Athlete brand endorsement has become common for firms attempting to distinguish themselves from their competition (Erdogan, Baker & Tagg, 2001). Initial research on athlete or celebrity endorsements was based upon the match up hypothesis and the source credibility model. The match up hypothesis focuses on achieving the best fit between the endorser and the product (Till & Busler, 2000). Research using the match up hypothesis determined that physical attractiveness and appearance are important factors influencing consumer behavior, particularly when the product being represented is related to health and beauty (Silvera & Austad, 2004; Till & Busler, 2000). Alternatively, research involving the source credibility model highlights overall character and expertise as valuable factors when selecting an endorser. Specifically, this model identifies three main components that contribute to a successful relationship with an endorser: expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014; Lee & Koo, 2015; Ohanian, 1991).

With the emergence of social media as a platform for professional athletes to communicate directly with their fans, brands have now begun to utilize varying forms of social media to market their products and/or services to the masses. Specifically, Twitter has become a popular avenue for athletes, teams and leagues to promote products and upcoming events, as well as to share information with their fans (Hambrick, 2012). Used as a vehicle to voice personal opinions, social media may provide an effective means for assessing athlete brands via public perception and how this might influence an organization's choice of a suitable endorser for its products and/or services. Thus, the objective of this study was to explore the public perception of professional athletes who are members of the Professional Golfers’ Association (PGA) Tour via Twitter, and demonstrate how the manner in which these athletes are perceived on social media can be used to establish their viability as potential product/service endorsers for the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC).

Methods
Netlytic, a social media analysis software program that collects and summarizes online conversations (Gruzd, 2016), was used to gather tweets mentioning the 50 PGA Tour players with the most followers on Twitter that were ranked within the top 100 on the Official World Golf Rankings from September 12 to September 26, 2016. This information was parsed into separate datasets, on a per player basis, for analysis purposes. Tweets were gathered based each player’s Twitter handle as well as their full name. Once data collection was complete, keywords associated with RBC’s ‘A Proven Approach’ marketing campaign (which featured professional golfers) were identified as the basis for our analysis: Consistency, Execution, Effectiveness, Empathy, Empowerment, Expertise, Integrity, Leadership, Stability, Strength Trust. These keywords were selected based on values that RBC hopes to instill through its endorsed athletes in golf, as well as its corporate values as a financial institution. A list of keywords related to ‘appearance’ was added to coincide with previous studies on endorser attractiveness. These keywords were entered into Netlytic through a text analysis, highlighting the number of times the keywords were mentioned in tweets associated with each golfer. Frequency counts and percentages were used to determine which keywords were mentioned most frequently in relation to each athlete in order to conclude who would be most suitable as a potential endorser for RBC’s products and/or services.

Results & Discussion
Our results indicated that certain keywords (i.e., stability, effectiveness, and appearance) were prominently mentioned (>75%) in reference to the PGA golfers in our sample. The size of our datasets ranged from 1,039 tweets for Henrik Stenson to 18,876 for Rory McIlroy. Within McIlroy’s dataset, the keyword leadership was mentioned most frequently, at 253 separate times. Of the PGA Tour professionals included in our sample, Sergio Garcia had the highest percentage of RBC’s keywords mentioned in tweets associated with him, with stability, trust, leadership,
and effectiveness being the most prominent. On this basis, it could be argued that Garcia might be an appropriate fit for recruitment as an athlete endorser for RBC based on the keywords outlined for this specific campaign. Appearance was also found to be an important aspect of the public’s perception of these athletes via Twitter, as variations of this keyword were prevalent in 22 of the datasets. This is consistent with literature related to the match up hypothesis.

Implications & Future Research
The connection between the public perception of an athlete on social media and an organization’s decision to choose an endorser could be viable when vetting potential candidates. Creating specific criteria based on an individual campaign can tailor research results directly to what the organization values and wishes to achieve during the promotional period.

With many different social media platforms available, future research could use alternative forms of social media, such as Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat in place of, or addition to, Twitter to establish a more comprehensive understanding of a potential athlete endorser’s public perception. Moreover, comparisons across genders, sports, or geographic regions could potentially render different results. Alternative forms of study may also include evaluating photos posted on Twitter, and their associated comments.

In closing, we argue that the public perception of professional athletes is an important consideration when determining who might be suitable to endorse a particular brand, and demonstrate one potential way in which this may be achieved.