much.

Participant 6 was a top 60 recruit coming out of high school. Participant 6’s characteristics, which are represented in figure 1.6, are much lower than even those of Participant 4 and 5.

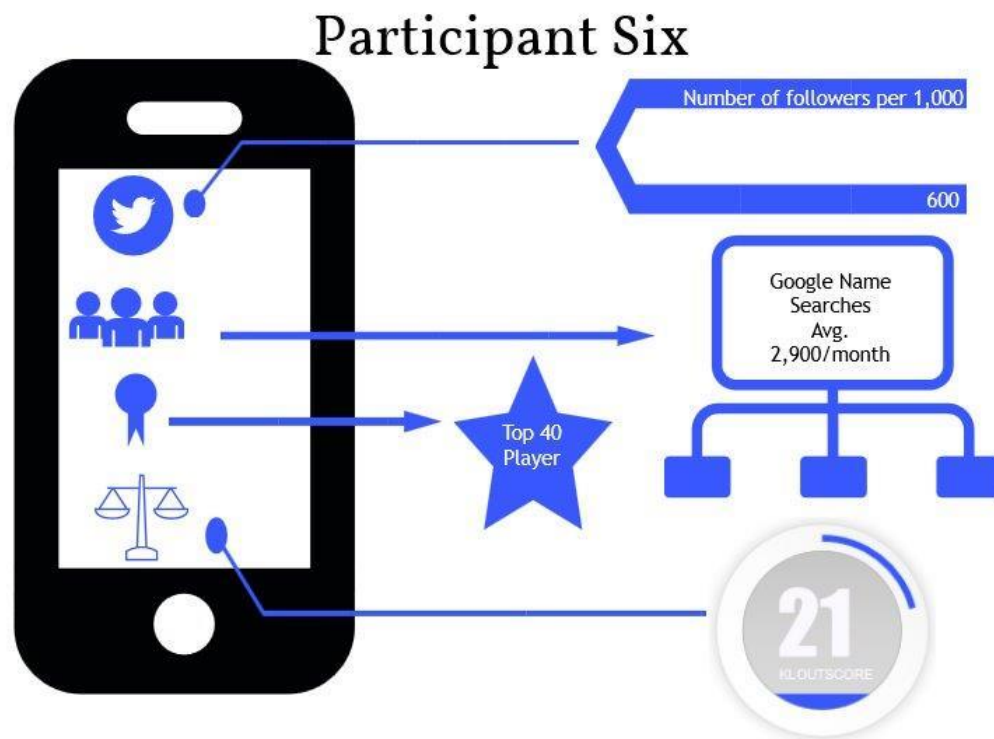


Figure 1.6

Participant 6 showed his eagerness to compete. He tweeted, “Y’all gone learn!” (Meaning everyone is going to see how good of a basketball player he is). When asked what he meant by that tweet he said, “Where I come from, we let people know when we’re about to shine (succeed). So I was basically just keeping it real (being honest) and letting everyone know I was about to get buckets (score points).” Participant 6 is showing his competitive spirit. However, his tweets throughout the season bordered on the mundane and had little to do with the team’s success or his overall basketball experience. Participant 6 tweeted, “Target is poppin off (insert girl emoji).” When asked about this tweet, Participant 6 responded, “Oh yeah, I remember this tweet. I was out at Target just getting something, I can’t even remember what now, but I overheard some girls say my name when I passed em. I figured since they was talkin about me, they followed me on

Twitter, so I just tweeted that Target was poppin off with good lookin girls. I figured they'd get a kick out of that." Participant 6 was simply reporting about the number of good looking girls at Target.

Participant 6 had an interesting take on his role on the team. He tweeted, "Y all show love for (insert university's abbreviation)'s newest family member (insert twitter handle)." He had a similar explanation, "I'll try to get like a former (university's name) basketball player to shout me out and then that way a bunch of his followers might follow me and get my numbers up." When asked why do you want your "numbers up" (meaning an increase in the number of followers)? Participant 6 responded, "Because the more numbers you have the more popular you are." When pressed for further explanation as to why it is important to become more popular, Participant 6 responded, "Isn't that the goal of this whole social media thing? Get as many followers as possible which means people want to listen to you because you must be doing big things." This provides an interesting insight into the participants psyche about their social media use. Participant 6 was not the only participant to reiterate this point. In fact, almost every participant felt this way. It is as if this hunt for the most followers is a form of competitiveness. Again, Participant 6's Twitter use correlated directly to his lack of playing time. When he didn't play, he didn't tweet.

## **Part IV**

### **Themes**

Interacting with fans was the only result of this study that was similar to a previous study by Sanderson and Hambrick (2012), in which participants used Twitter for (1) reporting news, (2) interacting with fans, (3) linking to content, and (4) self-promotion.. The participants did not report the news or link to content. And for the self-promotion piece, the researcher believed that the participants were not self-promoting, like the professional athletes in the Sanderson study, but instead were simply interacting with fans and building a fan base (Pegoraro, 2010). Participants often interacted with fans by responding to direct tweets. The fan interaction that occurred was like the participants were negotiating with the fans. The analysis of the data led the researcher to draw distinctions between two types of student athletes; high profile student athletes (HPSAs) and student athletes on a high profile team. HPSAs use of Twitter was more like that of professional athletes.

The three participants that became HPSAs met the researcher's criteria for a HPSA, which included a large number of Twitter followers, higher Klout scores, regular playing time, and regular season/post season accolades. These three participants tweeted regularly about their fan base and teammates. The three participants that the researcher classified as university athlete on a high profile team did not meet the researcher's criteria for a HPSA. The student athlete on a high profile team had lower Twitter followers, lower Klout scores, sporadic playing time, and no accolades. What the researcher also discovered was that the only tweets from student athletes on a high profile team occurred



when they had small stints of court success. This let the researcher further know that the self-promotion piece is too simplistic to agree with the Sanderson study. Sanderson was looking at professional athletes that are older in age and receive large amounts of money for their sport, whereas this study looked at post-adolescent amateur athletes. The point being, these participants did not have the wherewithal to make self-promotion a component of their Twitter context. The six participants in the study were divided into two categories; high profile student athletes and student athletes on a high profile team. They were “competing with their teammates” in trying to gain more followers (due to court success) and creating and interacting with a fan base.

Another theme throughout the tweets and interviews was that of teamwork. Many of the tweets dealt with the grind of practice and games, giving recognition to teammates for how hard they work and how much they love each other. As the participants had success on the court, they would express appreciation for the fans helping win the game, but would also give praise to teammates for their competitive spirit and willingness to win. Something not shown on Twitter but that did come up in the interviews was how competitive teammates were with each other at practice. Several participants mentioned that their success on the court is driven by a lot of things that the public does not see. For example, there are several players who never play, but go through all the practices and weight training sessions, and never receive the recognition as the high performing successful participants.

Game time is another defining element of the participants’ themes. What the researcher means by game time, is actual playing time in a real game (exhibition, regular

season, or tournament game) by the participants. To help create a contextual framework for the reader, when the researcher is talking about game time, he means the participant receives multiple forms of media exposure, from nationally televised games, to live streaming online games, to live streaming social media. These participants gain game time exposure on a national level. As the regular season games approached, the participants focused more of their tweets towards teammates and their fans. The attributes associated with high performing teams are the relationship between teammates, both on the court and via Twitter. As the participants experienced playing time and success on the court, their tweets not only reflected this, but also whom they interacted with, teammates and fans. As the participants who were not having success on the court, their tweets became mundane. It was not until they had success did the researcher see a spike in not only their tweet volume, but also interaction with teammates and fans. Therefore, the researcher discovered the importance of playing time or game time, when it comes to which participants tweet. If participants did not have game time experience or success, then their tweets were limited. The researcher discovered spikes in their tweets directly correlated to on the court success.

The next theme is that of on the court success. When the participants had success at playing basketball, they were the most active on Twitter. What the researcher found interesting is that when the participants were not successful on the court, this directly correlated to less Twitter participation. The two participants who moved from student athlete on a high profile team to HPSAs, had lots of success on the court, throughout the season, which led to a larger media exposure, which led to more mentions on Twitter,

which led to more followers. However, this theme of court success could possibly be the reason for the disappearance of the university student role.

The disappearance of the university student role was a theme. The only consistent examples of the participants using their university student role is during the Preseason and then again during the Post Tournament time periods. The university student role bookends the study nicely, in that as the participants enter college and are creating their Twitter foundation, meaning they are seeing what works and does not work with their audiences. They test the waters as a university student on Twitter. However, what the researcher discovered was they begin to notice that being on the team and having success is the best way to attract more followers. Looking at the disappearance of the university student role in the context of CTI, the participants were consumed by activities related to their university athlete role. The participants' busy schedule leaves them little time to tweet about the academic experiences they do have. However, as they figure out that on the court success and heightened media attention correlates to more Twitter followers (and a better opportunity to build a fan base), they then focus almost entirely on their university athlete role.

The following figures are a visual representations of the evolution of the 6 participants' Twitter following, Klout Score and accolades. These graphs are to help the reader see the differences between HPSAs and student athlete on a high profile team. Participants 1-3 were classified as HPSAs and participants 4-6 were classified as student athletes on a high profile team.

Figure 1.7 is the evolution of participant 1's characteristics that were influential in classifying him as a HPSA. The figures were recorded at the conclusion of the study, which was the last week of May.

## Participant One Evolved

### Twitter Followers

Preseason: 97,000



Regular Season: 125,000



Tournament Time: 225,000



Post Tournament: 275,000



### Klout Score

Preseason



Regular Season



Tournament Time/Post Tournament



### Accolades

Preseason

- . Preseason All-American
- . Preseason All-Conference

Regular Season

- . All-Conference First Team
- . All-Region First Team
- . Conference Freshman OTY

Tournament Time/Post Tournament

- . All-American Second Team

Figure 1.7

Participant 1 ended with 275,000 Twitter followers. To put this in perspective, the average NBA player has around 93,000 followers (NBA, 2014). His Klout score ended at 68, which compared

to some entire NBA teams, would be the highest without having even played a game in the NBA. As for the accolades and being selected as a lottery pick in the NBA draft, those speak for themselves.

Figure 1.8 is the evolution of Participant 2's characteristics that were influential in classifying him as a HPSA.

## Participant Two Evolved

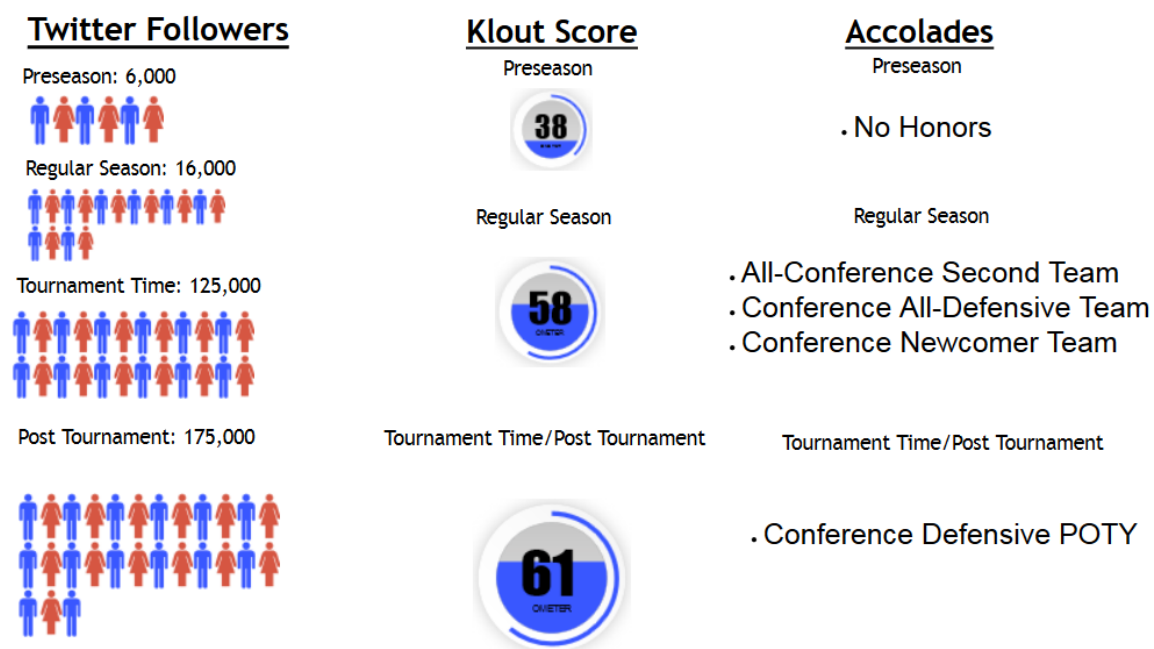


Figure 1.8

Again, his 175,000 Twitter followers almost double the average NBA player's number of followers. He too has an impressive Klout score and accolades. He was also a lottery pick in the NBA draft.

Figure 1.9 is the evolution of Participant 3's characteristics that were influential in classifying him as a HPSA.

## Participant Three Evolved

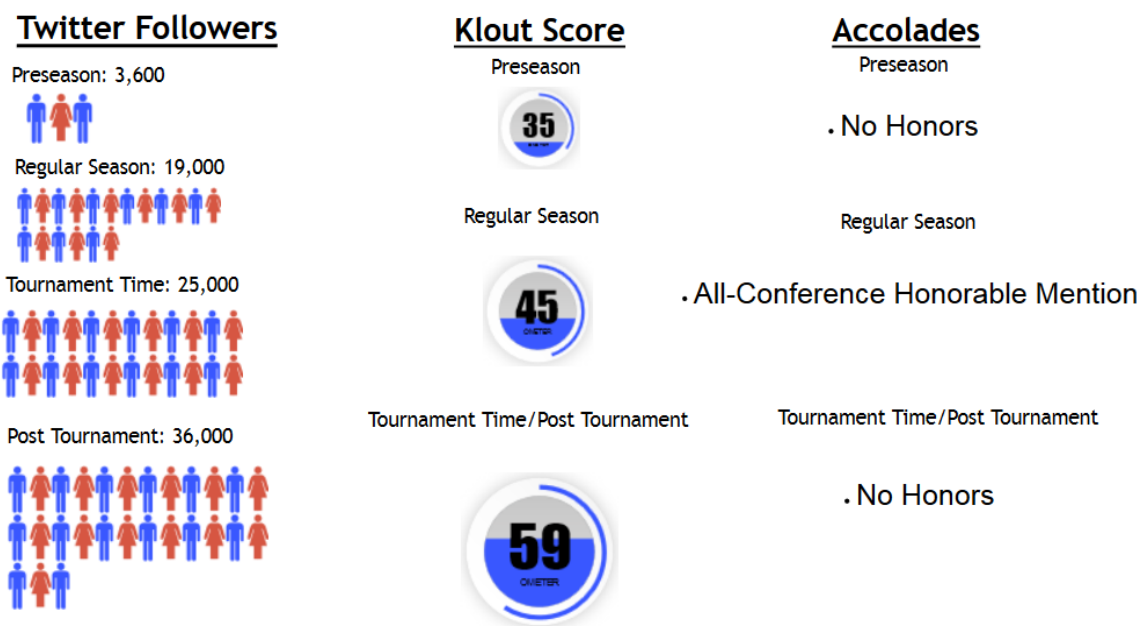


Figure 1.9

Of all the participants in the study, Participant 3's characteristics are the most difficult to justify his HPSA classification. His 36,000 Twitter followers are not as impressive as the first two participants. His Klout score is comparable to the first two. He did have one accolade to hang his hat on. And, due to the national media exposure he received from starting every game and the fact that he explored his NBA possibilities, but decided to come back for his sophomore year, gives the researcher confidence in grouping Participant 3 into the HPSA category. Playing time was the biggest contributing factor in the researcher's decision.

Figure 1.10 is the evolution of Participant 4's characteristics that were influential in classifying him as a student athlete on a high profile team.

## Participant Four Evolved

### Twitter Followers

Preseason: 2,500



Regular Season: 12,000



Tournament Time: 19,000



Post Tournament: 23,000



### Klout Score

Preseason



Regular Season



Tournament Time/Post Tournament



### Accolades

Preseason

. No Honors

Regular Season

. No Honors

Tournament Time/Post Tournament

. No Honors

Figure 1.10

Even though his Twitter followers ended the season at 23,000, his low Klout score, no accolades and lack of playing time and national media exposure, placed him in the student on a high profile team category.

Figure 1.11 is the evolution of Participant 5's characteristics that were influential in classifying him as a student athlete on a high profile team.

## Participant Five Evolved

### Twitter Followers

Preseason: 1,100



Regular Season: 11,000



Tournament Time: 17,000



Post Tournament: 21,000



### Klout Score

Preseason



Regular Season



Tournament Time/Post Tournament



### Accolades

Preseason

. No Honors

Regular Season

. No Honors

Tournament Time/Post Tournament

. No Honors

Figure 1.11

Participant 5's characteristics are very similar to those of Participant 4. The lack of playing time and low national media attention were also instrumental in placing him in the student athlete on a high profile team category.



Figure 1.12 is the evolution of Participant 6's characteristics that were influential in classifying him as a student athlete on a high profile team.

## Participant Six Evolved

### Twitter Followers

Preseason: 600



Regular Season: 9,000



Tournament Time: 12,000



Post Tournament: 18,000



### Klout Score

Preseason



Regular Season



Tournament Time/Post Tournament



### Accolades

Preseason

. No Honors

Regular Season

. No Honors

Tournament Time/Post Tournament

. No Honors

Figure 1.12

Of all the participants, Participant 6 had not only the lowest Twitter followers, Klout score, but also had the least amount of playing time of all the participants in the study. As comfortable as the researcher was with classifying Participant 1 and 2 as HPSA's, the researcher was equally comfortable in classifying Participant 6 as a student athlete on a high profile team.

The researcher created the aforementioned figures to help see the participants' evolution. These figures are to help distinguish the differences between HPSAs and student athlete on a high profile team. Again, Participants 1-3 were classified as HPSAs and participants 4-6 were classified as student athlete on a high profile team. To help answer the first two research

questions, the researcher viewed the participants as a collective, whereas to answer the third research question, the researcher viewed the participants as individuals. CTI was used in answering the first two research questions which led to the researcher discovering the need for a third research question addressing the differences amongst the participants student athlete role.

## Chapter 5

### Synthesis:

The purpose of this study was to understand how six freshmen student athletes on a high profile team (men's basketball) from a major midwestern university used social media to interact with their team members, university students, and fans of their respective sport. CTI suggests that there was a communication process by the participants' Twitter use, so that there were features such as roles adopted by those communicating. In each role a participant was communicating with a particular audience, and the role/audience suggested a certain relationship. The roles the participants adopted were 1) university student, 2) university athlete, and 3) teammate. All roles were present in the study however, as the students arrived on campus and moved through the university school year, their roles changed to focus more on the university athlete and teammate roles.

The defining element from this study is that the Twitter content from the participants focused on "game time" moments. By game time, the researcher means those characteristics dealing with actual basketball games. The participants commented on teammates' attributes, building a fan base, and success on the court. As the season got underway, the content of the participants' tweets focused on issues surrounding the team's success and failures. The fan base portion of their tweets dealt with showing appreciation to their fans, when the team was successful, and apologizing to the fans for letting them down after team adversity. However, it was the success on the court where those participants who actually participated in the contest created the most Twitter content. The university student role bookended the study, meaning the

role was present during the preseason and post tournament time periods, but disappeared during the middle of the year, when the participants were playing.

The Relational and Communal layers of CTI influenced the participants' interactive process on Twitter. The participants created their individual identities (university student role, university athlete role, and teammate role) as well as their collective role (teammate). The Relational layer of CTI saw the participants creating a fan base, which was done through Twitter and based on on the court success. For the communal portion of CTI, the participants as collective shared common characteristics, histories, and shared memories that exceeded individuals and resulted in commonly held identities.

Certain participants in the study set themselves apart from others. The two groups discussed in the study were HPSAs and student athletes on a high profile team. The researcher used the number of Twitter followers, Klout score, accolades, monthly Google name searches, national media exposure, and playing time as characteristics to determine of which category the participants were a part. Participants 1-3 were classified as HPSAs, while Participants 4-6 were classified as student athletes on a high profile team. Participant 1 entered the study as already high visible on the national scene. He lived up to his expectations and set the bar as the epitome of a HPSA for this study. Participant 2 entered the study without the same expectations as Participant 1, but ended up in the HPSA category, due to his high number of Twitter followers, a high Klout score, accolades he acquired, monthly Google name searches and lots of national media exposure due to playing time. Participant 3 was the most difficult to classify due to his in between characteristics. However, due to his national media exposure and playing time, the researcher decided to classify him as a HPSA. The researcher also realizes that the distinction for participant 3 is only appropriate for this study. Participants 4-6 are all classified as student

athletes on a high profile team, due to having considerable lower characteristics than the first three participants. The researcher was confident that their numbers speak for themselves.

## **Recommendations**

There are several areas that arose during this study that should be considered for future study. The first recommendation is how the participants envision their Twitter use. Through analyzing the participants' tweets and a series of interviews, the researcher only began to scratch the surface about how they actually view their Twitter use. The researcher did not delve too deeply into the content of their tweets, but only described their use relative to CTI. Sanderson's (2011) study of Division I athletic departments, found that when student athletes receive feedback about their social media use, it is usually when they are in trouble. The researcher recommends helping student athletes with their social media use, how they envision their use, and what are they doing to ensure the building of a fan base. Providing some type of social media education curriculum to help the student athletes with their social media use is one step.

Another recommendation is looking at how the participants respond when their fans are not interacting with their Twitter use. Sanderson's study (2011) found that one of the reasons for Twitter's popularity is due to the fact that fans have an easy access to their favorite athletes. After discovering that building a fan base was synonymous with "getting as many followers as possible," the researcher recommends looking at how the participants respond when their fan base does not interact with them. Meaning, are the participants able to grasp the reasons why their fans are not interacting with them via Twitter?

In looking at the relationship and communal piece of the study, the researcher recommends looking at how Twitter followers respond to the participants' tweets. Since the

researcher could not access the Twitter accounts of the participants, he was limited in being able to access the Twitter dialogue between the participants and their followers. Since the researcher discovered that the participants are new at negotiating a fan base and differ from the Sanderson (2011) study in that they are not self-promoting, because they are not aware of that aspect, how do the participants interact with former university players and the larger university community?

The researcher discovered that the university student role bookended the study and recommends looking into how their Twitter use changes during their entire duration at university. Are their roles cyclical each year? Meaning, during their second year, do they continue with the same roles they took on during their freshman year? If not, how different is their second year from their first? Since two of the six participants decided to leave college early and pursue a professional career, a recommendation from the researcher would be how does their Twitter use change once they have a professional career? Does their professional Twitter use align with Sanderson's (2011) study?

The last area of recommendations stem from the categories the participants were classified; HPSA and student athletes on a high profile team. The researcher recommends a longitudinal study following the remaining participants throughout their time at the university to see if at any point do they migrate from student athlete in a high profile sport to HPSA or vice versa? If there are migrations, which characteristics influence those migrations?

## **Summary**

This study expanded on the literature of student athletes' use of social media. Prior studies on the roles adopted by student athletes and the connection to identity formation, were applied to the participants' roles they adopted via their Twitter use. The study found that the

participants in this study took on three roles, that of 1) university student, 2) university athlete, and 3) teammate. The university student role bookended the study, in that it was present at the beginning and end of the study, but disappeared during the heart of the study.

The study then looked at how the adolescents and those entering post-adolescence use Twitter to socialize and how the participants interact with members of their Twitter community. The participants in the study took on all three roles to interact with teammates, other university students, and fans. Creating a fan base was a key component that came out of the study.

The study also looked at how CTI helped to explain how the participants used Twitter to act on the roles. The study found the participants using specific examples of the personal/enactment layer, the relational layer, and the communal layer.

The final component of the study discovered the distinction between high profile student athletes (HPSA) and student athletes on a high profile team. The researcher used the number of Twitter followers, Klout score, Google name searches per month, accolades, and playing time, to help distinguish between the two groups.

The results of the current study suggested that the participants in the study adopted three roles (university student, university athlete, and teammate) and acted on them related to their Twitter use. This study discovered that as the participants interacted with university students, teammates, and fans, during different time categories throughout their freshman year, they focused on creating a fan base and playing time was a major factor in determining their Twitter interactions. And lastly, two groups, HPSAs and student athletes on a high profile team, emerged after the researcher observed the participants' pattern of use on Twitter.

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## Appendix A

**Approved by the Human Subjects Committee University of Kansas, Lawrence Campus (HSCL). Approval expires one year from 7/8/2014. HSCL #20246**

The Department of Curriculum & Teaching at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

### **INFORMED VOLUNTARY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE**

**TITLE: High Profile Student Athletes' Use of Twitter.**

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Robert J. Nichols**

**FACULTY ADVISOR:** Dr. Joseph O'Brien

**PURPOSE AND DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY:** The purpose of this study is to measure and understanding and awareness of student athletes' use of social media (twitter). If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete a pre and post questionnaire. These tasks will take you less than 10 minutes to complete.

**RISKS:** There is little risk involved in this study. No invasive procedures or medications are included. The major potential risk is a breach of confidentiality, but we will do everything possible to protect your privacy. Another potential risk associated with your participation is the frustration some people experience when they attempt to solve difficult problems. This is not unusual, and if you like, we will discuss your feelings and concerns when you have completed the tasks.

**COSTS AND BENEFITS:** There are no costs to you for participating in this study, and you will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study. Failure to participate will not affect how you are reviewed neither in the leadership academy nor as a member of your athletic program.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** All records pertaining to your involvement in this study, including this informed consent form, are kept strictly confidential and any data that includes your identity will be stored in locked files, and will be retained by me for a minimum of 2 years. Your identity will not be revealed in any description or publications of this research. Results will not be shared with your instructors or University administrators, and will have no effect on your standing at this University. It is possible that authorized representatives from the University of Kansas may review your data for the purpose of monitoring the conduct of this study. In very unusual cases, your research records may be released in response to an order from a court of law. [If applicable-



--Also, if the investigators learn that you or someone with whom you are involved is in serious danger of potential harm, they will need to inform the appropriate agencies, as required by Kansas law.]

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION/QUESTIONS:** Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to take part in it, or you may stop participating at any time, even after signing this form. Your decision will not affect your relationship with the University of Kansas. Furthermore, please note that you are not required to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering during the course of this study. If any questions are not clear, please ask for clarification. If you have questions about this research study, you may contact the individuals listed at the beginning of this consent form.

### SUBJECT'S CERTIFICATION

- I have read the consent form for this study and any questions I had, including an explanation of all terminology, have been answered to my satisfaction. A copy of this consent form will be provided to me.
- I understand that I am encouraged to ask questions about any aspect of this research study during the course of this study, and that those questions will be answered by the individuals listed on the first page of this form.
- I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I am free to refuse to participate or to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation in this study at any time without affecting my future relationship with this institution.
- I acknowledge that I am over 18 years of age and am able to give consent to participate in this study.
- I agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Volunteer Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I was present during the explanation referred to above, as well as during the volunteer's opportunity to ask questions, and hereby witness the signature.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix B

### Participant Interview Questions

1. Why do you use social media?
2. Which platform do you prefer? Why?
3. How do you portray yourself? Why?
4. How do you think people view you?
5. Who are your tweets directed at?
6. Who do you interact with on Twitter? Instagram?
7. How do you perceive your audience?
8. What is your emotional connection to your following?
9. What are you hoping to accomplish by your tweets/instagrams?
10. What does family mean to you? Biological, team, KU
11. Do you have a personal brand?
12. How do you represent KU, team and yourself on Twitter?
13. What do you consider positive and negative uses of social media?
14. How do you model the positive uses of social media?
15. Why do you want a lot of followers?