

Athlete Brand Construction: a Conceptual Framework and a Perspective Based on Fans' Perceptions

Ali Hasaan



Estonian Business School

**ATHLETE BRAND CONSTRUCTION:
A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND
A PERSPECTIVE BASED ON FANS'
PERCEPTIONS**

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Ali Hasaan

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Department of Marketing and Communication, Estonian Business School, Estonia

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Supervisor: Professor Katri Kerem, PhD
Department of Management and Communication
Estonian Business School, Estonia

Consultant: Senior Lecturer Rui Biscaia, PhD
School of Marketing and Management
Faculty of Business and Law
Coventry University, United Kingdom

Opponents: Dr. Ulla-Riitta Ahlfors
School of Business and Economics
University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Associate Professor Andres Kuusik, PhD
Chair of Marketing Faculty of Economics and
Business Administration
University of Tartu, Estonia

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DEDICATION

To Mama and Baba.

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LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The technological changes have helped celebrities to gain global fame fueled by international media companies and proliferating social media. In the same vein, sports celebrities have gained international fame and wider publicity. Frequently they are considered larger than life figures and heroes for their fans, worshiped by many segments of society.

Celebrity athletes also tend to display extraordinary personal characteristics that cause a long-lasting, emotional attachment of the fans. Well known athletes have become personal brands and understanding the process of developing into athlete brand is important both for the athlete (during the career and also afterwards) and other related stakeholders.

However, there is a lack of studies that discuss athlete brand in full detail including the factors that trigger the creation of an athlete's brand as well as the implications of athlete brand to all the possible beneficiaries of athlete brand. Although athlete's positive role as a brand endorser has been researched before no study focused on the overall effects of star athlete attachment with a brand. There are very few studies addressing the team loyalty in relationship to and as a consequence of athlete loyalty. As well as, sports branding has never been studied in the context of foreign fans.

Therefore, the current study seeks to advance the understanding of athletes as brands. The main aim of the current dissertation was to develop a comprehensive framework of athlete brand including its antecedents and consequences. The current dissertation also aimed to provide a better understanding of the athlete brand framework according to the perception of the fans.

Based on an extensive literature review, the study proposed athlete brand framework that includes the antecedents of athlete brand, its measurement dimensions and implications. Five major antecedents identified in the framework are media, oral communications, impression management, social agents, and teams and sport. The components of athlete brand consist of on-field attributes and off-field attributes. In turn, the combined results of these two components are suggested to have three implications: athlete loyalty, team loyalty and sponsor's purchase intentions.

Qualitative content analysis was selected as a method to clarify the model constructs established via theoretical analysis. Based on a qualitative analysis of 21 interviews conducted with athlete fans in three different countries, a framework for athlete branding on a finer level of detail is proposed. The antecedents and sub antecedents identified by the fans are media (social media, mass media, mega event media spectacles and fantasy sport and video games), oral communications (word of mouth, and rumors and narratives), impression management, social agents (parents

and teachers, family members, friends and community), and teams and sport (sport interest, team interest and team geographical location). The components of athlete brand are related to on-field attributes (behavior, team, achievements, style of play and skills) and off-field attributes (physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity and entertainment) of the athlete. The findings further indicated that fans' athlete loyalty based behavioral outcomes include media following, creating their own narratives, positive word-of-mouth, and resistance to changing a favorite athlete. In addition, responses to the athlete's team include potential team substitution when the athlete transfer to another club, support for multiple teams and increased revenue generation. Finally, the sponsors of the athletes have benefited from fan's loyalty to an athlete via increased brand recognition, positive image, purchase intentions and ignoring rival sponsors.

The current study contributed to the theory by (1) combining different ideas from past studies into a single model about the athlete brand, and (2) developing a comprehensive framework to aid scholars and practitioners to understand the dimensions they should work on to promote or analyze the benefits of athlete branding. This study also highlighted the importance of achieving 'brand status' for athletes. Interview participants pointed out that when an athlete successfully establishes his/her name as a brand it generates long lasting loyalty. This study also discussed the idea of brand re-construction. There are many examples all around the world when an athlete destroys his/her brand. Through attributes of athlete brand proposed in the current study, an athlete could reconstruct its brand again.

Keywords: athlete branding, sports marketing

INTRODUCTION

Athletes have been followed and loved for decades if not centuries. Thus the phenomenon of fanship is nothing new for both sports practitioners as well as academic researchers. However, the progress of digital technologies and social media channels has provided new tools for global promotion of athletes. Historically sportsmen have mostly been local heroes with a few exceptions of superstars created with the help of satellite TV broadcasts and other traditional media channels. Now that athletes have access to all the communication channels and tools enabling them to become global icons, the topic of athlete branding as a conscious activity is gaining more and more attention. Previously the reputation of athletes was mostly based on their professional achievements and managing one's image was fairly straightforward. The emergence of new social media channels has added numerous variables to the puzzle of athlete's brand. At the same time, the stakes are high – a carefully cultivated positive brand image can yield not only the admiration of worldwide fans but also considerable financial returns from teams, tournaments, brands, etc.

Similarly to various other fields of life, technological development has also helped sport to enjoy increased popularity (Bolsmann & Parker, 2007). For instance, cricket that is a pure British colonial sport has gained popularity in countries like The Netherlands (and even Estonia) while football has become popular East Asia. Digital mass media has enabled various sport teams to establish their popularity locally and internationally. American New York Yankees of basketball, Dallas Cowboys of American football and Spain's Real Madrid of football are prime examples of the globalization; they have become richest teams around the world due to their immense popularity. Likewise, English football club Manchester United revealed survey results a few years ago that claimed they have 659 million fans and followers across the globe. Among these followers only one percent are from UK while 173 million are from the Middle East and Africa, 325 million are from the Asia Pacific and 108 million fans live in China (Gibson, 2012). As a result sports stars have become one of the most visible personas of the modern day (Leonard, 2009). Sport stars or athletes have become celebrities, superstars, public heroes and even super heroes. They attain popularity in the countries where the sport they represent is not popular by itself. Michael Jordan (basketball), Muhammad Ali (boxing), Lance Armstrong (cycling), Tiger Woods (golf) are few examples of the athletes that became popular regardless of culture, geography and popularity of the particular field of sports they represent.

Sports celebrities also tend to display unusual personal characteristics that elicit a long-lasting, emotional attachment with their fans (Kwon & Trail, 2001). For example, David Beckham's transfer from Manchester United to Real Madrid provoked five million Asian fans of Manchester United to switch their devotion to Real Madrid (Kerr & Gladden, 2008). Within a year of signing David

Beckham, replica jersey sales of Real Madrid increased from one million to three million shirts (Carlin, 2004). Consistently, Wayne Gretzky is considered as a pride of Canada. His achievements in the field made him class by himself. He is universally known as the 'great one'. He was national hero for the Canadian people and when he announced his engagement to the American actress Janet Jones and transfer from Canadian club Edmonton Oilers to the American club Los Angeles Kings it created a national crisis in Canada and people started to take positions against the proposed free trade between US and Canada (Jackson & Ponc, 2001). Furthermore, cyclist Lance Armstrong, after treatment of chemotherapy and brain surgery has won Tour de France and his courage and life story helped him to achieve enormous popularity. Road cycling in United States also benefited from his achievements and cycling become more popular than ever (Butryn & Masucci, 2003). It is worthwhile to note that Armstrong has lost most of his popularity and fans in the light of the recent doping scandals. The list of sport celebrities who emerged as national and international heroes based on their sporting image goes on and there are many examples in all over the globe. Sport celebrities are more than entertainers; they are expected to represent and signal their culture's values and ethics to their followers (Jones & Schumann, 2000) and these athletes frequently belong to the narrow group of the nation's most important celebrities (Coelho & Tiesler, 2007). That is why fans consider sport celebrities as the most heroic celebrities (Stevens, Lathrop, & Bradish, 2003) and are obsessed with sports heroes (Hyman & Sierra, 2010). Fans are so obsessed with their favorite athletes that they can consider their favorite sportsmen most important personas in their lives. Liverpool football club fans called one of their best players, Robbie Flower, as "Flower God" (Rookwood & Chan, 2011), similarly, Indian cricket fans called top batsman Sachin Tendulkar "God of cricket". Recent academic research has shown that thousands of individual athletes have massive cult-like followings (White & Absher, 2013).

Motivation for the study

Although athlete loyalty and athlete image have been discussed in the academia previous studies were more focused on athlete as a brand endorser. Studying the loyalty of the fans has been more focused on establishing brand equity and team identification (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008; Funk & James, 2006; Heere & Dickson, 2008). Aaker (1991,1996) and Keller (1993) have provided foundational branding theories for fan loyalty by proposing the concepts of brand equity and customer based brand equity. However, researchers have kept their focus on team loyalty and fan interest in athlete (i.e., athlete loyalty and athlete branding) has been treated as a motive for team loyalty (Kerr & Emery, 2011; Neale & Funk, 2005, 2006; Richardson & O'Dwyer, 2003). Increasing number of athletes acting as brand endorsers and various (local) fields of sports spreading outside initial geographical boundaries has attracted researchers to study athletes as brands, although still the main body of studies has centered around the celebrity

athlete endorsement (Agyemang, 2011; Charbonneau & Garland, 2006; Kim & Na, 2007; Lake, Reece, & Rifon, 2010). In spite of the shifting focus, **there is a lack of studies that discussed athlete brand in full detail including the factors that trigger the creation of an athlete's brand as well as the implications of athlete brand with an understanding of all the possible beneficiaries of athlete brand** (athlete, team and sponsor) in both local and foreign markets.

The main objective of the study and research questions

As pointed out before, there is a limited number of studies available so far focusing on athletes establishing themselves as brands instead of being a component in the formation of the team as brand or of celebrities as brand salesmen. Therefore, **the main aim of the current dissertation is to develop a comprehensive model of athlete brand including its antecedents and consequences.**

Carlson and Donovan (2013) described that image of the athlete is vital for athlete identification in the process of athlete as brand. Once athlete achieved the prestige in his field of sport, consumers feel an emotional attachment with athlete. Arai et al. (2014) proposed model for athlete brand first time and called it model of athlete brand image (MABI). The key dimensions of the model that enable a star athlete to establish himself/herself as a brand were athletic performance, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle. Arai et al. (2013) prepared the scale of athlete brand image (SABI) and positively tested the MABI. Williams and Agyemang (2014) proposed college athlete brand by applying sport brand equity theory. However, no study still fully discussed the athlete brand development **process** and **factors** that are involved in creating an athlete brand.

The first study of the current doctoral dissertation was conducted with an aim to develop a comprehensive framework of how athletes become brands. The research question for the first study was formulated as follows:

RQ 1 (Study 1): How can an athlete build a brand and/or establish himself/herself as a brand?

To address the question, the author started with examining past studies to gain a full understanding of the conceptualizations of the athlete brand. How can someone establish it? What are benefits to establish an athlete brand? A relevant starting point is to look into concepts that are loosely related to popularity of individuals. An idol is a person whose talents, achievements, status, and/or appearance are respected by his fans (Yue & Cheung, 2000). Sports fandom is about idolism and loyalty to a certain player, team, region or nation (Fletcher, 2011). Athlete branding can be also explained in terms of personal branding. A personal brand is people's perceptions about a particular individual and his/her characteristics that make the person different from others in terms of personality, reputation and character

(Carter, 2010). In the context of sport, personal brand is a public persona of an athlete who has established a certain symbolic meaning and value, and exposes various brand elements to the market (Chadwick & Burton, 2008). Personal sports brands build on values and characteristics of an athlete (Cortsen, 2013). Sports celebrities become heroes for the fans, they display extraordinary characteristics and could lead to building a high and long-lasting emotional relationship (Kwon & Trail, 2001).

So athlete branding is about image of athlete among the target public. The personal sports branding is also about athletes trying to cash their names (Cortsen, 2013) as being a “brand name athlete” can yield substantial incomes to the “brand owner”. A study by Montoya found that developing of personal brand required fans’ good perception and awareness about the athlete (i.e., who the athlete is, what athlete does and how the athlete is different from others (Montoya, 2002). Yu (2005) mentioned that athlete’s successful career and personal life’s positive image of among public help athlete to become top brand. Carter (2010) described that an athlete could turn a personal brand based on his/her life stories, values, charisma, authenticity, believability and athletic prowess into significant revenue. Furthermore, winning is considered essential when attracting fans to generate loyalty (Richelieu & Desbordes, 2009) but after the loyalty has been established, occasional losses are well tolerated by the fans. High loyalty pays off as loyal fans resist the idea of switching loyalty to other athlete when their idol is not enjoying best times (Neale & Funk, 2006). Fans develop trust in their favorite athlete and have faith in their hero. For example, English fans showed their trust towards the English coach Sven-Göran Eriksson and captain David Beckham during football World Cup 2006 even the team failed to meet the expectations set by the media (Daley & Wolfson, 2010). The past studies clarified that athlete brand is an image of an athlete among public that is established based on various characteristics of an athlete.

The aim of the current study was not only to gain a research based understanding of the concept of athlete brand but also to explore and explain the process of athlete brand development. Customer-based brand equity theory conceptualized by Keller described that the consumer must be familiar with the brand and the brand must have a positive brand image in the consumer’s mind (Keller, 1993). A positive brand image should increase the probability of brand choice and this process of becoming familiar is initiated through antecedents that trigger brand in mind of potential customer and leads to loyalty (Chen, 2006). So the first step of consciously establishing an athlete brand is to identify possible antecedents that cause awareness among the potential fans of athletes. In this context, positive personal brands have positive high visibility (Cortsen, 2013). This “high visibility” is only possible through media coverage. So media is good agent in promoting and creating awareness about sport brand (Cortsen, 2013). The second antecedent of the study is oral communication. Oral communication is type of communication that occurs face to face. Although media is major contributor in spreading information

but in developing countries still oral communication is big source of sharing knowledge. Impression management is another important antecedent. Impression management is the process by which people control the impressions of them for others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). A social agent is an independent entity that has the ability to have an effect on people. It can people, nations, organizations, cultures, or ideologies. Sport and teams itself are antecedents of player image. Young people are more attracted to star athletes of popular fields of sports and famous teams than to less known athletes that represent sports that do not enjoy such a wide popularity.

Antecedents help to understand the recognition of brand by potential customers and provide knowledge on how to introduce a brand to the target group. Athlete's own characteristics and behavior build an image among fans, and that behavior is combination of the on field activities like play and off field activities like behavior (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009). It can be concluded that to become a top brand an athlete has to maintain a successful career (on-field) and convey a positive image of personal life (off-field) (Yu, 2005).

Once the fans have developed an attachment with an athlete, they quite likely broaden their attachment to all aspects related to the athlete, the sponsors of the athlete among those. The desperate efforts of Paris Saint-Germain Football Club to sign a contract with David Beckham was clear attempt to win hearts of Beckham fans first and the hopes of winning trophies through Beckhams' play on the pitch were of secondary importance. The presence of good athlete increases the loyalty towards the while losing popular athlete could cause losing team loyalty as well (Aiken & Koch, 2009; Bodet & Chanavat, 2010). Furthermore, there is a link between the fans' connection to an athlete and its associated brands (Dees, Hall, Tsuji, & Bennett, 2010), as top athletes have power to influence the actual purchase intentions of their fans (Charbonneau & Garland, 2006). So to answer the research question the author of the thesis studied how an athlete can build its brand via brand awareness that emerges through antecedents (i.e., media, oral communication, impression management, social agents and team & sport) and how the athlete image builds upon athlete on-field attributes and off-field attributes. Furthermore, once athlete brand has established not only athlete become beneficiary of the situation but also his/her teams and sponsors enjoy the status of athlete as brand. Through thorough literature investigation the author was able to understand the process of athlete branding and to develop a new model that has never been proposed in the academic literature before.

The second step of the research (study 2) was conducted to get deeper knowledge of the model concerning the athlete brand antecedents and attributes of the brand. For this purpose, a qualitative interview based study was designed. The research questions of the 2nd study were derived from the framework that was proposed as a conclusion of the first study.

RQ2 (Study 2): How media, oral communications, impression management, social agents, and team or sport, contribute to increase fans' awareness and positive associations about athletes?

RQ3 (Study 3): What are the on-field and off-field specific components of athlete brand?

The study was carried out among the fans of three different countries (Estonia, Portugal and Pakistan). 21 interviews were conducted focusing on the athlete brand antecedents and athlete brand attributes. Results of the study provided further enhancement in the framework in the via clarifying the sub-antecedents.

While talking about antecedes, the participants' responses to media further highlighted specific types of media and communication channels such as mass media, social media, major sport events and video games. After interviewing fans, two categories of oral communications emerged as being influential in developing the athlete brand. Specifically, participants' responses allowed identifying word-of-mouth and rumors or narratives. The interviews allowed identifying four different types of social agents such as parents, family members, friends and community. Based on participants' responses, sport interest, team interest and team geographical location are three important factors that aid to better understand the role of team and sports for the creation of athlete brand.

In the answer of second research question, the interviews revealed five types of off-field attributes: physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity and entertainment. Responses to the interviews also allowed to identify five main categories related with on-field attributes: behavior, team, achievements, skills and style of play.

The final study (study 3) focused on last part of athlete brand framework, the athlete brand implications. The aim of the last study was to understand what are the consequences of developing an athlete brand and securing devoted fans. The third study followed the same qualitative research approach that was adopted for study 2, data was gathered via qualitative interviews among the sports fans. The specific research questions were drawn based of the theoretical model from study 1. This study seeks to get answers of the following research questions

RQ4 (Study 3): How does an athlete brand contribute to fans' responses towards that athlete?

RQ5 (Study 4): How does an athlete brand contribute to fans' responses towards the athlete's team and its endorsers/sponsors?

21 interviews were conducted with fans of three different countries (Estonia, Portugal and Pakistan) regarding the implications of athlete brand and three

dimensions of athlete brand's implication (athlete's loyalty, athlete's team loyalty, athlete's sponsor loyalty) described in the sections that analyze the importance of athlete branding.

As a result of the interviews five specific manifestations of athlete loyalty emerged: media following, own narratives, positive word-of-mouth (WOM), creation of links and resistance to change. The participants' responses indicate that team loyalty manifests through aspects such as team substitution, support for multiple teams and revenue generation. Lastly, the participants' responses about the athlete's sponsors indicate that these sponsors can also benefit through brand recognition, positive image, and increased intentions among the fans to purchase products or services and to ignore rival sponsors.

Originality of the research, theoretical and empirical contributions

Overall, this study is adopting an interpretive inductive approach because the phenomenon of study has not been thoroughly studied before. The author aims to generate an understanding of the athlete brand in its social context and the processes that are both influence to the phenomenon of study and triggered by the phenomenon. The subjective assessments and meanings of the interview participants provide input into inductive theory building.

This study will add to the academic literature and theories of athlete branding, sport branding, sport marketing and athlete branding by proposing a framework that explains athlete brand starting from the awareness process to its benefits and outcomes. Thus the main contribution lies in the comprehensiveness of the model compared to the previous studies of the area. Furthermore, this framework is also applicable to foreign fans, athletes of various sports and teams and thus the study demonstrates a wide range of potential applications both academically and practically.

The scope and limitations of the thesis

The aim of the study was to develop a framework that describes process of athlete brand generation in detail including role of antecedents and consequences of athlete brand. This study is able to contribute to the academic literature by introducing a more complete framework of athlete brand (i.e., combining antecedents, components and implications of athlete brand in a single framework and with inclusion of both local and foreign fans responses). This model is applicable for top athletes who are enjoying the celebrity status but also provide a guideline for young athletes that how they can achieve celebrity status. In academics, the current study is intended to represent a springboard for future studies, as there are always room for improvement so even though qualitative data provides an in-depth

understanding of this topic, future studies could employ quantitative methods in order to provide further support for these findings with a larger sample of sports fans. Furthermore, while the current study includes a sample of fans from three different countries (i.e., Pakistan, Estonia and Portugal), with investigating more athletes and fans could bring more detailed results.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. Athlete as a brand

Worshipping heroes is as old as the human history. Everyone has its idols: dead or alive, good or bad, pious or evil. As the world turned into a global village new breed of idols emerged. These idols achieved specific positions in their professions (sport, politics, media, etc.) and were renowned as celebrities. Celebrities are people who have achieved iconic status in their respective professions and are viewed as heroes of their fields (Hyman & Sierra, 2010). According to Stever (1991) celebrity worship basically depends on four factors: hero/role model, sex-appeal, charisma, and talent. Along with other celebrities, worldwide popularity of sport proved vital in emergence of sport celebrities who have enjoyed status of local and global heroes (Merkel, 2012). Arguably first athlete establish himself as brand was famous boxer Muhammad Ali (Cortsen, 2013). At the time when television was not yet even introduced in many countries Muhammad Ali become world's most renowned sports celebrity.

Athletes have gradually become bigger and bigger players in the celebrity culture and they are frequently perceived as being bigger and more famous than the teams they represent. Thus the current era belongs to the professional athletes who are no longer always associated with their team (Agyemang, 2014). As a result athletes have become top endorsers of brands similarly to celebrities of any other field (McGhee, 2012). Cristiano Ronaldo is a prime example of athlete power among public. As a three times "FIFA player of the year" he became the first athlete to get 100 million Facebook fans and continued getting new fans at a rate of approximately one per second. Besides securing popularity for himself and his current team Real Madrid, which is the richest football club (García, 2011), he also delivered for his endorsement partners like Nike, Tag Heuer and Herbalife. For instance, Ronaldo posted six times on Facebook over two days in 2014 the Tag Heuer's "Don't Crack Under Pressure" ad campaign. The posts were viewed 35 million times with 2.4 million "likes" in just over two days. The posts helped the brand to generate an estimated value of \$380,000 (Badenhausen, 2015). These figures indicate that athletes can be brand entities by themselves as they have such powerful fan power and that fans use to follow star athletes instead of teams (Hognestad, 2012).

Due to the cultural, personal and social following from their fans, the establishment of athletes as brands is important phenomenon (Ilicic & Webster, 2015). In this sense, understanding an athlete brand, its construction and its benefits is of supreme importance for the actual athletes and their managers. Although previous studies have attempted to discuss athlete as brand (Arai, Ko, & Ross 2014; Agyemang 2011; Carlson & Donovan 2013; Parmentier & Fischer 2012) still, there is a lack of a study that described athlete brand comprehensively, including attributes of athlete brand, antecedents of athlete's brand as well as the consequences of athlete

brand for athlete, its teams and its associated sponsors in both local and foreign markets. Thus, the purpose the current study is to introduce and test a framework that describes loyalty cycle of fans (i.e., pre-loyalty and post-loyalty), causes of loyalty of athlete among their fans and benefits of establishing a brand for certain athlete.

Any renowned personality who is subject of marketing communication is a **human brand** (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). Likewise, a brand consisting of public opinion about certain individual is called a personal brand (Carter, 2010). In marketing, the term “brand” is usually applied to firms, products, and services and this term can be extended to celebrities as well because they celebrities can be professionally managed and have features characteristic of a brand (Thomson, 2006). In this regard, athlete brand can be defined as a brand based on an aggregate public opinion about particular athlete. Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014) defined that **athlete brand** is personality and image of particular athlete perceived by public. Moreover, athlete brand basically depends on public perception about that athlete (Carlson & Donovan, 2008). Consequently, athlete himself/ herself has to contribute to build and develop its brand image (Cortsen, 2013). This development can be achieved through successful career and positive images (Yu, 2005) and by signaling how/what he/she is different from other athletes (Montoya, 2002). With more and more athletes emerging as a brand, there is an increase in the studies about athlete branding as well. For example, Parmentier and Fischer (2012) described athlete brand through athlete’s professional image and its media coverage.

Carlson and Donovan (2008; 2013) discussed athlete branding in terms of athletes’ personal appeal and athlete’s achievements. In a similar vein, Cortsen (2013) presented the idea about hybrid athlete brand (i.e., when something positive or negative happens with an athlete, it effects the on the athlete’s brand is same) and used the case study of famous Swedish female golfer Annika Sorenstam. Arai, Ko, and Kaplanidou (2013) and Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014) developed and tested the model of athlete brand image (MABI) first time that includes the dimensions of athlete’s performance, athlete’s appearance and athlete’s marketable lifestyle. Also, Williams and Agyemang (2014) discussed athlete brand awareness (i.e., organization-related antecedents, market-related and athlete-related antecedents) in the context of college athletes.

1.2. Antecedents of an athlete brand

Keller (1993) explained that brand knowledge is a vital factor in the context of development of brand associations. In other words for creation of a successful athlete brand the athlete should be highly noticeable (O’Reilly & Braedley, 2008). Such visibility can be achieved through various channels, e.g. media (Andrews & Jackson, 2001) or live sports events. In this sense antecedents provide a path

for constructing a brand through generating familiarity with the brand. It is self-evident that consumers should be aware about a brand to become loyal to it (Gladden & Funk, 2002). In the previous studies different isolated factors have been mentioned as potential antecedents of an athlete brand. For example, different media channels (Vincent, Hill, & Lee, 2009); oral communication (Künzler & Poli, 2012); impression management (Rojek, 2001); social agents (Hsieh, Wang, & Yoder, 2011) and team/sport athlete represents (Robinson & Trail, 2005). The following sections will analyze these factors in more detail.

Media

It is media that ultimately develops the image of athlete, and sufficient media coverage (i.e., television, magazines) has traditionally helped to achieve the status of celebrity or hero for an athlete (Kerr & Emery, 2011; Liu & Brock, 2011). Media has immensely helped to promote the popularity of athletes, teams and sports. Media coverage has enabled athletes to raise market profile. Many sports types and athletes that have been known only on limited geographic territories have benefited from media coverage to generate wider visibility. Sports with very limited global interest that are represented on the Olympic Games (e.g., table tennis, boxing), have benefited from international exposure thanks to media (Vincent et al., 2009). Therefore, the role of media in sports celebrity life is imminent and especially crucial in the age of glamorizing sport where sport has turned into entertainment (Blackshaw & Crabbe, 2004). So it is impossible to ignore the importance of media in building, developing, enhancing and maintaining athlete brand (Nicholson, 2007). Thus, media is an important agent in promoting and creating awareness about sport brand (Cortsen, 2013). For the purpose of the current study media has been divided into sub categories for a more precise analysis. These four sub domains are mass media, social media, mega event media spectacles, fantasy sports & video games.

Mass media that is frequently also referred to as conventional media, or traditional media consists of newspapers, radio, television, satellite television, the internet (including digital versions of mass media publications and excluding social media and other peer to peer or network interactions) and mobile phones as means of accessing mass media (Boyle & Haynes, 2004; Cleland, 2011). Mass media generates mass effects for the users (in the context of the current study, sports fans). Through various sources (i.e., television, newspaper, magazine, etc.) media is (sometimes unintentionally) working on spreading awareness in the favor of athlete brands even if the user has initially no interest in athlete and its image. Mass media has helped to spread images of star athletes (Summers & Morgan, 2008). Mass media broadcasting generates unrestrained flow of information towards fans and thus helps to increase the popularity for famous professional athletes (Liu & Brock, 2011).

Social Media is digital media channels and tools that provide a live experience to its users and a social platform to discuss topics online with a community of like-minded people (Harrington, Highfield, & Bruns, 2013). Social network sites emerged starting from LinkedIn (2003), YouTube (2005) and Twitter and Facebook (2006) (McLean & Wainwright, 2009). Social media has provided a unique opportunity to give feedback and communicate in real time for the sport fans. The real time nature of the social media is one of the reasons why the sports fans found their way to social media very fast. Now nearly every sport team and athlete considers it important to represent himself/herself on the internet (e.g. via having a dedicated website) and social media (e.g. having a celebrity fan page on Facebook) to increase team or athlete awareness (Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012). Furthermore, social media causes increase in fan knowledge and identification with of human brands (Sierra, Taute, & Heiser, 2010). That is why social media has worked as information sharer, and promoter for brands (Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012), including the person brands of top athletes.

Mega event media spectacles are quite unique to the field of sports. Big events such as Olympic Games, World Cup, Continental Games, etc., secure huge media coverage and cause an increased visibility and awareness about sports and athletes among fans (and even people who are not fans and not interested in sports). Big sports events are organized so that they have high entertainment value and very good potential for media broadcasts. When a sport event takes place the fans have an opportunity to follow it live or through media in real time. This increases their interest in the sport, teams and/or athletes (Koenigstorfer, Groeppel-Klein, & Kunkel, 2010). The occurrence of big event is also useful for developing the popularity of sports in the countries where certain sports are traditionally not very popular (for example the 1986 FIFA Football World Cup draws a lot of attention to football in India where football is traditionally not paid attention to). The event proved a big sensation throughout the country and though India is not represented in the World Cup the fans chose their favorite teams based on various individual criteria and preferences. Through such processes many new athletes and teams gain new fans (Dimeo, 2002). Even in countries where a particular sport is popular already, a big event can influence fan's opinions (Markovits & Hellerman, 2003). Olympic Games is a 'hero brand' by itself that provides a chance for the athletes to become popular among new fans (Goodman, Duke, & Sutherland, 2002).

Since around year 2000, **video gaming and fantasy sports** have grown exponentially and converted into to a giant influencer in the sport industry (Drayer, Shapiro, Dwyer, Morse, & White, 2010). Online fantasy sports contests provide a virtual version of the real-world sport and a space where fans experience the pleasure of management of their own athletes (McCarthy, 2012; Oates, 2009). Through gaming, a user can follow an athlete via his/her virtual image to real image as fantasy football participants track their athletes and opponents athletes on various channels of media (Nesbit & King, 2010). Furthermore, video games can increase the popularity of specific sports and successful athlete as Sport fans

can develop an emotional bond with a sport team or athlete through playing video games (Dixon, 2012). It has been confirmed that sport video games have captured not only hard-core sport fans' attention but also attention of non-sport fans, that create an interaction point between consumer and athlete (Kim, Walsh, & Ross, 2008).

On the basis of previous literature analysis, the role of mass media, social media, mega event media spectacles, and fantasy sport and video games, it is proposed in the current framework that:

P1: Media has an impact on the creation of an athlete's brand via building the athlete awareness.

Oral Communication

Oral communication is type of communication that takes place face to face. Information is spread by word of mouth from one person to another. Although media is major contributor in information spreading about an athlete, especially in developing countries oral communication is still big source of sharing knowledge (Künzler & Poli, 2012). It is a widely accepted that frequently people are more influenced by communication that is delivered orally by trusted peers than by communication that is spread via more anonymous media channels. In this study two types of oral communication will be analyzed as antecedents to developing an athlete brand, these are word of mouth and rumors and narratives.

Word of mouth (sometimes also called buzz marketing), is an advice or opinion about certain issue delivered by one person to another person. Word of mouth communication by someone trustworthy or influential can have really important impact on one's opinions and decisions. Studies have shown that in some cases consumers relay more on word of mouth as they don't have trust in regular media (Rosen, 2000). The same tendency is valid in the context of the athlete brand development where oral introduction or endorsement can cause awareness about and attachment to a specific athlete. Following word of mouth advice has been found especially prominent among young females (Bush, Bush, Clark, & Bush, 2005). Furthermore, devoted fans are not only open to the positive impact of word of mouth but also spread positive information about their favored athlete and the brands that are linked to their favorite athlete (Bush, Martin, & Bush, 2004).

As the fans are often more interested in the personal life of athletes compared to the professional life of the athletes, they are very receptive towards **rumors and narratives** evolving around their favorite celebrity athletes. Rumors are unconfirmed statements about the athletes while narratives are (confirmed or unconfirmed) stories about athletes. These can be about athlete's life, play, family or about their personality. In many countries rumors and narratives continuously

play an important role in drawing attention to a celebrity. Such influence has been studied in the African context where media has its power but oral communication (often in the form of rumors) is very important in shaping people's opinions (Künzler & Poli, 2012). Rumors have been found to play an important role in shaping the reputation of athlete (Garner & Smith, 1977). Furthermore, life story of an athlete could boost his image among followers (Carter, 2010). Through narratives, either true or false, an athlete can become a hero for the fans (Grant, Heere, & Dickson, 2011) while lack of narratives could cause loss of interest. Human beings crave stories and this applies for sports as well. Crawford (2002) explained in his study that lack of interest in ice hockey in England is essentially a lack of narrative among fans and without a connecting narrative the sport does not have power to engage fans.

On the basis of previous literature analysis, the role of oral communication and rumors and narratives, it is proposed in the current framework that:

P2: Oral communication has an impact on the creation of an athlete's brand via building the athlete awareness.

Impression Management

Impression management is the process by which people control the public impressions of them to the others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The common objective of such strategic self-presentation is to achieve a more favorable self-presentation and self-promotion (Thornton, Audesse, Ryckman, & Burckle, 2006). There is no doubt that the impressions have implications for how others perceive and evaluate us (Prapavessis, Grove, & Eklund, 2004), so the purpose of impression management is to create good first impression (and subsequent next impressions) among potential customers (i.e., fans) (Agyemang & Williams, 2013). Impression management is focused on the efforts of the individuals who are determined to promote an image of themselves in other's eyes (St. James, 2010). Dumitriu (2015) mentioned that top athletes require high level impression management. Athlete branding is not much different from the corporate branding as it highlights similarly the importance of reputation management and image/impression management (Illicic & Webster, 2015). Wagg (2007) emphasized the importance of impression management for celebrity managers/coaches concluding that a winning team alone is not sufficient for growing the popularity of a team or an athlete. He argued that the victories in sports need to be complemented with a professional impression management. Impression management not only builds the image of an athlete but also spreads awareness among potential fans. For instance, cricket fans declared bowlers as least popular, and a more detailed study identified that bowlers are actually less active in managing their impressions than other cricketers (Prapavessis et al., 2004).

On the basis of previous literature analysis, the role of impression management, it is proposed in the current framework that:

P3: Impression management has an impact on the creation of an athlete's brand via building the athlete awareness.

Social agents

A social agent is an independent entity that has an ability to influence people, nations, organizations, cultures, or ideologies, as people learn from what they observe (Bandura & Walters, 1963). People's attitudes and actions are influenced by other people. They are influenced by different social agents such as family members, peers, school, and community. In this study, the social agents identified as antecedents of athlete brands are parents and teachers, family members, friends and community.

Parents and teachers (i.e., class teachers, coaches) are direct and most influential agents of motivating their children towards a goal (Melnick & Wann, 2010) and class teachers, trainers or coaches tend to have direct influence on their students (Keegan, Harwood, Spray, & Lavalley, 2009). Parental influence is a basic reason for becoming a fan (Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996) as the foundation for interest in sports is frequently laid at home, either in the form of doing sports or being a spectator. Furthermore, if young people experience acknowledgement from parents and coaches regarding their choice of sports and athletes they are interested in this increases their motivation both for participating in sports and being interested in sport (Keegan et al., 2009).

Besides parents and teachers, other **family members** (i.e., siblings, spouse, aunts and uncles, etc.) may also assume a great importance (Melnick & Wann, 2010). Hsieh et al. (2011) confirmed a positive effect of family members on sport liking/disliking. Among other social agents family members (i.e., peers, relatives) are also important source of influence for fans (Dixon, 2012) and young football fans are very likely to be influenced by their family members (Stone, 2007).

Hsieh et al. (2011) identified the influential role of **friends** in sports related decision and Dixon (2012) explained that in football fandom friends and friendship circles played the major role in choosing a favorite player and team. Friends are seen as an essential influencers for the development during childhood and adolescence (Shook, Vaughn, Litschgec, Kolivoskic, & Schelbe, 2009), including also developing attitude to and engagement with sports. Friends are influential social agents that are directing the choices of their friends through promoting awareness and image (Chen, 2006). Thus we can say that friends are important both in developing initial awareness about an athlete and also in sustaining a long term fanship as having a shared group interest has a potential to intensify the fandom.

Community is very multifaceted concept representing various cultural aspects of a society, including for example race, religion, ethnicity, locality, gender, economics, politics, education and culture itself. Most of the studies related to community in the sports context revolve around ethnicity and race. Fans also often create mental links with athletes with the same religious beliefs (Armstrong & Peretto Stratta, 2004). Racial community influence is more prominent in case of minority groups, e.g. African American sportsmen are more likely to receive encouragement from other member of African American community (Shakib & Veliz, 2012). The same pattern can be observed across different communities – an athlete usually enjoys increased popularity in the community where he or she comes from.

On the basis of previous literature analysis, the role of parents and teachers, family members, friends and community, it is proposed in the current framework that:

P4: Social agents have an impact on the creation of an athlete's brand via building the athlete awareness.

Team/sport

Sport itself is a factor of spreading awareness about athletes representing the respective field of sports. Popularity of the specific sport or game helps to promote the athlete. The same applies to the influence of the team which the player is representing. High popularity of team and sport leads to more awareness about its representatives (i.e., athletes) (Correia & Esteves, 2007). Team/sport influence is further divided into three sub-domains (i.e., interest in sports; team location and interest in team).

Popularity of a certain sport (**interest in sports**) in a society is a basic antecedent for athlete brand awareness. Young people tend to be more attracted to star athletes of widely popular sports while athletes that represent less popular sports have to work hard to market themselves. For instance, football in South Asia and cricket in America are facing the same kind of difficulties – both are considered to be of marginal importance and interest and thus the players are relatively little known in the society. Therefore, consumer's (i.e., fan's) involvement with a certain sport is frequently a reason to start following an athlete or team of that sport (Kunkel, Hill, & Funk, 2013). Also, a fan could develop a connection to athlete through popular leagues of particular sport (Robinson & Trail, 2005). That is why sports itself is considered as a socializing agent (McDonald, Karg, & Lock, 2010). For instance, the popularity of football itself played a major role in establishing football related brands (Chadwick & Burton, 2008).

Interest in a particular team has a potential to lead fans towards being interested in a specific athlete/player of that team. Bodet and Chanavat (2010) explained that fans get direct information from (or about) the team and based on that they

draw a connection to athletes belonging to this team (Robinson & Trail, 2005). For instance, a few years ago Arsenal football club manager Arsene Wenger sent condolence letter to the family of a fan in Karachi, Pakistan (footyroom, 2014). The letter become viral in social media and boost the image of Arsenal football club and indirectly benefited star players of Arsenal as well.

Geographical location of team is a trigger of athlete brand awareness as well. People feel attachment with certain locations and if team located in that place it can exploit people's loyalty in favor of team. Richelieu, Lopez, and Desbordes (2008) explained that French club Paris Saint-Germain could capitalize its reputation through international status of the city of Paris. However, global fans are less interested in geographical location of team (Kerr & Gladden, 2008) but local fans most of time follow their home team because of its geographical location that leads to liking the athletes of this team as well. Therefore, geographical location of the team is considered as socializing agent that influences fans' choices of sport entities (Tainsky & Stodolska, 2010).

On the basis of previous literature analysis, the role of interest in team, interest in sport and team geographical location, it is proposed in the current framework that:

P5: Team and/or sport has an impact on the creation of an athlete's brand via building the athlete awareness.

1.3. On field and off field components of athlete brand

Antecedents of athlete brand help the brand to become visible and introduce the brand to potential customers. The characteristics, attitudes and behavior of an athlete build an image among fans and that image is a combination of the athlete's on field (i.e., sport related) activities and off field (i.e., everyday life related) activities and behavior (Fink et al., 2009). Athletes become famous both due to their achievements on field and public interest in the off field activities (Grant et al., 2011). This interest (on field and off field) of fans builds greater knowledge among fans and leads to increased loyalty towards the players or athletes (Yoshida & Gordon, 2012).

The best examples are football players David Beckham and Cristiano Ronaldo, as both have been able to establish their brand image and both display a variety of highly visible on field and off field qualities (e.g. being athletic, good looking and skillful) (Chadwick & Burton, 2008). Therefore, in the pursuit of building a brand, athlete should maintain successful career (on-field) and positive image of personal life (off-field) (Yu, 2005). Fans develop a firm belief that their favorite athlete will perform well on the field and if this is not so it weakens the fans attachment to the athlete. The same applies for off field behavior where for example not adhering to perceived norms or societal expectations could cause loss in fan interest in that athlete as well (Wu, Tsai, & Wang, 2012).

Thus based on past studies it can be concluded that the creation of brand for certain athlete has two distinctively different dimensions: on field performance of an athlete and off-field activities of an athlete. In case of celebrity football athletes there is evidence that both their on-field achievements and off-field activities have been necessary components for them to become famous (Grant et al., 2011). Consistently with this view, athlete brand is dependent on athlete's on-field success and off-field positive image (Yu, 2005). Likewise, fan's liking about certain athlete is not only depend upon athlete's on field performance but also athlete's positive off-field image (Wu, Tsai, & Hung, 2012). Thus the current study will describe on field achievements and off-field activities of an athlete as athlete brand attributes. As previously discussed, the on-field attributes are associated with an athlete's performance and attitude on the field and off-field attributes are associated with the athlete's personal life (i.e., personality, family, hobbies, activities).

On-field attributes

The on field attributes are the factors related to athlete's sports performance and athlete's performance-related characteristics (Arai et al., 2013). Athletes' success on the ground influences fans to a great extent as the fans like to associate themselves with successful athletes (Kaynak, Salman, & Tatoglu, 2008) and distance themselves from unsuccessful athletes. On the basis of previous studies, the following aspects are considered in the proposed model to assess the on-field attributes: athlete's behavior, team, achievements, style of play and skills.

Behavior is composed of the athlete's performance related attitudes and behavior on the sports ground and in the competitions. The reactions of an athlete in certain situations, connectedness to teammates during the game, showing leadership qualities and showing strong character are all visible manifestations of behavior that the fans are able to observe when following a sports event. As fans expect athletes to show responsibility and mental toughness, the positive attitude of athlete towards competition creates a positive image among fans (Daley & Wolfson, 2010). For instance, French footballer Zinedine Zidane was known for always taking full responsibility by leading the team from the front (Morrissey, 2009) and part of his long lasting popularity is definitely related to his behavioral style.

The team(s) that a player or athlete represents (or represented in the past) help to determine athlete's rank for the fans as reputation and success of the team and the player's role within the team are related to the status that the individual athlete has achieved (Chadwick & Burton, 2008). The historical and current success of the team and the team's participation in most important competitions are the building blocks for promoting the athlete's image (Kerr & Emery, 2011). Therefore, athletes that represent more popular teams (i.e., Manchester United, Real Madrid, New York Yankees, to name a few) have more chances to establish themselves as a brand compared to athletes who represent smaller clubs and teams.

Among the on field attributes, **athlete achievements** play a crucial role for the development of athlete's image. The athlete's on-field record, the number of trophies, medals and prizes, the victorious games in which the player has been involved all have a potential to improve athlete's status among fans (Chadwick & Burton, 2008). Therefore, positive playing record (Carmichael & Thomas, 1993) and winning the competition or game and trophies (Cortsen, 2013) are very important for developing a well-received brand. Furthermore, performance of the athlete is one of the major contributors in enhancing star image (Mullin & Dunn, 2002) as athlete's good performance has been proved to increase its market value (Kiefer, 2014).

Style of play is based on position an athlete uses to play in a specific field of sport and his/her personal style. Kiefer (2014) noted that that number of goals is an important factor to increase popularity of an athlete in football. By scoring goals player can achieve quality player status (Weiss, 2001). Style of play also includes aesthetic elements, for example grace in player style. Perceived effortless and elegant style attracts admirers. So style and position where athlete plays are another factors that can enhance player image. Footballer Zidane was for example called magician (Morrissey, 2009) because of his playing style.

Tactical ability, athletes' talent and competence are **skills** of an athlete. Athlete's special skills differentiate him/her from others in the same field. Athlete's skills and technical complexity is major attribute in the effort of satisfying fans' longing for aesthetic pleasure (Wakefield & Sloan, 1995) and athletic agility is a dominant factor to help a player achieve success among the fans (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). Fans are sometimes more interested to watch and enjoy the athletic skills of the athletes than see the team winning (Theysohn, Hinz, Nosworthy, & Kirchner, 2009). Considering the category of skills, Zidane has again been the favorite both for the fans and the researchers. The fact that he was universally admired has been related to the fact that he was a graceful player with superb skills (Groves, 2011).

Off-field attributes

Off field attributes of the athletes are related to athlete's personal life outside the sporting field, including for instance, where the athlete lives, who the athlete hangs out with and where, who the athlete is married to or is dating, the type of house the athlete lives in, the car they drive, the clothes they wear, how they look in general (Chadwick & Burton, 2008). Grant et al. (2001) stated that because of increase in public interest in athlete personality, the media is more focusing in private life of star athlete. Thus it is essential to acknowledge the role of the off filed attributes in the role of athlete brand building and understand that a highly recognized athlete brand has to rely on a complex of off field attributes that yield positive reactions from the fans. Although the off filed attributes may seem irrelevant from the sports and achievements perspective they cannot be ignored as they are crucial

components shaping the perceptions of the audience. There are five off-field attributes identified for the current study: physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity and entertainment factor.

Physical attraction is based on the looks of an athlete. This factor comprises of the facial appearance, physique and other distinguishing features (i.e., hairstyle, tattoos) of the star athlete (Chadwick & Burton, 2008). Researchers have agreed that one of the main factors in developing interest towards an athlete is athlete's looks (Pope, 2013). Some researchers have argued that only female fans are attracted to athletes because of athlete's handsome looks (Crawford & Gosling, 2004), however recent studies have proved that attractiveness factor is relevant both for male and female fan's decisions about liking certain athlete (van Amsterdam, Knoppers, Claringbould, & Jongmans, 2012).

Lifestyle of an athlete is personal way of life, life choices and lifestyle (i.e., interests, attitudes and behavior in real life, partnership choices, family) of an athlete. As sport has obtained a glamorous aura in the recent decades, life of an athlete has become similar to life of the pop stars and fans of athletes are really interested in their lifestyle choices (Woodhouse & Williams, 1999). If athletes become public celebrities, they also attract a number of fans who are closely following their private behaviors. Celebrity athletes and their lifestyles are increasingly scrutinized by the media (Koernig & Boyd, 2009). Therefore, all the details about athlete's private life can be discussed in the media. The most favored lifestyle choices of athletes that have got media coverage are clothes they wear (Chadwick & Burton, 2008), cars they drive (Chadwick & Burton, 2008); lifestyles of the their wives and girlfriends (Vincent, Kian, & Pedersen, 2011), family life (Yu, 2005), and fashion they adopt (García, 2011).

Personal appeal is overall personal attractiveness and personality of a player (i.e., athlete's charm, charisma). Celebrity brands strengthen the glamour and charisma of an athlete (Kerrigan, Brownlie, Hewer, & Daza-LeTouze, 2011). Charisma of athlete is an important factor of the star quality (Mullin & Dunn, 2002). Personal charm and charisma have a direct impact on fans (Aiken & Koch, 2009) and thus they enable to create emotional and long lasting fan interest. Discussing the brand of the famous tennis star Venus Williams, Cortsen (2013) has pointed out that her brand is not about her play but rather about presenting her as a lifestyle icon that inspires with her off field personality power. Therefore, the influence of the personal appeal of an athlete will not stop when the athlete retires as personal appeal of an athlete is converted into kind of a symbol and the athlete can remain popular long after withdrawing from sports (Volz, 2013).

Ethnicity has already been discussed as socializing agent to generate awareness about an athlete in the current thesis. In the context of the athlete's off-field attributes ethnicity also plays an important role in constructing the positive image of athlete. The race, religion, locality, nationality, descent and skin color of the athlete help

to build positive image among fans. The ethnicity of a player influences fans in various ways. For instance, the popularity of the footballer Didier Drogba in Africa and Zinedine Zidane in Algeria are due to their ethnicity and roots as ethnicity of an athlete can lead to being a fan of a certain player (Hyman & Sierra, 2010). Several studies have been conducted to explore the links between the ethnicity and popularity of the athletes; African American athletes have frequently been the focus of interest when establishing links between the ethnic origin of the athlete and fans (e.g., (Blank, Sweeney, & Fuller, 2014; Ruibley, Runyan, & Lear, 2010; Shakib & Veliz, 2012).

Entertainment factor of an athlete is very much connected to the media portrayal of the athlete. Entertainment is a fast track to creating a mental bond between the fan and an athlete as entertainment can change people emotionally and is universally interesting and appealing (Vogel, 2010). Following an athlete can provide amusement and pleasure for the fans. García (2011) described the charisma of an athlete is capable of providing good stories for the media and entertaining fans outside the football stadium. That is why the celebrity athletes are entertainers as well (Andrews & Jackson, 2001). In this vein, Levy (2015) noted that athletes have several possibilities to entertain the public and become prominent. Entertainment value can be derived from seemingly mundane activities like Terrell Owens (American football player) eating popcorn on the field and doing sit ups shirtless in his driveway. Another American footballer, Chad Johnson, changed his last name to an incorrect interpretation of the No. 85 (Ocho Cinco) and was famous his reality show participation, thus providing different type of entertainment for the fans. Basketball player Shaquille O'Neal was known for his hilarious interactions with the media and his four rap albums all created entertainment value among fans and made the athlete more popular than maybe only sports achievements would have predicted.

On the basis of previous literature, it is proposed in the current framework that:

P6: On-field and off-field attributes of an athlete have an influence on fans' loyalty towards that athlete.

1.4. The influence of athlete's brand on fans behavior

Athlete brand implications

It has been well established that positive perception of a brand cause an increase in consumer loyalty toward that brand (Aaker, 1996; Bauer et al., 2008). Arai et al. (2013) suggested that a good image of an athlete tends to increase loyalty to that athlete as well. Furthermore, fans' goodwill towards the athlete tends to be transferred to the athlete's team (Theysohn et al., 2009), and also extends to the athlete-related brands (Dees, Bennett, & Villegas, 2008). Based on these insights

the current study will consider the influence of athlete brand on loyalty towards the athlete, loyalty towards the athlete's team and purchase intentions of sponsored products.

Consumer loyalty can be conceptualized as the psychological commitment to certain brand (i.e., athletes) (Kunkel et al., 2013). In this sense, **athlete loyalty** is psychological commitment of fans to the athlete. Loyal fans often resist against the idea of replacing their favorite athlete with someone else (Theysohn et al., 2009). Furthermore, presence of top athletes tends to attract more people to the stadium (Bodet & Chanavat, 2010). Due to presence of an athlete more people are attracted to watch games and competitions with top athletes on TV (Hsieh et al., 2011) and win loyalty of fans home and abroad (Kerr & Gladden, 2008). Football club Real Madrid is good example to illustrate the relationship of athlete loyalty and team loyalty. The club has been hiring the big names of the football and without winning any major trophies they still have managed to gain profit due to foreign and local fans of individual athletes that play for the club. The fans of the players buy team jerseys, subscribe to TV channels and visit stadiums to watch live their favorite athletes (De Hoyos, 2008). Florentino Perez, the president of the Real Madrid has explained that fans watch Real Madrid matches to see how Zidane controls a ball, or how Ronaldo runs and dribbles with the ball, how Raul chips the ball over the keeper or how Roberto Carlos shots on goal. People don't go to a football match only to watch the match, or to see wining, they also want to see a spectacle (Hoyos, 2008). Therefore, being loyal to an athlete is an individual's emotional attachment to a certain athlete that led him/her to develop a positive image about that athlete (Arai et al., 2013). In this context, Dwyer (2011) noted that a loyal consumer displays strong, positive attitudes toward a brand and the consumers behavioral choices are in line with these attitudes.

1.5. Relationship of the athlete brand and fans perception of the athlete's team and sponsored brands

The construction of athlete brand is important for an athlete because its impact on fans of the athlete is paramount. Establishing an athlete as a brand is not only beneficial for athlete and his/her reputation; it has also proved advantageous for athlete's team and athlete's sponsors. That is why teams and sponsors compete to get services of best available athletes in the field of sport. Star athletes have abilities to win loyalty of fans for their representative teams (Kerr & Gladden, 2008). That is why several fans visit stadiums only to watch their favorite athlete (Yang & Shi, 2011) without really caring deeply for the team the athlete represents. Athlete branding develops positive relations with fans and athletes leading to loyalty. Dwyer (2011) pointed out that loyal customers display positive behavior towards a brand and same applies to athletes as well. Athlete branding helps to develop fan loyalty for athletes but also generates attachment to the athlete's team. If fans are loyal to certain athlete they tend to support athlete's team as well (Kerr & Gladden,

2008). Furthermore, the presence of the top athlete in a team also can guarantee more game day attendances (Neale & Funk, 2006). The other stakeholder group that benefits from the skillful construction of athlete brand is athlete's sponsors. As Dees et al. (2010) described, there is a positive link between athletes, their fans and their sponsors. Similarly when an athlete represents a brand, it receives more public attention and positive image among fans of athlete (Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward, 2006).

Influence of athlete brand to team loyalty

Once the fan has established attachment with athlete, he/she gradually starts to like various aspects related to the athlete, usually including also the team of the athlete. A presence of good athlete increases fans loyalty towards the team while losing popular player could cause fans losing loyalty to the team as well (Aiken & Koch, 2009; Bodet & Chanavat, 2010). Previous studies have found that 30% of the fans follow a player instead of a team or a club (Dolles & Söderman, 2005; Kerr & Gladden, 2008). When a star athlete, who is a strong brand himself, transfers to a new team he will bring glamour to the new team and league (Kunkel et al., 2013). In this context, desperate efforts of the Paris Saint-Germain football club to sign David Beckham in 2013 was a clear attempt to win hearts of Beckham fans instead of winning trophies through Beckham's play on the pitch. In Ivory Coast (a French speaking country) the Chelsea football club and English Premier League become immediately more popular after Didier Drogba (who is of Ivorian origin) transferred to Chelsea (Künzler & Poli, 2012). Furthermore, first game of Lie Tie and Sun Jihai in the English Premier League were watched by over 700 million Chinese viewers although the players were totally unknown for the English fans. Also, Parma visited Japan for friendly matches even before Milan and Napoli thanks to presence of a Japanese player Hidetoshi Nakata in their squad (Desbordes, 2006). We can conclude that popular players help to develop loyalty to a club and team (Theysohn et al., 2009). Because of such loyalty transfer from athlete to a team, the fans often like all the teams (i.e., clubs, international teams) where their star player has played or is playing (Merkel, 2012). It has been argued that in new markets (i.e., Asia, Africa) more fans follow these star players and their respective teams do not have similar numbers of fans in the same countries (Hognestad, 2009). Star players' performance significantly increases game attendance in both home and international matches (Brandes, Franck, & Nuesch, 2008; Mullin & Dunn, 2002). The more popular a player/athlete is, the easier it is to accumulate economic capital for a club. That is why some football clubs (i.e., Real Madrid, Paris Saint-Germain F.C., Manchester City) have adopted a strategy to sign internationally renowned players because of their marketing success and not necessarily equal sport achievements (Desbordes, 2007).

Influence of athlete brand to purchase intentions of a sponsored brand

Athlete's influence on the loyalty of the fans to its sponsors refers to athlete's role in creating purchase intentions among fans regarding his/her sponsors. Dees et al. (2010) suggested that there is a link between the fans' connection to an athlete and brands associated with the athlete. Celebrities are role models (Stever, 1991) and role models inspire their admirers in several fields of life (including also purchasing habits, consumer behavior) (Dix, Phau, & Pougnet, 2010). Therefore, celebrity endorsement an effective strategy for brands (Kim & Na, 2007) and celebrity athletes have a power to influence the actual purchase intentions of their fans (Charbonneau & Garland, 2006). Also, commercial brands prefer sport celebrities to endorse their products because athletes are source of awareness and spread positive impressions about the brand (Koernig & Boyd, 2009). In addition, during recent years' athlete sponsorships have become more common, as sponsors want to capitalize on well-known athlete brands in order to boost their product or brand that is sold to the public (Yu, 2015). Athlete brands themselves provide several important benefits over unknown marketing personas as they easily win viewers' attention due to their popularity (Charbonneau & Garland, 2005). This means that when athletes endorse a product or service, these brands tend to achieve a wider public recognition and increased sales due to the athletes' own brand status. In recent years, athlete sponsorships have become more widespread as sponsors want to capitalize on well-known athlete brands in order to boost their products (Agyemang, 2011). If brands involve celebrities in their marketing communication it leads to high level of public attention and positive emotional responses (Rindova et al., 2006). Athlete as an endorser of a commercial brand is understandable for the audience because athletes who appear in ads have their own celebrity status already. When they are endorsing a product or service it automatically gets public recognition and ultimately can increase the endorsee profit (Kim & Cheong, 2011). In order to maintain the positive marketing influence and ability to get attention in advertisements athletes must carefully select brands they partner with. Being connected with too many brands decreases the credibility of the athlete as an endorser.

On the basis of the literature related to the celebrity endorsement, team and athlete loyalty, we propose that:

P7: A fan's loyalty towards an athlete will have a positive influence on his/her loyalty towards the team.

P8: A fan's loyalty towards the athlete will have a positive influence on his/her intentions to purchase the associated sponsoring brands.

2. METHODS

Drawing on the past studies analyzed in the previous chapter the current study introduces a proposed framework (see figure 1) of the athlete brand. The framework is based on a detailed review and analysis of the research related to the context of sport marketing and management focusing on the topics such as celebrities, branding, brand equity, brand loyalty and athlete branding. The framework is based on a thorough review of more than 400 peer-reviewed articles, conference proceedings and book chapters published in the English language. From these, 168 high quality and relevant sources were selected to give input to the development of this framework. There were no restrictions with respect to the format and age of the studies as the oldest reference selected is from 1963 and the latest is from 2015. For the argumentation regarding the relevance of the included constructs to the model, please refer to the theoretical framework development in Chapter 1. The proposed framework of an athlete brand is shown in Figure 1. The relationships P1 to P8 represent the propositions about the relationships that are drawn based on past research and explained in detail in section 1.

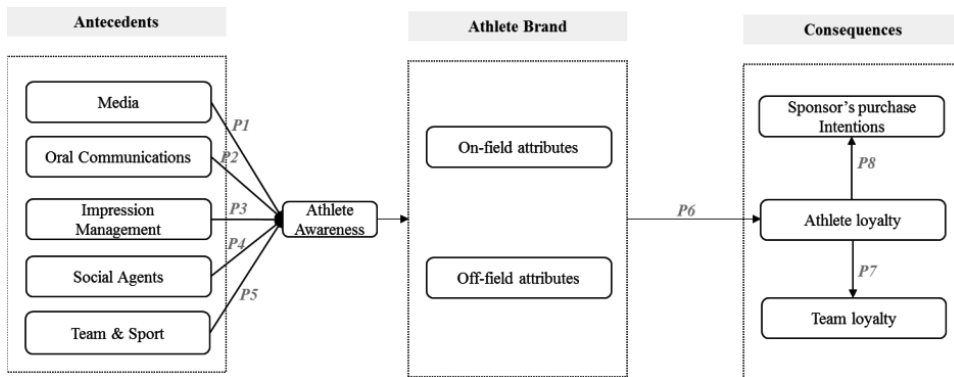


Figure 1. Proposed framework of athlete brand (composed by the author).

The current thesis follows the research paradigm of constructivism. The term paradigm represents way of looking at the world (Mertens, 2010) while constructing is defined as a developmental path from some initial state, instead of progress towards some final state (Burman, 2007). Constructivism expresses the idea that mental structures and operations are actively constructed by one's mind rather than submissively acquired.

The constructivist paradigm is based on the philosophy of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology and Wilhelm Dilthey's study of interpretive understanding called hermeneutics (Mertens, 2005). Hermeneutics is the study of interpretive understanding or interpretive meanings. In this regard, the concept of hermeneutics

is fundamentally interpretive (Clegg & Slife, 2009). Therefore, the idea of hermeneutics is interpretation (Gadamer, 2008). Constructivist researchers used hermeneutics as a way to interpret the meaning of something from a certain viewpoint or situation. All knowledge, in this sense, is developed within a social environment.

Constructivist approaches to research have the aim to understand the human experience (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Constructivists do not generally begin the research with a theory instead they “generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meanings” (Creswell, 2003, p.9). The basic assumption of the constructivist paradigm is that researcher should try to understand the knowledge in the world of live experience from the prospect of those who live it (Schwandt, 2006).

The basic beliefs associated with constructive paradigm are:

1. **Axiology** (nature of ethical behavior): It is based on balanced representation of views that represent community and raise participants’ awareness.
2. **Ontology** (nature of reality): It is based on socially constructed realities.
3. **Epistemology** (nature of knowledge): Constructive paradigm provides interactive link between researcher and participants
4. **Methodology**: Constructive paradigm mainly uses qualitative research method (Mertens, 2010).

Qualitative methodology is widely used in the constructivist exploratory studies (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006) where the aim is to gain new insights into a phenomenon that has not yet been sufficiently studied. Therefore, to explore further, this study employed an inductive qualitative approach to gain in-depth knowledge.

2.1 Sampling of participants

A purposeful, convenience sampling technique was employed to select this study’s participants. In qualitative inquiry one of the crucial considerations is to find a sample that is information rich. From the different purposeful sampling strategies criterion sampling was identified as being the most suitable to achieve the goal of the thesis (Patton, 2002).

In the early stage of sampling the researcher needs to establish contacts with stakeholders of the study (Okumus, Altinay, & Roper, 2007). For this purpose, the author of the thesis established relationships with a range of stakeholders, including sports fans, clubs, athletes, sports managers and sport researchers in the countries where the study was conducted. Those contacts helped to select knowledgeable and experienced interviewees for the empirical data collection.

The next step in sampling was setting the criteria for the criterion sampling. Participants of the study fulfil all of these conditions simultaneously. In order to be included in the sample the person had to

- consider himself/herself a sports fan,
- have at least one favorite athlete,
- have watched at least one game (live or through television) of their favorite athlete during the current season, and
- have been following this particular athlete for at least one year on various media channels (i.e. mass media, social media).

The purpose of defining these criteria was to choose sports fans who consider himself/herself passionate with sport (Crawford, 2004). Through setting these criteria, the author was able to select only enthusiastic and intense sport fans who are likely to be prepared to share their thoughts and insights. Furthermore, purposeful criterion sampling enabled to secure easy access to participants and their secured their willingness to participate in the study (Berg & Lune, 2011).

All interviews were conducted by the author of the thesis in settings preferred by the interviewees (e.g. the interviewee's office or a classroom attributed by the school for this specific purpose). The final sample comprised of 21 football fans. The participants included both males and females that came from a diverse range of professions. The study participants belong to three different countries: Estonia (a Baltic, Northern European country), Portugal (a south western European country), and Pakistan (a South Asian country). The purpose of selecting three countries with different culture and different sporting background was to study fans of different geographical areas of the world as these three countries have distinctively different background: Portugal has strong football culture, Estonia is an emerging European country regarding the popularity of football and existence of football culture and Pakistan is a non-football playing country where cricket is most popular game and popularity of football is very low (Dimeo, 2002). The final sample included participants that were fans, as well as amateur and former players, sport researchers and sport analysts which offered interesting viewpoint to the current study (see table 1).

Table 1. Participants profile information

	Gender	Pseudonym	Country	Profession	Status
1	M	Tiago	Portugal	Football Expert	Expert/ Player/ Fan
2	M	Ricardo	Portugal	Student	Player/Fan
3	M	Pedro	Portugal	Student	Fan
4	M	Saad	Pakistan	Mechanical Engineer	Fan
5	M	Abid	Pakistan	Student	Fan
6	M	Bilal	Pakistan	Lecturer	Fan
7	M	Sohail	Pakistan	Student	Fan
8	M	Shoaib	Pakistan	IT-Specialist	Player/Fan
9	M	Rehan	Pakistan	Salesman	Player/ Fan
10	M	Waqas	Pakistan	IT-Specialist	Fan
11	M	Najaf	Pakistan	Football Expert & Journalist	Expert/Fan
12	M	Farhan	Pakistan	Student	Fan
13	M	Nouman	Pakistan	Marketing Manager	Player/Fan
14	M	Muzamil	Pakistan	Student	Fan
15	M	Umair	Pakistan	IT-Specialist	Fan
16	M	Aat	Estonia	Football player	Player/Fan
17	F	Triin	Estonia	Lecturer	Fan
18	M	Peeter	Estonia	Commercial Director	Expert/ Fan
19	M	Oleg	Estonia	Entrepreneur	Fan
20	F	Aili	Estonia	Researcher	Fan
21	M	Zemenu	Estonia	Banker	Player/Fan

2.2. Data collection

A semi-structured interview guide was created in accordance with the interview guidelines proposed by Patton (2002) and Lincoln and Guba (1985). Personal interviews were conducted in order to obtain a deeper understanding on fans' thoughts about their favorite athletes and Keller's (1993) recommendations for measuring the characteristics of brand associations were used to develop questions for the interview. Data were collected through a set of 21 interviews. All interviews were conducted during a period of two months (October 2014 to December 2014) and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants were asked to sign a voluntary participation form that explained the purpose of the study and confirmed their acceptance to participate in the study.

The decision about the number of participants in the current study was taken based on insights from both previous studies and methodological literature. There are no definite numerical guidelines to assist qualitative researchers to select sample size. In general, it is acknowledged that sample sizes for qualitative studies are a lot smaller than those for the quantitative studies (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2003). There is an early point for diminishing returns if the researcher increases the sample size and large participant numbers are not required in qualitative research as that does not contribute to gaining new evidence. Besides, qualitative research does not aim towards generalizations and proving hypotheses being rather aimed at understanding meanings (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Qualitative sample must be large enough to assure that main ideas, perceptions and meanings that are important are revealed, increasing sample size beyond that goal leads to the data becoming repetitive and excessive (Mason, 2010). Thus the exact number of qualitative study participants depends on the topic of research, variability in the population and results extracted from the interview data as the research process is active. Once data saturation occurs and no new information is extracted from subsequent interviews the researcher can be confident that the sample is sufficient for the research topic. There have been a few attempts to propose exact participant numbers but the researchers have not reached a common conclusion. The proposals for qualitative sample size have been for example 5 to 25 participants (Creswell, 1998), six participants (Bertaux, 1981), at least 15 participants (Guest, Bunce & Johnson 2006), etc. The current study involves 21 participants and the main criterion for the sample size was data saturation. Accidentally, the number is also corresponding to the most ambitious numerical requirements provided in literature (presented above).

2.3 Designing the interview

The purpose of the research was to gain deeper knowledge about creation of athlete brand process among fans. For that purpose, author developed interview guide with the help of previous literature following the guidelines of qualitative research theory. As Patton (2002) mentioned, interview guide increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes data collection somewhat systematic for with regards to each participant.

An interview guide was developed based on the research questions and analysis of past studies. The purpose of developing the interview guide was to assist the researcher in conducting interviews and ensuring that all the insights from the respondents are gathered in a systematic way following the same logic of themes and topics. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that the researcher followed the script loosely allowing the respondents to provide deeper insights on themes that were triggered by the main questions.

As the framework was based on three aspects of athlete branding (i.e., antecedents, attributes and implication) each interview consisted of three sections. The first

section of the interview was based on questions focused on the antecedents of athlete brand, the second section was designed to develop the knowledge about the components of athlete brand, while third section discussed implications of athlete brand among fans of athletes.

First part of the interview is focusing on the brand awareness factors that triggered associations regarding the athlete for the fan. Question 1 looks into how the fan become aware about a favorite athlete. In question 2, the interviewer asked the participants to discuss the role of media, oral communication, impression management, social agent and team/sport regarding providing information about the athlete in the process of becoming a fan. The reason behind asking specifically about these factors is that these are main antecedents which were proposed in the study (see section 1.2). As media is basic source of promoting products and services (Keeffe & Zawadzka, 2011). Moreover, oral communication (Künzler & Poli, 2012), impression management (Wagg, 2007), social agents (Melnick & Wann, 2010) and team and/or sport (Best, 2011; Stewart, Smith, & Nicholson, 2003) also proved to be vital in term of spreading awareness about an athlete. Questions 3-8 helped to get a detailed insight of the antecedents as these questions discussed fan's experience about factors of the model. The researcher also sought to understand reasoning behind certain actions of fans in the process of becoming a fan.

The second section of interview dealt with the attributes of the athlete brand. The basic idea of developing questions of this section was to know about factors that are crucial for a fan if he or she deeply likes an athlete and what motivates the fan to keep this relationship alive. The questions of this section are about the essence and importance of on-field attributes of athlete in the context of athlete branding. Past studies had highlighted that an athlete's on-field attributes are a key to building an athlete brand (see section 1.3) but via this question the interviewer was able to understand what are the specific sets of on field attributes that the study participants consider crucial in developing fanship and what is the relative importance of each of the on-field attributes. The same sequence of questions was used for the off-field attributes of athlete brands. As off-field activities of an athlete have a strong influence on fans (Arai et al., 2013, see section 1.2) the author wanted to clarify the components that form the set of off field factors and assess their importance.

The third section of the interview guide enabled the author to study the implications that arise from the athlete's brand. As Aaker (1996, see Introduction of the thesis) mentioned that good perceptions of a brand are linked to an increase in consumer loyalty towards that brand and subsequent purchase intentions. The current study aims to understand whether such positive sentiments and intentions are present also in the case of an athlete's brand. When fan develops a good image of an athlete it increases loyalty towards that athlete as a consequence. Moreover, this good image also cast positive effects on athlete's team (Theysohn et al., 2009, see section

1.4) and as well as on athlete related brands (Dees et al., 2008). Therefore, in the interview three types of athlete brand implication were discussed (i.e., athlete loyalty, athlete's team loyalty and athlete's sponsor loyalty). The third section of interview consisted of questions that discussed all three implication types of athlete branding in detail.

2.4 Instrumentation

The instrumentation process defines what sort of data the researcher has to gather, how the data collection is organized and what is the timing of the process of conducting interviews. To get more detailed knowledge researcher served as instrument to elicit the data. To do so, follow up questions were asked, as asking probing question is a good source of obtaining in depth knowledge from interviewees (Kvale, 1996; Mason, 2002). The interviews lasted from 20 to 40 minutes depending upon participant interest, and willingness to share his/her thoughts. Moreover, it is important to mention that an expert (i.e., an interviewee related to the field of sport) from each country was interviewed separately from the fans in order to gain clearer understanding of the country specific factors influencing the culture of sports fans. For these interviews, all questions were presented based on two different angles (i.e., their opinion as fan and as expert). In doing so, question was asked to 'directed to the fan' (e.g., Do you follow your favorite player on mass media and social media? Why?), and then it was 'directed to the expert' (e.g., Do you think fans tend to follow their favorite player on mass media and social media? Why?). For the sake of concealing their identities, pseudonyms assigned to each of the participants after every interview.

Back translation: All participants from Estonia and Portugal had to a solid understanding of the English language, and therefore, the interviews were conducted in English in these countries. However, the Urdu language was adopted in Pakistan due to the difficulties in finding sports fans that had good English skills. For that purpose, back translation was used to minimize discrepancies between the original instrument and the translated instrument. The questionnaire was first translated into Urdu by author of the current study and then back-translated into English by two different professors who are proficient in both languages (i.e. English and Urdu). The comparison of the two forms made it clear that the two instruments were conceptually equivalent.

2.5 Data analysis

The of data analysis for this study commenced right after conducting first interview as this strategy allowed to become more familiar with study participant's responses (Marshall & Rossman, 1995) and also identify the early signs of data saturation. The process started with compiling the data (Yin, 2011). The lead

researcher (the author of the thesis) listened to the interview and transcribed the data. After converting the interview into written form, the author noted down the first impressions of the interview. Next, the initial impressions of the interview were discussed with the other researchers (co-authors of the published papers of the study) after each interview. Through this process, the researchers were able to discuss how to improve subsequent interviews.

Two level coding system was adopted for the analysis of this study, starting with open coding and continuing on the axial level. Open coding is frequently called disassembling (Yin, 2011) as it means “breaking data apart and delineating concepts to stand for blocks of raw data” (Corbin & Strauss 2008, 195). To do so, interview responses were first read and analyzed until the data were entirely understood. Researchers discussed preliminary themes arising from the first round of reading the transcripts. Through this process the author of the thesis was able to determine and understand the emergent patterns. Furthermore, researchers referred to the study purpose and interview guide to further aid in the process of identifying the initial themes. Once initial themes were recognized, these were either developed into more defined, specific themes or in some cases, the initial themes were combined if they were very similar to each other and when there were not sufficient grounds to create a standalone theme.

2.6. Validity and reliability of the study

Validity and reliability of the study is an important consideration for all academic research however several authors have admitted the difficulty of establishing validity criteria in qualitative research (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2011). For instance, Wolcott (1990) argued that in terms of qualitative research, understanding is a more fundamental goal than validity. Validity in qualitative research has been linked to the keywords of integrity, character, and quality, that should be assessed relative to study purposes and circumstances of the research (Brinberg & McGrath, 1985, p. 13). The opponents of qualitative approaches have frequently criticized the lack of standard means of assuring validity as qualitative research is based on subjective interpretations and influence of background factors (Thomson, 2011). Therefore, for the sake of validity and reliability of the study, this thesis followed the guidelines of Huberman and Miles (2002) in order to achieve maximum validity for the current research. Five corresponding types of validity that concern qualitative researchers are descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, generalizability, and evaluative validity (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

‘Descriptive validity’ refers to the accuracy of the data (Maxwell, 1992). The data must accurately reflect what the participant has said or done. For the purpose of descriptive validity, author recorded the interviews and created verbatim interview transcripts. As this study does not involve fan’s facial and body language the verbatim transcript provided descriptive validity.

‘Interpretive validity’ is about interpretation - how well the researcher reports the participants’ meanings of events, objects and/or behaviors (Maxwell, 1992). This validity criterion was secured via additional sub questions and presenting daily life examples to clarify participants’ replies to questions. For instance, when a fan answered a specific question, the interviewer asked if he/she can give a real life examples as illustration or explain it bit more to get better understanding of fans and avoid interpretations that are not in line with the original ideas of the interviewees. Also, the researchers in the team discussed interview transcripts to make sure none of the authors misinterprets what the participants have said.

‘Theoretical validity’ addresses the validity of the researcher’s concepts and theory (Thomson, 2011). Theoretical validity of the concepts is maximized via a very thorough analysis of past research with an aim to identify all the building blocks of the fans loyalty to an athlete. The theoretical relationships of the components of the model are drawn based on past research and interview data but in order to achieve theoretical validity that would conclusively explain the causal relationships further validating studies are required.

‘Generalizability’ is the ability to apply the theory resulting from the study (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Generalizability is based on the supposition that this theory is valuable in making sense of similar persons or situations. Huberman and Miles (2002) have stated that in the case of qualitative studies the researchers should not aim for external generalizability.

‘Evaluative validity’ moves away from the data itself and tries to assess the evaluations drawn by the researchers (Maxwell, 1992). Paying attention to evaluative validity is necessary in order to maintain neutral position of the researchers and avoid evaluative assessments (i.e., labelling a behavior good or bad). To ensure evaluative validity in this study, two level coding system was adopted and besides the author of the thesis also the co-authors of the papers were involved in data analysis. Peer-debriefing sessions were held to gain an outside perspective on the themes emerging from the data to ensure the unbiasedness of the author during evaluation procedure.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study extracted from the analysis of the interviews with fans are presented below. The first part of the interviews covered the antecedents of athlete brand. The second part focused on athlete brand components while the third part of interviews covered implications of athlete brand. Overall, the findings are in line with proposed framework in this study and allow a deeper and better understanding of the model proposed in Figure 1. The results of the interviews are presented and summarized in Table 2, 4 and 6.

3.1. Antecedents of athlete brand

In this subchapter the research results regarding the antecedents of athlete brand are discussed. First, the verbatim illustrative quotes of the participants will be presented in the table format, followed by a more detailed discussion.

Table 2. Participant's discussion about antecedents.

Antecedent	Participants' sample quotes
Media	
Mass Media	"I watched lots of their matches on TV, I read about them" [Shoaib]
Social Media	"Messi was kind a hot thing, I watched him on YouTube videos and I realized he is a magician player" [Waqas]
Mega Event Media Spectacles	"During the 2006 World Cup, I came to know about Ronaldo" [Abid]
Fantasy Sport & Video Games	"I came close to Ronaldo while playing Play Station as I always choose him for my team" [Farhan]
Oral Communication	
Word of Mouth	"I always mention Messi as a fabulous player in my chats with friends" [Waqas]
Rumors & Narratives	"I started to like him when I heard the story that he refused to exchange shirt with an Israeli player after the match" [Nouman]
Impression Management	"The one which impress me the most is the how hard working Ronaldo is and how he shows that to all of us" [Tiago/ Recardo]
Social Agents	
Parents and teachers	"My father played football, my grandfather was a football player and a referee, so I decided to adopt football" [Shoaib]

Family Members	“My cousins discussed all the time about him so I knew him from their talks” [Sohail]
Friends	“My friend told me about Messi when we were watching a football game” [Muzamil].
Community	“I played Cricket like any other child as every new child born automatically attract towards cricket in Pakistan” [Shoaib]
Team & Sport	
Sport Interest	“As a football player myself, I chose my favorite player due to the similarities in the playing ground” [Zemenu]
Team Interest	“My favorite player plays in my favorite team and he is the captain and a very loyal player” [Pedro]
Team Geographical Location	“My favorite player played in sporting Lisbon, which is my favorite team because I live in Lisbon and played for Sporting when I was younger” [Ricardo]

From the five major antecedents identified in previous studies and introduced in framework the study further improves knowledge about antecedents of athlete brand. Fans identified four sub antecedents while discussing media as an antecedent of athlete brand. These sub antecedents are: (1) mass media, (2) social media, (3) mega event media spectacles and (4) fantasy sports & video games. While discussing oral communication two sub categories emerged that are: (1) word of mouth and (2) rumors & narratives. Five types of social agents discussed by participants in the current study (i.e., parents & teachers, family members, friends, and community). Lastly, team and sport factors sub-categorized into three parts: (1) sport interest, (2) team interest and (3) team geographical location. These sub-antecedents are further described in the table below.

Table 3. Proposed antecedents of athlete brand, its definitions and theoretical support.

Antecedent	Definition	Theoretical Support
Media		
Mass Media	Consist of local and national newspapers, radio and television plus new media satellite television, the internet and mobile phones.	Summers and Johnson (2008); Liu and Brock (2011); Hu and Tang (2010)
Social Media	A group of internet based applications that allow live experience to fans and social atmosphere	Pronschinske et al. (2012); Sierra et al. (2010); Harrington et al. (2012)

Mega Event Media Spectacles	When a major sport event such as the Olympics or World cup occurs, the event may lead to an increased interest in athletes	Dimeo (2002); Goodman et al. (2002); Koenigstorfer et al. (2010)
Fantasy Sport & Video Games	a virtual version of having a role in the sport environment allowing fans to engage with the real-world	Dixon (2012); Nesbit and King (2010); McCarthy (2012)
Oral Communication		
Word of Mouth	One to one communication or spoken messages	Lovelock & Wirtz (2011); Bush et al. (2004); Bush et al. (2005)
Rumours & Narratives	Rumours are unconfirmed information and narratives are stories about the player	Künzler and Poli (2012); Grant et al. (2001); Crawford (2002)
Impression Management	The process by which social actors attempt to influence how others view them	Bolino et al, 2008; Prapavessis et al. (2004); St James (2010); Rojek (2001)
Social Agents		
Parents	Direct and most influential agents of perusing their children for following a goal	Wann et al. (1996); Hsieh et al. (2011); Melnik and Wann (2010)
Family Members	Influence of relatives.	Dixon (2012); Melnik and Wann (2010)
Friends	Influence of friends and peers.	Dixon (2012); Hsieh et al. (2011)
Community	Cultural aspects such as race, religion, ethnicity, location, influencing fans choices	Fletcher (2011); Armstrong and Peretto-Stratta (2004); Wang (2004)
Team & Sport		
Sport Interest	Popularity of a certain sport within the fans' geographical area.	Stewart et al. (2003); Kunkel et al. (2013); Robinson and Trail (2005)
Team Interest	Awareness of the team and points of interest for the fans.	Best (2013); Robinson and Trail (2005); Bodet and Chanavat (2010)
Team Geographical Location	Geographical location of the team contribution to an athlete's popularity.	Richelieu et al. (2008); Hay and Joel (2007); Heere et al. (2011)

These findings are consistent with Summers and Johnson (2008) suggesting that in the process of promoting athlete image, mass media is playing an important role. Sierra, Taute, and Heiser (2010) mentioned that social media is triggering and deepening fans' knowledge about athletes. Most of the Pakistani study participants mentioned that they become familiar with their favorite football athlete during

2014 FIFA World Cup. To this respect Goodman, Duke, and Sutherland (2002) have mentioned that major sport events have the power to influence segments of population. Moreover, fantasy sport & video games as an antecedent nominated by fans also supported in literature as video games aid to develop emotional bond between sport fan and athlete (Dixon, 2012).

Fans identified two sub antecedents (word-of-mouth and rumors or narratives) while discussing oral communication media as an antecedent of athlete brand. These findings provide support to previous literature such as Kim and Trail (2011) acknowledged that in many cases word-of-mouth (WOM) is the most effective resource of awareness in the context of sport. In the same vein, Künzler and Poli (2012) highlighted the role of rumors and/or narratives in the African context where rumors and stories about certain athletes often contribute to enhance their image among fans and general populations and same result found in South Asian country of Pakistan.

Impression management was confirmed as an important antecedent of athlete brand by study participants as they acknowledged the role of image building activities by their favorite athlete; given that impression management by an athlete spread the awareness about the athlete and built his/her image among fans (Prapavessis et al., 2004).

The dimension of social agents in this study was further developed into four sub-dimensions in the light of responses from fans: parents and teachers, family members, friends and community. These results provide support to Dionisio, Leal, and Moutinho (2008) suggesting that most kinds of fans start to follow the club in their childhood under the influence of some close person (i.e., parents, teachers, family members). Furthermore, community also considered an important socializing agent in the context of sports (Dunne, 2012).

The team and sport itself can also be the awareness factor about certain athletes, as noted by Kunkel, Hill, and Funk (2013), the interest in a specific sport is often a reason to follow an athlete, and more than half of the participants highlighted the role of sport in the context of athlete brand. Furthermore, Bodet and Chanavat (2010) explained that fans get direct information from the team regarding an athlete and that knowledge helps them to create a bond with that athlete. The participants' responses were also in line with the result of Heere et al. (2011) suggesting people feel attached with certain regions, the teams located in those regions and respective athletes of that teams.

3.2 Components of athlete brand

In this subchapter the research results regarding the attributes of athlete brand are discussed. First, the verbatim illustrative quotes of the participants will be presented in the table format, followed by a more detailed discussion.

Table 4. Sample quotes about on-field attributes and off-field attributes of athlete brand

Components of athlete brand	Participants' responses
On field attribute	
Behavior	"He is a fighter. He is a team player, very mature in the field" [Saad]
Team	"He is the captain of my favorite team" [Pedro]
Achievements	"He won golden boot with Manchester United" [Saad]
Style of play	"He has extreme good reactions as goalkeeper and the best thing is that he is kind of a half defender" [Triin]
Skills	"His shoots and free kicks are like a tomahawk missile" [Ricardo]
Off field attributes	
Physical Attraction	"I find him very sexy" [Abid]
Lifestyle	"He is devoted to his family and he does charity work for people of Gaza" [Umair]
Personal Appeal	"His personality has groom much, and now he has a good personal appeal" [Waqas]
Ethnicity	"I like him because he is an Estonian playing in Germany" [Oleg]
Entertainment	"His life has enough entertainment factor to entertain us" [Waqas]

From the two major attributes of athlete brand identified from previous literature and introduced in framework the study further improves knowledge about attributes of athlete brand. Fans identified five sub dimensions of each while discussing on-field and off-field attributes of athlete brand. The five on field attributes are (1) behavior, (2) team, (3) achievement, (4) style of play and (5) skills while five off field attributed of athlete branding are (1) physical attraction, (2) lifestyle, (3) personal appeal, (4) ethnicity and (5) entertainment.

Table 5. Definitions and theoretical foundations of on-field attributes and off-field attributes of athlete brand

Antecedents	Definition	Support
On-field attribute		
Behaviour	How an athlete behaves and performs during the match	Daley and Wolfson (2010); Morrissey (2009); Koernig and Boyd (2009)
Team	The status of the team(s) that an athlete represented in the past or that is currently representing	Chadwick and Burton (2008); Kerr and Emery (2011); Martin (2013)
Achievements	The number of games, trophies, medals and prizes won by the athlete	Grant et al. (2001); Kiefer (2014); Mullin and Dunn (2002)
Style of play	Style and aesthetic elements of an athletes' play	Morrissey (2009); Aiken and Koch (2009); Weiss (2001)
Skills	Tactical ability, level of talent and competence of the athlete	Theysohn et al. (2009); Groves (2011); Abernethy (1990)
Off-field attributes		
Physical Attraction	Looks and physique of the athlete	Van Amsterdam et al. (2012); Kerr and Emery (2011); King (2002)
Lifestyle	Aspects related to an athletes' private life, such as interests, living style, WAGS, family, friends	Koering and Boyd (2009); Vincenta et al. (2011); Yu (2005)
Personal Appeal	The force of an athletes' personality	Vincent et al. (2009); Cortsen (2013); Mullin and Dunn (2002)
Ethnicity	Race, origin, religion and other aesthetic cultural patterns of an athlete	Hyman and Sierra (2010); Künzler and Poli, 2012; Dunne (2012)
Entertainment	Capability of the athlete to provide entertainment outside the sport environment	García (2011); Künzler and Poli (2012); Tanaka (2004)

The on field attributes of athlete brand are based on aspects of athlete performance while off field attributes are athlete's personal life aspects. Five on field attributes of athlete brand identified by the fans are: (1) behavior, (2) team, (3) achievements, (4) style of play and (5) skills. The attributes extracted from the interviews with the fans are in line with previous literature. Daley and Wolfson (2010) suggests that fans expect their favorite athletes to lead the team upfront and show a disciplinary behavior. The importance of team athlete represent on the field is consistent with the study of Chadwick and Burton (2008) who noted that team athlete represent currently or in the past could change the athlete rank.

Complementary, Grant, Heere, and Dickson (2011) mentioned that athletes become famous because of their achievements. Furthermore, An elegant style of play by athlete is considered a positive aspect for creating an athlete's brand (Daley & Wolfson, 2010) as former French and Real Madrid footballer Zidane called 'magician' due to his style of play (Morrissey, 2009). The sub-dimension of skills that was identified in the current study suggests a link with prior studies as Theysohn et al. (2009) highlighted that some fans are more interested to watch athletes' skills than the team winning.

Regarding the off-field attributes of athlete brand, five new sub-dimensions were identified based on the interviews: (1) physical attraction, (2) lifestyle, (3) personal appeal, (4) ethnicity and (5) entertainment. Regarding physical attraction this study replicate the result of van Amsterdam et al. (2012) who stated that an athlete's look and physical attraction is important for fans. Furthermore, athlete's private life patterns being increasingly talk of media and becoming an important aspect of establishing connection with fans (Koernig & Boyd, 2009). The sub-dimension of personal appeal that was identified in the current study suggests a link with prior studies as (García, 2011) mentioned that the charisma or appeal of an athlete is capable to amuse fans outside the playing pitch. Complementary, Shakib and Veliz (2012) mentioned that African-American and other communities support their own ethnic athlete as Fletcher (2010) discussed that British Asians cheers for athletes and teams that represent their ethnical groups instead of Great Briton's. Lastly, entertainment as an off field attribute of an athlete brand supported the idea that athletes have numerous possibilities to entertain their fans and become prominent among fans (Levy, 2015).

3.3 Implications of athlete brand

In this subchapter the research results regarding the implication of athlete brand are discussed. First, the verbatim illustrative quotes of the participants will be presented in the table format, followed by a more detailed discussion.

Table 6. Participants' discussion about the implications of athlete brand

Antecedent	Participants' responses
Athlete Loyalty	
Media following	"I have my mobile full of pictures of Cristiano Ronaldo, and I saved pictures from him wherever these pictures are posted: on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Newspaper" [Farid]
Own narratives	"I think Ronaldo has converted to Islam, but he did not declare it publically" [Abdul]

Positive WOM	“I usually mention to my friends that I follow Iniesta because of his example of humbleness, even knowing he wants to succeed” [Imran]
Creation of links	“I am a hard worker like Ronaldo though I have less success” [Fazal]
Resistance to change	“fans won’t stop following their favorite athlete in any case” [Kashif]
Team Loyalty	
Team substitution	“I was a Barcelona fan, but after Ronaldo’s transfer I started to follow Real Madrid” [Anton/ Martim/ Abdul]
Support to multiple teams	“If Gerrard would move to Inter Milan I would start supporting them as well, although Liverpool would also be my favourite team” [Dinis]
Revenue generation	“I have a Barcelona scarf already, and I used to watch their matches on TV. Still, I would like to visit Barcelona to watch a live match in the stadium” [Kadri]
Sponsor Loyalty	
Brand recognition	“I remember Cristiano Ronaldo was the face of a Bank in Portugal. Although the bank almost closed, I still remember the name because of Ronaldo” [Afonso]
Positive image	“When my favourite athlete appears in a TV commercial, I have faith that he has tested that product himself” [Awais]
Purchase intentions	“If my favourite player is involved in marketing strategy from a brand, I would love to buy that product at least once” [Heino/ Afonso/ Tariql]
Ignoring rival sponsors	“Nobody in Portugal bought a Pepsi when the brand campaigned against Cristiano Ronaldo” [Martim].

From the five major antecedents identified in previous studies and introduced in framework the study further improves knowledge about implication of athlete brand. According to fans athlete loyalty’s outcomes are: (1) media following, (2) developing own narratives, (3) spreading positive WOM, (4) creation of personal links and (5) resistance of change. Three sub dimensions of team loyalty emerged that are: (1) team substitution, (2) support to multiple teams and (3) revenue generation, while sponsor loyalty can be further described as: (1) brand recognition, (2) positive image, (3) purchase intention and (4) ignoring rival sponsors. These sub-die mentions are further described in the table below.

Table 7. Explaining the implications of athlete brand

Antecedent	Participants’ responses
Athlete Loyalty	
Media following	fans tend to start following the on various media platforms
Own narratives	Fans starting to create/ believe good stories and turning negative news into positive stories

Positive WOM	Fans engaged in a campaign to advertise through words of mouth their favorite athlete
Creation of links	Fans seem to relate everything to their favorite athlete
Resistance to change	once a fan, always a fan, no matter what happened
Team Loyalty	
Team substitution	Fans started to like a certain team because of their favorite athlete represents them
Support to multiple teams	Fans tend to have a favorite player in every league and they often watch and support multiple teams because of those athletes
Revenue generation	Fans tend to spend for their athlete's team in shape of gate money, TV subscription, merchandize purchase, etc.
Sponsor Loyalty	
Brand recognition	recognized the brands sponsoring their favorite athletes
Positive image	When a fan's favorite athlete is advertising a brand, it creates a positive image in the minds of the fans for that brand
Purchase intentions	Positive intention to buy things related to their favorite athlete
Ignoring rival sponsors	Fans deny everything that occurs against their favorite athlete even rival brands of their favorite athlete's sponsoring brand

The third part of the study focused on the implications of athlete brands in terms of fan perceptions about the athlete, the teams represented by the athlete, and athlete's sponsors. The dimension of athlete loyalty was further categorized into five sub-dimensions: media following, own narratives, positive WOM, creation of links, and resistance to change. The first sub-dimension, media following is in line with Frederick et al. (2012) who mention that loyal fans follow their favorite athlete on different media channels to increase interpersonal closeness. The study found that fans tend to create their own narratives based upon their experiences about true or false stories they hear about the favorite athlete. This second sub-dimension of creating own narrative is in line with views of Dubois, Rucker, and Tormala (2011)'s statement that fans start believing in positive rumors and stories and neglect bad things about their favorite brand one they become loyal. Furthermore, fans not only create their own narrative surrounding their favorite athlete but also spread these stories in conversations. This is consistent with the view that young female fans spread positive WOM regarding their favorite athletes (Bush et al., 2005), but also male fans do the same. Moreover, fans started to see everything in connection with their favorite athlete. In literature, Fink et al. (2009) described that highly identified fans see them as reflection of their favorite and thus they started to see everything through their favorite's context. Lastly, resistance to change is in line with the view of Neale and Funk (2006) that loyal fans keep loyal to their favorite athlete even when athlete is not in portraying a good image. The role of the athlete brand on team loyalty allowed us to identify three sub-dimensions: team substitution, support for multiple teams and revenue generation. The concept of team substitution is in line with views of Yu (2005) who mentioned that top athletes have power to win the loyalties for their respective teams. In contrast, supporting

multiple teams is a rarely discussed idea in the literature as it is about having loyalties for more than one team. McDonald, Karg, and Lock (2010) described that fans follow multiple teams even in the same sport as mentioned by some of the participants. In this study author found that reason behind multiple teams is an athlete representing that team. Furthermore, athletes also proved to be a source of revenue generation for their teams. Yang and Shi (2011) stated that star athletes are often proved profitable for their teams, as their fans watch their games, wear their jerseys and follow their news.

The third positive implications of athlete brand concerns fan loyalty is about the sponsors that are associated with the athlete. These positive implications are related to sponsor brand recognition, positive image, purchase intentions and ignoring rival sponsors. The first sub-die mention brand recognition is in line with the idea that when an athlete endorses some brand, the ability of fans to recognize the brand effectively increases (Charbonneau & Garland, 2005). The second concept positive image is replicate the idea of developing positive image regarding athlete's sponsor is an important aspect as positive thoughts leads towards purchasing (Biscaia, Correia, Ross, Rosado, & Maroco, 2013). This idea has been supported by Charbonneau and Garland (2006) who claim that a star athlete influences purchase intention of their fans. Lastly, the findings of this study highlight that fans not only purchase brands related to their favorite athlete but also tend to avoid brands associated with rival teams or athletes. This is a new finding that has vital importance for the brand managers employing athletes suggesting that the sponsoring brands obtain benefits through an increase in fan willingness to purchase its products or services, as well as the exclusion of rival brands from the purchase list.

Figure 2 below presents the final model of the athlete brand development including the antecedents and consequences based on the literature review and qualitative study.

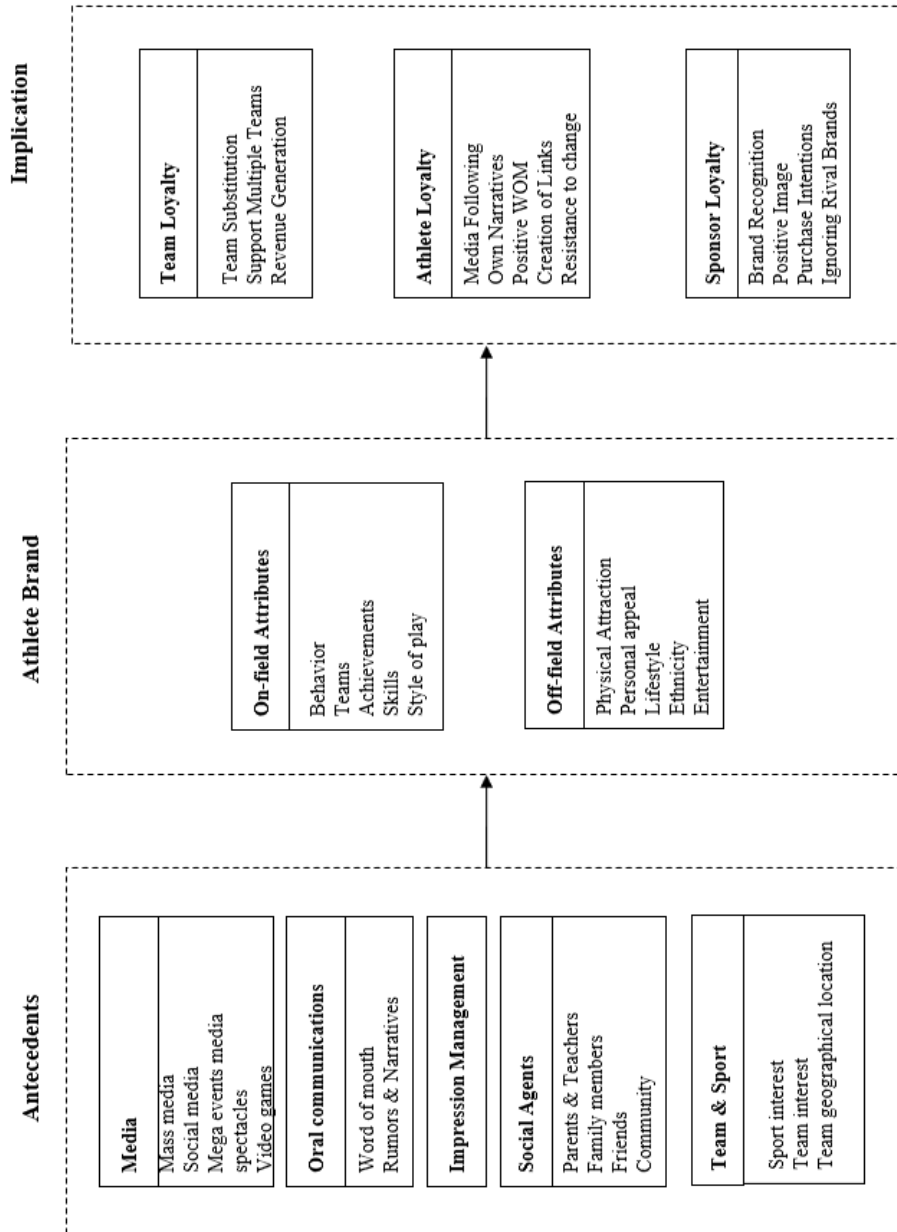


Figure 2. Final framework of the athlete brand

4. CONTRIBUTION TO THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF MANAGEMENT

This dissertation yielded findings that give both managerial insights to athlete branding and explain the wider impact of athlete brand. The current study focused on the linkages between factors affecting an athlete brand as well its subsequent implications for the athlete him/herself, his/her team and associated sponsors. The comprehensive model of athlete brand developed in the thesis fills the gap in the theory by explaining how an athlete's brand is created in the interaction of the components of the model. All the previous studies have focused on one or a few sub factors of the model. Also, this study explains the implications of athlete brand for the athlete himself/herself, athlete's teams and athlete's sponsors.

4.1 Contribution to management theories

Athlete branding is derived from customer brand equity theories. However, athlete brand is still new and unique idea as sport teams branding is more popular topic among researchers (see Chapter 1). Unlike sports team brand, athlete brand is also related with the concept of human (i.e., celebrity) brand as well. Thus this study contributed via explaining how the athlete branding process works via involving the learnings from the concepts of customer based brand equity and celebrity branding.

Importance of brand awareness is indispensable in the theory of brand management. However, antecedents that trigger the creation of athlete brand or factors that spread athlete brand awareness in the athlete brand theory were nonexistent before. In this study brand awareness factors in the context of athlete brand have been discussed and combined into a single framework. Five major athlete brand awareness factors were identified and discussed together with their sub-factors as well.

This study discussed and combined effects of athlete brand antecedents as source of athlete brand awareness among fans. This study not only analyzed brand awareness factors in developed countries (i.e., social media, fantasy games etc.) but also explained factors that are useful in third world societies (rumors & narratives, word-of-mouth, etc.). Thus the current study is a valuable starting point into exploring deeper the differences and similarities of developing and developed countries.

Constructs of athlete brands have already discussed in various studies but this study contributed in the theory by providing more specific and detailed explanations about the attributes of athlete brand. Dividing the on-field and off-field attributes of the athlete brand enables to create a clear structure of the factors. The combined effects of these attributes have an impact on fans' loyalty towards the athlete.

Through these attributes this study provided a clear-cut picture of athlete brand constructs that were never presented before.

Importance of establishing athlete brand has been discussed through athlete brand implications in the current study. Consequences of athlete brand are unique as a research topic and this study explained effects of athlete brand for athlete's team, athlete's sponsor and for athlete itself. This study highlighted the need and importance of establishing athlete brand from management's prospect. This study also extended the literature of celebrity brand and human brands via explaining the applicability of these concepts to the athlete brands.

This study introduced the new concept of 'ignoring rival brands'. In athlete brand management this concept provided a new dimension. This finding enhanced the scope of athlete branding as participants of this study mentioned that they tend to ignore rival brand of their favorite brand (i.e., athlete). This is of paramount importance and suggests that athlete sponsor brands obtain benefits through increase in sale via fan willingness to purchase products or services of the brand, as well as the elimination of the chances to purchase rival brands.

Favorite brand substitution among customers is an exciting topic in management studies. In this study participants mentioned about shifting their loyalties from one brand (i.e., sport team) to another. Through team substitution this study provides deeper understanding and an insight about motivations that can cause customers to shift loyalty between favorite teams.

The participants of the study also indicated that they can support multiple teams at a time. This concept is useful in brand management studies as well, as this clarified that customers can like multiple athlete brands simultaneously without feeling any dissonance or discomfort.

4.2 Contribution to managerial practice

This study provides guidance for managers who are working with athletes and athlete brands. We can derive a set of recommendations and guidelines for managers in the field of sport and disseminate the importance of creating athlete brand for athlete and athlete's stakeholders as well.

4.2.1 Insights for the managers of the athlete brands

This study offers guidance to athlete's marketing teams and managers to establish athlete as a brand. The model developed in this thesis discusses the factors that drive athlete awareness for fans both in home country and abroad. Understanding the antecedents of athlete brand creation can aid people responsible for promoting athletes in their pursuit to introduce an athlete into new community (i.e., potential

fans). Further, the model explains athlete branding is discussed via two aspects of athlete life, on field activities and off field activities.

In the practice of athlete management, the managers tend to be overly focused on the sport related factors of the athlete's success labelling personal life factors as non-important. However, the study shows that in order to curate an athlete brand image, also off field factors are important as fans look at on field attributes and off field attributes in a synergetic manner. The brand managers have to be aware all the off field activities of an athlete in order to understand how these can shape the brand image.

This study is first of its kind which discussed the prospect of the foreign fans. As athlete is a global entity and international brand. The importance of fans living in other countries is huge for many fields of sports. This study has addressed viewpoint of fans living abroad and framework provided in the study is useful for both home and foreign fans.

The framework introduced in the study is suitable for various kinds of athletes (i.e., solo and teams, males or females). The set of factors provided in the framework would be relevant for most of the cases. For instance, in case of solo sport athletes instead of team interest, sport interest and major sport events plays vital role. In athlete brand attributes team as on field athlete attribute is a major factor in team sport athlete case. However, in case of solo sport athlete, achievements and skills are crucial athlete brand attributes. In summary, antecedents of the athlete brand and the on field and off field attributes of athlete brand proposed in the study are generally applicable across the athletes with a notion that some attributes are more important in some specific cases, and some model components do not play a role for all the athletes.

Additional aspect of the construction of the athlete brand is athlete brand re-construction. There are many examples all around the world when an athlete destroys its brand and have to re-construct from the scratch. Some examples are John "Bone" Jones, Lance Armstrong and Luis Suárez. Through attributes of athlete brand presented in this study the brand manager can work also on re-constructing athlete brands from the scratch again.

4.2.2 Implications for the managers of sports teams

This study also provided research based evidence to support the idea of clubs buying expensive athletes. Managers who approved purchase of big sports stars benefited from their decisions as when a top athlete moves to new club he/she brings along sporting qualities that enable his/her new team to win. But it is also important to emphasize that when athlete moves from one team to another this motivates also the fans of the athlete's previous home team to switch their loyalty

to the new team. Thus attracting high level talent to the team has a positive effect that goes beyond the initial effect of better sports performance of the team.

When a fan likes an athlete, he/she tends to follow the team in which the athlete plays. In some cases, the fans can change their favorite team due to the athlete's presence in a certain team, and this situation leads to supporting multiple teams. For example, when Ronaldo moved to Real Madrid, his fans started to have more than one favorite team (i.e., Manchester United and Real Madrid) and this often becomes a source of revenue generation for those teams through merchandise sales, TV viewership and stadium visits.

Pretense of top athlete or purchase of celebrity athlete is beneficial for teams. Star athletes have power to change the course of game on the field. Also, they have abilities to change the heart of fans and fans tend to become loyal with athlete's teams. Participants of the study mentioned that due to top athlete they tend to

- change their favorite team
- spend money for the team in which their favorite athlete belongs
- started to like more than one team

4.2.3 Implications for marketers managing sponsorships

This study supported the hiring of athlete as a brand endorser and “face” for commercial brands. This knowledge is not new as marketers have used sports celebrities in advertisements and other communication successfully for a long time already. Results of the study also confirmed that athlete loyalty transformed into loyalty towards the athlete's sponsors. Fans tend to have positive image about a brand that sponsors their favorite athlete. The results indicate that fans recognized the brands associated with their favorite athlete so athlete generates additional awareness for brand. This awareness tends to develop a positive image about the brand due to its association with the favorite athlete. Fans build positive purchase intention regarding athlete's sponsors and loyal fans even tend to avoid brands associated with rival teams, brand or athletes. For the sponsorship managers, it is beneficial to know how exactly athlete brands develop. For example, it is vital to pay attention to the off-field activities of the brand related athlete because any misbehavior will automatically cast negative image also to the brand that uses athlete as an endorser or sponsors the brand. Even when athlete's on field achievements are top of class the person is not suitable as a brand endorser if some of the off field factors clash with the brand values.

However, if the on field and off field qualities of the athlete are of equally high level, the study justifies hiring of athletes as brand endorsers and brand “faces”. Participants of the study mentioned that involvement of an athlete with certain brand has several positive effects on fans of that athlete regarding the brand. Athlete's attachment with a brand is found useful in the context of:

- spreading brand awareness
- building a positive image
- yielding to purchase intentions
- ignoring rival brands

Therefore, the increasing trend of hiring athletes to endorse brand is justified and beneficial for brands via potential sales increase and image enhancement.

5. CONCLUSION

The model of athlete brand development is a result of extensive literature analysis followed by an empirical qualitative study. Sport branding is not a new topic, but athlete branding lacks a comprehensive approach that would look into the brand itself as well as antecedents and consequences in a single model. This study was an effort to contribute to both the academia (developing the first model of athlete branding combining antecedents, components and implications of athlete brand in a single framework) and practitioners (athletes and athlete's managers), as this model provides guidance on how to increase fans' link with their favorite athletes and associated teams and sponsors.

5.1 Empirical findings of the study

The current framework provides an extensive overview of the process of establishing athlete as a brand via answering the research question of the study.

The **first research question** explored how can an athlete build a brand and/or establish himself/herself as a brand. The framework proposed in the study provides detailed answer of this research question. The process of athlete branding starts with generating awareness about the athlete and the antecedents that are the source of athlete brand awareness in this context are media (mass media, social media, major sport events and video games), oral communication (word-of-mouth and rumors or narratives), impression management, social agents (parents, family members, friends and community) and team or sport (sport interest, team interest and team geographical location).

Once a fan becomes familiar with athlete and starts liking the athlete, he/she tends to look athlete's life more closely. Then attributes of athlete brand come into play in order to build a bond between fan and athlete. These athlete brand attributes or components are described in two different groups: on-field attributes (behavior, team, achievements, style of play and skills) and off-field attributes (physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity and entertainment). Fans select their favorite athletes based on the combinations of these attributes. Furthermore, once awareness has led to a positive perception of the athletes that further leads to the increased loyalty to an athlete. Athlete loyalty also pays off to athlete's teams as fans tend to like athlete's teams and the sponsors associated with the athlete. The fans develop positive purchase intentions towards the brands of the athlete's sponsor.

The **second research question** of the study was addressing how media, oral communications, impression management, social agents, and team or sport contribute to increasing fans' awareness and positive associations about athletes. The study first enabled to categorize the dimension of media was further into four

main sub-dimensions. Specifically, mass media, social media, mega sport events and video games were identified as media sources to increase fans' awareness of the star athletes. Second, for the construct of oral communication, two further sub-dimensions were identified, namely word-of-mouth and rumors or narratives. Impression management was confirmed as an important antecedent to developing an athlete brand, given that some of the participants acknowledged that image presentation of their favorite athlete impressed them greatly leading to lasting memories. The dimension of social agents shows how parents and teachers, family members, friends and community can influence fan's awareness about an athlete. Finally, the team and sport itself can also be the source for information for people about certain athletes, and the data from the current study allowed to identify three sub-dimensions of sport related factors: sport interest, team interest, and team geographic location.

The **third research question** was posed to clarify what comprises the on-field and off-field specific components of athlete brand. Interviews with the fans revealed that both components of athlete brand play important role in enhancing the loyalty of a fan to an athlete. Five on-field attributes emerged according to participants' descriptions: behavior, team, achievements, style of play and skills. Regarding the off-field attributes of athlete brand, five sub-dimensions were identified based on the interviews: physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity and entertainment proved effective among fans regarding athlete brand.

Research question four of the study was "How does an athlete brand contribute to fans' responses towards that athlete?" The study found that once basic loyalty has been established, fans develop a positive perception of the athlete and this in turn has a positive influence on increasing the loyalty to an athlete via following media for the athlete related content, developing own narratives, spreading positive word of mouth, creating personal (perceived) links to an athlete and resistance to change. The current study also highlights the importance of achieving 'brand status' for athletes. Fan responses suggest that when an athlete successfully becomes a brand, this situation generates benefits for the athlete him/herself as well as other stakeholders. The creation of a brand is important to ensure that an athlete won't lose the support of the fans even in difficult moments (e.g. bad performance or mistakes in private life).

Research question five of the study was "How does an athlete brand contribute to fans' responses towards the athlete's team and its endorsers/sponsors?" The current study found that an athlete brand contributed towards athlete's team via influencing team substitution, generating support for multiple teams and revenue generation. This means that when a fan likes an athlete, he/she tends to follow the team in which the athlete plays. In some cases, the fans can change their favorite team due to the athlete's presence in a certain team, and this leads to supporting multiple teams. Furthermore, the positive implications of an athlete brand regarding athlete's team also noted. These positive implications related to sponsors are brand recognition,

improved image of the sponsor, purchase intentions towards the sponsor brands and ignoring rival sponsors.

This study contributes to the literature by (1) combining different ideas from past studies into a single model about the athlete brand, and (2) providing a comprehensive framework to aid scholars and practitioners on the dimensions they should work on to promote the benefits of athlete branding. The current study highlights the importance of achieving 'brand status' for athletes. Fan responses suggest when an athlete successfully becomes a brand it generates long lasting loyalty.

This study also discussed the idea about brand re-construction. There are many examples all around the world when an athlete destroys its brand. Through attributes of athlete brand, an athlete could reconstruct its brand again, also an athlete could see list of does and don'ts for future. This study also included foreign fans opinions in this study which provide wider applicability and broad understanding of athlete brand. Just like foreign fans, literature about re-construction is also nonexistent that is discussed in this study.

5.2. Limitations of the study and suggestions for the future research

The studies based on interviews often faced objections to regarding their reliability, validity and generalizability. As explained before the study does not aim for a very broad generalizability but the validity and reliability issues have been carefully addressed (see the methods chapter).

The current sample includes fans from three different countries and can therefore provide a culturally biased view on the research topic. Thus future studies could try to conduct similar interviews in more countries in order to collect data from larger samples and verify if differences exist in athlete brand creation and its components in different sports or cultural settings. As statistical generalization is an important aspect in the context of theory generation, future studies could employ quantitative methods in order to validate the model.

The framework proposed in the study was created with an aim of covering different types of sports (team and solo) but the members of the sample were mostly fans of athletes playing team sports (e.g., football, cricket), which may limit the generalizability of the study results to other sports. Thus, while this model could represent a starting point, future studies should always adapt the proposed model according to the specific sport context. One of the future research directions would be to use a purposeful sample of fans that are fans of solo sports athletes. The distinction between team and solo sport athletes could provide also an interesting setting for comparative studies between the two types of sports.

This study discussed the process of establishing athlete brand and its consequences and implications on the athlete and athlete's stakeholders. The future studies could look at the athlete brand consequences in even wider perspective. For example, there is a reason to believe that a successful and well recognized athlete brand provides advantages to an athlete also after retirement but how those advantages manifest themselves could be a topic for a further study.

6 PUBLICATIONS

6.1 A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO UNDERSTAND THE CREATION OF ATHLETE BRAND AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

**Ali Hasaan, Katri Kerem, Rui Biscaia and
Kwame J.A. Agyemang**

Hasaan, A., Kerem, K., Biscaia, R. and Agyemang, K.J.A. (in press) 'A conceptual framework to understand the creation of athlete brand and its implications', Int. J. Sport Management and Marketing, Forthcoming

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to propose a conceptual framework for understanding how to establish athletes as brands. Based on an extensive literature review, the proposed model includes the antecedents of athlete brand, its measurement dimensions and implications. Five antecedents are included in the model: media, oral communications, impression management, social agents, and teams and sport. The components of athlete brand consist of on-field attributes and off-field attributes. In turn, the combined results of these two components are suggested to have three implications: athlete loyalty, team loyalty and sponsor's purchase intentions. A set of propositions is presented to link the three parts of the model. Implications for building and managing athlete brand and research directions for future studies are discussed.

Keywords: athlete; brand; fans; loyalty; teams.

1 Introduction

Sport celebrities (i.e., athletes) are often considered larger than life figures (Hartmann et al., 2008), regarded as heroes by many segments of society and often maintain cult-like followings (White and Absher, 2013). Thus, it is no surprise they are worshiped by the masses (Hyman and Sierra, 2010; McCutcheon et al., 2002). Consequently, these individuals are becoming increasingly important for teams and associated brands, not just because of their role on the field but also due to the impact off the field (Dix et al., 2010; Yu, 2005). Celebrity athletes such as Gareth Bale, Lionel Messi and LeBron James are some examples of how athletes play a vital role on the overall success of the teams and associated brands and products (Agyemang, 2011; Lombo and Tielung, 2014). To further illustrate the influence of celebrity athletes, consider Real Madrid Football Club's Cristiano Ronaldo. The club claims that after purchasing Ronaldo for £80 million, they earned £100 million through shirt sales with Ronaldo's name (Metro, 2010). It is also worth noting that Ronaldo's endorsement by Nike helped the brand compete with Adidas in the Asian market. This was relevant because Adidas dominated this market for almost 50 years (Roll, 2006). From a personal branding perspective, Cristiano Ronaldo has more than 100 million Facebook followers and he is the first ever athlete to achieve this figure (Forbes, 2014).

Celebrity athletes also tend to display extraordinary personal characteristics that elicit a long-lasting, emotional attachment with their fans (Kwon and Trail, 2001). David Beckham's transfer from Manchester United to Real Madrid prompted five million Asian fans of Manchester United to switch their loyalty to Real Madrid following Beckham's transfer (Kerr and Gladden, 2008). Within a year of signing David Beckham, replica jersey sales of Real Madrid increased from one million to three million shirts (Carlin, 2004). Consistent with this view, there is an increasing stream of research focusing on how to measure athletes' brands (e.g., Arai et al., 2014; Williams and Agyemang, 2014) and its role on fans' loyalty towards these athletes both within and outside the geographical boundaries where the team is located (Kerr and Gladden, 2008; Künzler and Poli, 2012). The establishment of athletes as brands is important in the sense that athletes have become cultural, personal and social idols of their fans (Ilicic and Webster, 2015); and a well branded athlete not only enjoys the status of a celebrity during his/her playing career (Arai et al., 2014) but also in his/her post-athletic career (i.e., retirement) (Rein et al., 2006). Consequently, understanding how to measure an athlete brand may be of paramount importance for the actual athletes, their teams and sponsors. Still, there is a lack of knowledge both about the factors that trigger the creation of athlete's brand in the minds of the fans, as well as the consequences of the brand for both teams and associated sponsors. Thus, the purpose of the current study is to provide a conceptual framework to understand the process of establishing an athlete's brand among fans and across various markets through its antecedents. Furthermore, the framework also provides insight for understanding the implications of an athlete brand for fans' loyalty towards the athlete, the respective team and associated sponsors.

2 Theoretical Background

Arai et al. (2014) defined athlete brand as a public persona of an athlete, while Carter (2010) stated that a personal brand is a brand that consists of peoples' opinions about a particular individual. In this sense, an athlete brand can be defined as a brand consisting of peoples' opinions about a particular athlete. The development of an athlete brand requires fans' awareness about the athlete such as who the athlete is, what he/she does and how he/she is different from other athletes (Montoya, 2002). Yu (2005) mentioned that an athlete's successful career and positive image play an integral part in the athlete becoming a top brand. Also, Cortsen (2013) argued that the establishment of a personal brand is related to life stories, values, charisma, authenticity and believability. The author further highlighted the significance of "winning" for attracting followers and building loyalty in sports. Generating loyalty is important, as loyal fans resist the idea to switch their allegiance to other athletes when their idol is not enjoying success (Neale and Funk, 2006).

Another important aspect for the creation of an athlete brand is related to his/her high visibility (Hamlin et al., 2006). Positive personal brands are highly visible (O'Reilly and Braedley, 2008) and this "high visibility" is possible through aspects such as media coverage, given that personalities are a focal point in the era of televised sport (Andrews and Jackson, 2001). Media has changed the course of athlete branding (Castillo, 2007), and this, coupled with globalization of the sport industry allows many athletes to be seen as brand entities often surpassing the image of their own team (Cashmore and Parker, 2003). From a sport organization perspective, teams have increased their global appeal, and star athletes are very important in this process (Richelieu and Desbordes, 2009). These athletes represent a valuable economic asset for their teams, and they have created a new type of relationship between themselves and their clubs. They are attractive for the sports teams not only based on their technical skills, or their contribution to the team's performance, but also due to the rights to exploit their image and related profit opportunities (Castillo, 2007).

Of the recent studies developed about athlete brands, Parmentier and Fischer (2012) discussed athlete brand via two characteristics of athletes: professional image and media persona. In a similar vein, Carlson and Donovan (2013) reported that athletes' personal appeal and achievements play a major role with regard to increasing fans' identification with an athlete. Cortsen (2013) presented the idea about hybrid athlete brand and used the famous Swedish female golfer Annika Sorenstam as a case study. According to the author, when something positive or negative happens with an athlete, it casts the same effect on the athlete's brand. In turn, Arai et al. (2013) and Arai et al. (2014) developed the model of athlete brand image (MABI) including the dimensions of athletic performance, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle of a star athlete. Also, Williams and Agyemang (2014) suggested the athlete brand awareness is the first step to establish an athlete brand and this could be achieved through organization-related, market-related and athlete-related antecedents. All of these studies contributed to an understanding of how to conceptualize athletes as brands. However, although the notion of an athlete brand is becoming an important topic in the literature, there is a lack of a comprehensive model explaining the factors that trigger an athlete brand, its components and subsequent implications. Thus, through the proposed conceptual framework, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how fans create an image of their favourite athletes, how to measure the athlete brand and its impact on fans' subsequent reactions. In doing so, this study also intends to provide a contribution for better understanding the importance of athletes in the sport domain.

3 Proposed framework

The proposed framework was based on a thorough review of the literature related to celebrity branding, brand equity, brand loyalty and athlete branding. Based on a search among more than 400 peer-reviewed articles, conference proceedings and book chapters published in the English language, 168 were selected to develop this framework. There were no restrictions with respect to the format and age of the studies as the oldest study selected is from 1963 and most recent from 2016. The search of articles was conducted on the electronic databases of EBSCO and ProQuest. The first round of a very broad search was carried out to identify all relevant articles in the field and in the subsequent search phase the final selection was made based on higher impact factor of the publication source of the articles. The proposed framework of an athlete brand is depicted in Figure 1.

Keller (1993) stated brand equity creation starts with brand awareness, which refers to the familiarity with the brand (i.e., a consumer's ability to identify the brand under different conditions). We propose that the awareness of an athlete is generated through a set of antecedents including: media; oral communication; impression management; social agents; team and sport (Dixon, 2012; Künzler and Poli, 2012). In turn, the athlete brand is composed of on-field attributes and off-field attributes. The combined effects of these attributes will have an impact on fans' loyalty towards the athlete. Once fans became loyal to the athlete, they increase the possibility of developing a loyal relationship with the athlete's team (Aiken and Koch, 2009) and athlete's endorsers (Carlson and Donovan, 2013). While previous studies have focused on athlete brand conceptualization (e.g., Arai et al., 2014; Carlson and Donovan, 2013; Yu, 2005), this is the first study combining antecedents, components and implications of athlete brand in a single model. The scattered results and inputs regarding the components of an athlete brand identified in previous studies were now divided into two major categories in order to provide a structured description of the essence of an athlete (i.e., on-field attributes and off-field attributes). Also, unlike previous studies highlighting the implications of athlete brand for the athletes themselves (e.g., Arai et al., 2013), this study also considers implications of athlete brand on teams and sponsors associated with the athlete adding to the comprehensiveness of understanding the phenomenon. By developing a model with antecedents, components and implications of athlete brand, this study represents an important contribution towards the future empirical studies aiming to investigate the athletes as brands. Also, practitioners can use the model as an analysis framework or management toolkit to develop and nurture relationships between athletes and fans or prospective fans in a more efficient way.

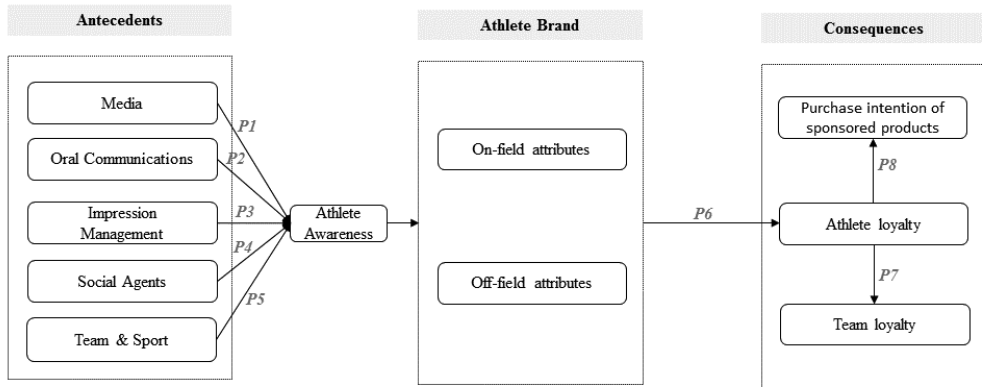


Figure 1 Proposed framework of athlete brand

3.1 Antecedents

In order to create value for a brand, consumers must first become familiar with the brand, and subsequently, they must develop positive and unique brand associations towards that brand (Keller, 1993; Biscaia et al., 2013). Based on previous studies, we propose a set of five antecedents that trigger the awareness and subsequent image of the athletes in potential fans' minds. These antecedents are media (Liu and Brock, 2011), oral communications (Künzler and Poli, 2012), impression management (St James, 2010), social agents (Hsieh et al., 2011), and team and sport (Robinson and Trail, 2005). See Table 1 below for the summary of the antecedents of athlete brand.

3.1.1 Media

Media refers to certain materials or techniques used for communication purposes (Bennett, 2012). Media has increased the popularity of star athletes, teams and sports. Media is well known for its potential in promoting products and services and enabling brands to achieve their market potential (O'Keeffe and Zawadzka, 2011). Many sports and/or athletes have obtained benefits from the use of media channels (Vincent et al., 2009). Blackshaw and Crabbe (2004) pointed out that the role of media in celebrity life is imminent, while Rindova et al. (2006) noted how the media plays an integral part in the creation of celebrity. In turn, media can also bring negative publicity to the athlete (Shakib and Veliz, 2012). In this instance, journalists seek stories that are riveting and novel. Much like a modern-day soap opera, they then dramatize it so that it will be of interest to the public. Also, previous studies suggest that media can be one important agent in promoting and creating awareness for sport-related brands (Hamlin et al., 2006). In this study four aspects of media are further discussed: mass media, social media, mega event media spectacles, and fantasy sport and video games.

3.1.1.1 Mass media

Mass media is related with conventional or traditional media consisting of local and national newspapers, magazines, local and national radio and local television plus satellite television, the Internet and mobile phones (Boyle and Haynes, 2004). Mass media has a great impact on users. Via simple activities such as watching television or reading a newspaper, media is working on spreading awareness in the favour of athlete brands. Summers and Johnson (2008) emphasized that mass media is the key element in the process of spreading the image of star athletes. Previous studies suggested mass media broadcasting leads to an increase of popularity for famous professional athletes as they are becoming popular more than ever (Hu and Tang, 2010; Liu and Brock, 2011).

3.1.1.2 Social media

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2011), social media is a group of Internet based applications (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, blogs) that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content. One of the many reasons why social media is popular in the sport context is that social media provides a live experience to fans and social platforms to discuss sport online with the community (Harrington et al., 2012; Vann, 2014). Social media provides opportunities to communicate in live sessions, and that is another reason why it is becoming increasingly popular channel among the sports enthusiasts. Furthermore, social media sites allow fans to become aware of the athletes, and thus aid the creation of an image about those athletes. Nowadays, nearly all sport teams and athletes find it important to be represented on social media channels to increase awareness (Pronschinske et al., 2012) and communicate with fans. Sierra et al. (2010) mentioned that forms of media like blogs or text messages produce and increase fans' knowledge of and identification with human brands. Witkemper et al. (2012) added that social media is often used to supply new or upcoming information about a team or athlete, while Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) found that social media has been contributing to the creation of numerous athlete brands such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Dwyane Wade and Floyd Mayweather. Similar success stories exist for sportswomen, Ronda Rousey and Maria Sharapova have been identified as two most popular female athletes on social media (Independent, 2015).

3.1.1.3 Mega event media spectacles

Mega events such as the Olympic Games or World Cup tend to attract significant media coverage. When a mega sport event occurs, fans can witness a live experience or follow it through media, and this may lead to an increased interest in the sport, teams and/or athletes (Koenigstorfer et al., 2010). The mega event media spectacles have proven to be useful for creating awareness about the athletes even in countries where certain sports are not very popular. For example, the 1986 FIFA World Cup generated a great sensation throughout India. As the Indian

team was not represented in the tournament, most Indian followers choose their favourite team on the basis of the playing style of the team, athlete qualities and loose cultural connections (Dimeo, 2002). Even in countries where sport is popular already, mega sport events can affect many segments of the population (Goodman et al., 2002).

3.1.1.4 Fantasy sport & video games

Sport video games have become prominent in the sport industry, and not just typical offline games but also online fantasy sport (Drayer et al., 2010). These activities provide a space for fans to experience the pleasure of having a role in the sport environment, allowing them to engage with a virtual version of the real-world (McCarthy, 2012; Oates, 2009). Through these activities, a user can follow athletes and convert an athlete's virtual image into a real image. For example, Nesbit and King (2010) commented that fantasy football participants are not only able to track their athletes on the Internet, but are also able to watch them on television. Also, the authors mentioned that fantasy league participation tends to increase the consumption of sport itself. Dixon (2012) further stated that sport fans can develop an emotional bond with a team or athlete through playing sport video games, and these games have now captured not only die-hard fans' attention but also attract non-sport fans, allowing an interaction point between consumer and an athlete (Kim et al., 2008).

Media coverage can create a basic awareness about an athlete without necessarily leading to the development of "athlete brand" in the mind of the consumer. For example, people can just know the name and field of sport of the athlete based on news broadcasts. However, media is a channel to increase athlete awareness, but the impact of media on potential fans can be either positive or negative based on media content and how people interpret it. For example, previous studies have shown that negativity about celebrities spreads faster in certain media channel (Bochenek and Blili, 2013), and these negative messages cast their effect on likes and dislikes of the fans (Belch and Belch, 2013). Yet this type of awareness is a necessary prerequisite for developing a deeper set of mental associations related to the athlete because if one does not know who the athlete is, it will not be possible to develop any mental associations regarding the athlete.

On the basis of previous literature analysis, the role of mass media, social media, mega event media spectacles, and fantasy sport and video games, it is proposed in the current framework that:

P1: Media has an impact, either positive or negative, on the creation of an athlete's brand via athlete awareness.

3.1.2 Oral communications

Oral communication is an interchange of verbal messages between people. It is quick, immediate, natural and informal (Kumar, 2010). Even though media is an important contributor in spreading knowledge in a vast array of countries (McLean and Wainwright, 2009), oral communication also represents a vital source of sharing knowledge (Künzler and Poli, 2012). Due to the nature of sports, two types of oral communication are discussed as antecedents in the current study: word-of-mouth and rumours and/or narratives.

3.1.2.1 Word of mouth

The expression word-of-mouth (WOM) refers to one-to-one communication and exchange of spoken messages (Minazzi, 2014). WOM has the ability to impact another person's decision depending on the nature of the relationship between the two people engaging in communication. In some cases, consumers rely more on WOM, as they do not have faith in media and other channels (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2011; Rosen, 2000). In the context of sports, an oral communication from a trustworthy person could cause awareness and lead to developing a favourable or unfavourable image of a specific athlete. Complementarily, Bush et al. (2005) suggested that trust in WOM is common in young females who tend not only to be receptive to the impact of WOM but also spread positive ideas about their favourite athletes. Bush et al. (2004) also reported that interpersonal communication might also bear some responsibility in the development of a specific image. So, the input of WOM is a vital factor in this regard as it can affect decisions of customers (i.e., fans) either positively or negatively based in its content (Buttle, 1998).

3.1.2.2 Rumours and narratives

Rumours are unconfirmed pieces of information that are important to people (Myer et al., 2007), while narratives refer to a specific type of discourse, the story (Polkinghorne, 1995). In the current study, rumours and narratives represent stories about athletes, their lives, sports performance, family life or their personality. Those stories represent important elements for the creation of a positive or negative image of an athlete regardless of the truthfulness of this information. Consistent with this view, Künzler and Poli (2012) referred to the African context, in which rumours play an important role in making decisions about some celebrities. Rumours and truth combined build stories, and Carter (2010) emphasized that the life story of an athlete could boost his/her image. Grant et al. (2001) explained that fans create their own narrative about the brand and through these narratives they recognize and give identity to certain athletes. Similarly, Crawford (2002) noted that the lack of interest in ice hockey in England is probably due to the lack of narratives among fans. Both oral communications and WOM contribute to the spread of awareness of an athlete, and may have a positive or negative effect on how a sport

fan perceives an athlete. Based on previous studies conducted in the sport context, we propose that:

P2: Oral communications have an impact, either positive or negative, on the creation of an athlete's brand via athlete awareness.

3.1.3 Impression management

Impression management is the process by which people control the impressions of them for others (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Bolino et al. (2008) defined impression management as "efforts by an actor to create, maintain, protect, or otherwise alter an image held by a target audience" (p. 1080). Wagg (2007) explained that though performance is an important aspect of success, impression management is essential to promote athletes as individual celebrities. Rojek (2001) noted that modern day celebrities are result of three processes, and impression management is among one of them that occurs through media. Halbert (1997) declared impression management as a key factor for successful future in the context of woman boxers. Impression management is achieved through gestures, dress, appearance or speech patterns to manipulate one's self image for the purpose of better self-presentation to win hearts of others (St James, 2010). Impression management not only builds the image of an athlete but also spreads awareness among potential fans. For instance, when asked about athletes of different sports, fans declared bowlers as less popular, as bowlers were found less active in managing their impressions (Prapavessis et al., 2004). Furthermore, leading up to the 2012 Olympics, Lolo Jones, who was the top ranked American hurdler, was relatively unknown to sponsors. To combat this, she started to engage with fans via Facebook and Twitter. She gave fans an inside look at her preparation and became popular without winning a single Olympic medal (Business Insider, 2012). Thus, from a marketing perspective, impression management is akin to brand management strategy (Agyemang and Williams, 2013). It is also important to highlight that an inappropriate impression management may spread a negative image of the athlete among potential foreign and local fans (Thornton et al., 2006). Thus, based on past research on impression management we propose that:

P3: Impression management has an impact, either positive or negative, on the creation of an athlete's brand via athlete awareness.

3.1.4 Social agents

A social agent is an influential entity that has the ability to create impact on people (Melnick and Wann, 2010), through other people, nations, organizations, cultures, or ideologies. Bandura and Walters (1963) suggested that people learn from what they observe, and others influence their attitudes and actions. They are influenced by different social agents such as family members, peers, school, and the community. Based on the concept of social agents (Melnick and Wann, 2010)

and the distinct nature of sport (Ross et al., 2006), we consider the following social agents as antecedents of developing the athlete's brand: parents, family members, friends and community (Armstrong and Peretto-Stratta, 2004; Dixon, 2012; Wann et al., 1996).

3.1.4.1 Parents and teachers

Parents and teachers are the direct and most influential agents for directing their children towards a goal (Melnik and Wann, 2010). Hsieh et al. (2011) noted the effect of parents on their kids' likes and dislikes of particular sports, while Wann et al. (1996) highlighted that parental influence is a basic reason why becoming a fan is imminent. Also, teachers (e.g., class teacher, trainer or coach) tend to have direct influence on their students (Keegan et al., 2009). Also, anecdotal evidence suggests that parents' opinions about a certain team or athlete are often transferred to children. For example, if Diego Maradona is the father's favourite athlete, it will almost likely influence the son in a positive manner to like the same athlete. The same may happen in the opposite direction. That is, if the father has a negative opinion about Diego Maradona, this may have an influence on the son's opinion.

3.1.4.2 Family members

Beside parents and teachers, other family members may also assume a great importance (Melnick and Wann, 2010). Extant studies highlight the importance of family members as socializing agents for athletes (e.g., Hsieh et al., 2011; Wann et al., 1996). For example, Dixon (2012) stated that the participation in football fandom squads is often due to the influence of a family member, with the same being common when developing an opinion about athletes (either positive or negative).

3.1.4.3 Friends

The contact with friends represents an important part of one's life (Berndt, 1992), as friends are seen as an essential part for the development during childhood and adolescence (Shook et al., 2009). Within the sport domain, Dixon (2012) asserted that friends tend to motivate their friends to become fans of certain types of sport. Also, Hsieh et al. (2011) reported a role of friends in sport-related decisions. Consistently, a friend can affect a person's opinion about an athlete.

3.1.4.4 Community

A community consists of a group of people sharing common interests (Wong, 2010), and for the purposes of this study, common interests might be related to race, religion, ethnicity or location (Dunne, 2012; Wang, 2004). For example, Fletcher (2011) focused on cricket and noted that an athlete's ethnicity is an important aspect for generating support among fans. Meanwhile, Armstrong and

Peretto-Stratta (2004) indicated fans often create a link with athletes with the same religious beliefs, while they may also step away from an athlete due to community-related aspects. Also, Hu and Tang (2010) reported that American baseball teams with Taiwanese athletes have more TV viewership from Taiwanese fans. While common interests are suggested to be important to develop a positive perception of an athlete, opposite interest may have a negative role on how sport fans perceive a certain athlete.

On the basis of previous literature regarding the social agents, we propose that:

P4: Social agents have an impact, either positive or negative, on the creation of an athlete's brand via athlete awareness.

3.1.5 Team and sport

The popularity of teams and sport helps people to become aware of the athletes, as well as the team that the athlete is representing or has represented in the past. For example, Richelieu et al. (2008) noted that football clubs that are stronger at an international level are able to attract the best international talent, thereby allowing them to generate support from fans worldwide. In this model, three aspects related to teams and sport are discussed: sport interest, team interest and team geographic location.

3.1.5.1 Sport interest

The popularity of a certain sport in a given society may potentially influence its population to like (or dislike) a particular athlete (Stewart et al., 2003). A large number of people are attracted to star athletes of popular types of sport, while star athletes playing sports that are less popular in that region must exert more effort to become popular. For example, football in South Asia and Cricket in Europe face this kind of difficulties (Manzenreiter and Horne, 2007). Kunkel et al. (2013) identified consumer involvement with the sport as a reason to follow a team or athlete. Also, Robinson and Trail (2005) explained that fans could develop a connection to an athlete through the league of a particular sport, while Chadwick and Burton (2008) suggested that football itself has played a major role in establishing the features of football related brands. At the same time, athletes representing sports that are generally considered less interesting have a lower potential of generating involvement of fans, or in extreme cases those athletes may even be perceived negatively (Gilaninia, et al. 2011).

3.1.5.2 Team interest

A fan's interest in a certain team tends to lead to an increased interest in its athletes (Best, 2013). Fisher (1998) stated that as soon as the players wear the jersey of "our" club, they become one of "us". Also, Bodet and Chanavat (2010) explained

that fans get direct information from the teams and this knowledge helps them create a link with the athletes, while Robinson and Trail (2005) argued that sport consumers tend to develop a connection through the team to its belongings (e.g., team athletes). On the other hand, fans from a team tend to develop a negative opinion about the athletes of rival teams. For example, when Ali Sen was the manager of Fenerbahce football club in Turkey, he was subjected to sexual verbal chanting from Besiktas supporters. Similar chants were heard from opponent supporters in the stadium for then Besiktas player Arda Turan and for his girlfriend Sinem Kobal, who is an actress and a celebrity herself (Erhart, 2011).

3.1.5.3 Team geographical location

The geographical location of the team could contribute to an athlete's popularity (Hay and Joel, 2007). People feel attached with certain regions and the teams located in those regions; its respective athletes tend to benefit from this connection as well (Heere et al., 2011). Richelieu et al. (2008) explained that French club Paris Saint-Germain could capitalize on its reputation through international status of the city of Paris, which is an important aspect to aid fans generating an image about the athletes. Similarly, Kerr and Gladden (2008) noted that local fans tend to follow a certain team because of its geographical location. The geographical location of the team has been referred to as an important aspect influencing fans' opinions about the teams and its athletes (Heere et al., 2011). However, it is important to keep in mind that the location or country of the team may also have a negative role on sport fans' perceptions of a certain athlete. For example, both Pakistani and Indian cricket fans strongly dislike each other's star players (Davis and Upson, 2004). Based on previous studies focusing on geographical boundaries of the teams, we propose that:

P5: Team and sport-related aspects have an impact, either positive or negative, on the creation of an athlete's brand via athlete awareness.

Table 1. Proposed antecedents of athlete brand, its definitions and theoretical support.

Antecedent	Definition	Theoretical Support
Media		
Mass Media	Local and national newspapers, magazines, radio and television, plus new media satellite television, the internet and mobile phones	Summers and Johnson (2008); Liu and Brock (2011); Hu and Tang (2010)
Social Media	A group of internet-based applications that allow live experiences to fans and social atmosphere	Pronschinske et al. (2012); Sierra et al. (2010); Harrington et al. (2012)

Mega Event Media Spectacles	Increased interest in an athlete following a mega sport event such as the Olympics or World cup	Dimeo (2002); Goodman et al. (2002); Koenigstorfer et al. (2010)
Fantasy Sport & Video Games	Virtual version of having a role in the sport environment allowing fans to simulate and engage with the real-world	Dixon (2012); Nesbit and King (2010); McCarthy (2012)
Oral Communication		
Word of Mouth	One-to-one communication or spoken messages	Lovelock & Wirtz (2011); Bush et al. (2004); Bush et al. (2005)
Rumours & Narratives	Stories about the player that can may be either true or not	Künzler and Poli (2012); Grant et al. (2001); Crawford (2002)
Impression Management		
	The process by which social actors (e.g. athletes) attempt to influence how others view them	Bolino et al., 2008; Prapavessis et al. (2004); St James (2010); Rojek (2001)
Social Agents		
Parents & Teachers	Direct and most influential agents of perusing their children for following a goal	Wann et al. (1996); Hsieh et al. (2011); Melnik and Wann (2010)
Family Members	Influence of relatives	Dixon (2012); Melnik and Wann (2010)
Friends	Influence of friends and peers	Dixon (2012); Hsieh et al. (2011)
Community	Cultural aspects such as race, religion, ethnicity or location, influencing fans' choices	Fletcher (2011); Armstrong and Peretto-Stratta (2004); Wang (2004)
Team & Sport		
Sport Interest	Popularity of a certain sport within the fans' geographical area.	Stewart et al. (2003); Kunkel et al. (2013); Robinson and Trail (2005)
Team Interest	Awareness of the team and points of interest for the fans.	Best (2013); Robinson and Trail (2005); Bodet and Chanavat (2010)
Team Geographical Location	Contribution of the team's location to an athlete's popularity	Richelieu et al. (2008); Hay and Joel (2007); Heere et al. (2011)

3.2 Athlete brand

Cortsen (2013) explained that athlete brands consist of existing values and characteristics of an athlete. The creation of certain values and characteristics about the athlete can be related with both on-field and/or off-field aspects. That is, it is the athlete's own characteristics that establish his/her brand. Similar with this view, Grant et al. (2001) stated that football athletes become famous due to their field achievements and public interest in off-field activities. For example, David Beckham and Cristiano Ronaldo are famous for both athletic characteristics and other features regarding their private lives. Beckham is well-known for his tattoos, while Ronaldo's slick hairstyle is as famous (Chadwick and Burton, 2008). Therefore, an athlete brand is dependent upon two different dimensions of an athlete's life: on-field success and an off-field positive image (Yu, 2005). A fan's perception of his/her favourite athlete depends on how the athlete performs and also on the off-field image of the athlete (Wu et al., 2012). Based on previous literature highlighting the attention devoted to star athletes, both within and outside the field, we propose to measure an athlete brand based on the on-field attributes and off-field attributes (Chadwick and Burton, 2008; Cortsen, 2013). See Table 2 below for the summary of the attributes of athlete brand.

3.2.1 On-field attributes

The on-field attributes are related to the performance of the athlete, which can be defined as an athlete's performance-related characteristics (Arai et al., 2013). Past researchers have highlighted that on-field success of an athlete is key to building an athlete brand (Arai et al., 2014; Cortsen, 2013). Athletes' success influences fans in the way that fans like to associate themselves with successful athletes (Kaynak et al., 2008) and to distance themselves from unsuccessful athletes. On the basis of previous studies, the following aspects are considered in the proposed model to assess the on-field attributes: athlete's behaviour, team membership, achievements, style of play and skills (Chadwick and Burton, 2008; Morrissey, 2009).

3.2.1.1 Behaviour

How an athlete behaves and performs in situations on the field of play can be referred to as behaviour (Koernig and Boyd, 2009). This pertains to how the athlete reacts in certain situations, how the athlete is connected with teammates during competition, and the athlete's leadership and character qualities. For instance, fans expect their favourite athletes to lead the team by demonstrating a sense of responsibility, maintaining focus, and exhibiting mental toughness (Daley and Wolfson, 2010). Ben Roethlisberger, for example, is a professional player in the National Football League (NFL) who has a reputation of a leader on the pitch and his leadership skills make him one of the top quarterbacks in the league (MacRae, 2009). On the contrary, if the athlete adopts incorrect behaviours in the field, he/she could be perceived negatively by the fans (Lear et al., 2009).

3.2.1.2 Team

The status of the team(s) the athlete represented in the past or is currently representing helps to increase (or decrease) athlete popularity and his/her own status (Chadwick and Burton, 2008). Commonly, the term team refers to the club or country the athlete represents, but in solo sport, the term 'team' may relate to the athlete's entourage. Fans with positive perceptions of their favourite team develop a long lasting attachment with its players (Martin, 2013). Kerr and Emery (2011) explained that aspects such as team success and team history help to strengthen an athlete's profile. Contrarily, teams with a lower status may affect negatively fans' perceptions of the associated athletes (Richelieu et al., 2008).

3.2.1.3 Achievements

The athlete's achievements are related with his/her records, such as the number of trophies, medals and prizes athlete won, and the victories in which the athlete has been involved (Chadwick and Burton, 2008). Grant et al. (2001) explained that athletes become famous because of their achievements. That is, athletes with important achievements tend to become famous and are important assets for the teams, while athletes with lack of sport achievements tend to be devalued by the sport market, in general. Consistent with this view, Mullin and Dunn (2002) argued that an athlete's past performance is one of the major contributors for enhancing the perception about his/her quality, while Kiefer (2014) noted that a good performance of an athlete increases its market value.

3.2.1.4 Style of play

Style of play refers to the style and aesthetic elements of how an athlete plays during competition. For instance, Zidane was called the magician because of his style (Morrissey, 2009). A graceful style of play is considered a positive aspect for creating an athlete's brand (Daley and Wolfson, 2010; Kerr and Emery, 2011), while an unappreciated style would make it more difficult for an athlete to become relevant for fans (Hill and Vincent, 2006). Complementarily to this view, Weiss (2001) explained that by scoring goals, footballers can achieve status of top athletes.

3.2.1.5 Skills

Skills are related to an athlete's tactical ability, talent level and competence during the competition. Athletes can be differentiated from each other on the basis of their skills (Abernethy, 1990). For example, Zidane was among one of the most skilful and elegant footballers that played football (Groves, 2011; Morrissey, 2009). Sloan (1985) mentioned that athletes' general skills and tactical skills are important for delivering aesthetic pleasure from the game to satisfy the fans. Complementarily, Theysohn et al. (2009) highlighted that some fans were more interested to watch the skills of the athletes rather than to see the team winning.

3.2.2 Off-field attributes

The off-field attributes are related to the athlete's life behind his/her sport activity including aspects such as where the athlete resides, with whom and where the athlete socializes, what is his or her marital status, residential arrangements (i.e., type of house), what brand of car athlete drives, which clothing style the athlete adopts and how the athlete looks like (Chadwick and Burton, 2008). Off-field activities of an athlete have a strong influence on consumers (Arai et al., 2014), and Cortsen (2013) contented that an athlete's image could be either enhanced or damaged via his/her off-field activities. In view of previous literature, physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity and entertainment were considered as off-field attributes in the current framework (Chadwick and Burton, 2008; Kerr and Emery, 2011).

3.2.2.1. Physical attraction

The face and physique of the athlete and other distinguishing features such as the hairstyle or tattoos represent the features of physical appearance (Chadwick and Burton, 2008). Previous researchers have explained athlete's physical appearance using different constructs such as sexual attractiveness of star athletes (King, 2002), sexual interest in athletes (Crolley, 1999), puck bunnies (i.e., fans who have 'lust' after the athletes; Crawford and Gosling, 2004), physical attraction (Melnick and Wann, 2010), cuteness (Kerr and Emery, 2011), and sexiness (Brook, 1997). Regardless of the terms used, it is commonly accepted that the physical features of an athlete are important when fans develop an image of that athlete. For example, Pope (2010) mentioned that a fan's link to an athlete can be derived from an athlete's look, particularly among female fans. In addition to that, Van Amsterdam et al. (2012) stated that an athlete's physical attraction tends to be important for both male and female fans. To this respect, as Hogan and Strasburger (2008) noted that although the female tennis star Anna Kournikova has never won a major tournament in her career; she has always been very popular because of her status as a sex symbol.

3.2.2.2 Lifestyle

Lifestyle refers to how a person lives (Mowen and Minor, 1998). In the context of athletes, it includes everything related to their private lives such as the clothes they wear and the cars they drive (Chadwick and Burton, 2008), their husbands/wives or boyfriends/girlfriends (Vincent et al., 2011), their family life (Yu, 2005), and even how fashionable they are while attending public events (García, 2011). Because of the glamour described in the media, famous athletes have become like pop stars and their fans are really interested in their lifestyle choices (Woodhouse and Williams, 1999). While their fame and achievements on the field of play are vital for fans, their private life patterns are being increasingly scrutinized by the media and becoming an important part for establishing a connection with fans (Koernig and Boyd, 2009).

3.2.2.3 Personal appeal

The personal appeal depends on the force of one's personality (Larson and Larson, 2012) and it is related to an athlete's personality and how he/she behaves on different occasions of life. Cortsen (2013) referred to Venus Williams, noting how a brand is not merely an athlete's athletic prowess but also incorporates their personal appeal (i.e., apart from sport, inspirational behaviour in other fields of life as well). Consistently, Vincent et al. (2009) summarized all aspects of personal appeal while discussing David Beckham by highlighting the combination of Beckham's persona with the expressions or words such as English, tall, lean, good looking, athletic skills, born Hollywood star. Meanwhile, Roger Federer, former number one tennis player, never considers his opponents as rivals; this modest but unusual personality has made him popular as a person and player (Stauffer, 2006). In contrast, his opponent Rafael Nadal is known for his aggressive or arrogant behaviour (Bodo, 2010).

3.2.2.4 Ethnicity

The ethnicity can be defined via the racial uniqueness, territoriality, religion, aesthetic cultural patterns and language (De Vos, 1995). As Hyman and Sierra (2010) explained, demographics could lead to fandom of a certain player or team. The ethnicity of an athlete has the potential to influence fans either in a positive or negative way. For instance, the popularity of some football athletes such as Didier Drogba and Yaya Touré (Ivory Coast), or Samuel Eto'o (Cameron) in Africa, are good examples of the role of ethnicity in establishing an athlete's brand (Künzler and Poli, 2012). Another example can be drawn from American baseball. That is, due to the strong recognition of the Irish in baseball, several athletes who were not Irish decided to adopt Irish names in the hopes of advancing their career (Dunne, 2012).

3.2.2.5. Entertainment value

The charisma of an athlete is capable of providing good stories for the media and entertaining fans outside the football stadium (García, 2011). Besides various other roles the celebrity athletes are entertainers (Andrews and Jackson, 2001), as public figures they have a marketable lifestyle, and many people yearn to read about them (Künzler and Poli, 2012). For example, almost all of Beckham's personal characteristics (e.g., smile, hairstyle) were subject to news generation among his followers. Also, Cristiano Ronaldo's trademark scream 'Si!', Mario Balotelli's constant links with bad stories, controversies about posting selfies by Pakistani cricket players, or documentaries about players often generate entertainment among their followers. In line with this view, Levy (2015) noted that athletes have several possibilities to entertain and become prominent among fans. Tanaka (2004) explained that fans tend to become entertained by their favourite athletes as they capture almost every facial expression (e.g., crying, smiling, anger, joy),

and actions (e.g., talking, raging, swearing, passing beautifully). On the basis of previous literature, it is proposed in the current framework that:

P6: On-field and off-field attributes of an athlete have an influence, either positive or negative, on fans' loyalty towards that athlete.

Table 2. On-field attributes and off-field attributes of athlete brand, its definitions and theoretical support.

Antecedents	Definition	Support
On-field attribute		
Behaviour	How an athlete behaves and performs during the match	Daley and Wolfson (2010); Morrissey (2009); Koernig and Boyd (2009)
Team	The status of the team(s) that an athlete represented in the past or that is currently representing	Chadwick and Burton (2008); Kerr and Emery (2011); Martin (2013)
Achievements	The number of games, trophies, medals and prizes won by the athlete	Grant et al. (2001); Kiefer (2014); Mullin and Dunn (2002)
Style of play	Style and aesthetic elements of an athletes' play	Morrissey (2009); Aiken and Koch (2009); Weiss (2001)
Skills	Tactical ability, level of talent and competence of the athlete	Theysohn et al. (2009); Groves (2011); Abernethy (1990)
Off-field attributes		
Physical Attraction	Looks and physique of the athlete	van Amsterdam et al. (2012); Kerr and Emery (2011); King (2002)
Lifestyle	Aspects related to an athletes' private life, such as interests, living style, WAGS, family, friends	Koering and Boyd (2009); Vincenta et al. (2011); Yu (2005)
Personal Appeal	The force of an athletes' personality	Vincent et al. (2009); Cortsen (2013); Mullin and Dunn (2002)
Ethnicity	Race, origin, religion and other aesthetic cultural patterns of an athlete	Hyman and Sierra (2010); Künzler and Poli, 2012; Dunne (2012)
Entertainment Value	Capability of the athlete to provide entertainment outside the sport environment	García (2011); Künzler and Poli (2012); Tanaka (2004)

3.3 Athlete brand implications

Good perceptions of a brand are often linked to an increase in consumer loyalty towards that brand (Aaker, 1996; Bauer et al., 2008). Consistent with this idea, Arai et al. (2013) suggested that when fans develop a good image of an athlete, they tend to increase their loyalty towards that athlete. In addition, previous studies also proposed that the fans' goodwill towards the athlete tends to be transferred to the athlete's team, with this being relevant for both foreign and local fans (Theysohn et al., 2009). Also, fans that are loyal to an athlete tend to develop positive purchase intentions in favour of the athlete-related brands (Dees et al., 2008). On the basis of previous literature, we consider three consequences of an athlete brand to be of crucial importance: athlete loyalty, team loyalty and purchase intentions of sponsored products.

3.3.1 Athlete loyalty

Consumer loyalty can be conceptualized as the psychological commitment and subsequent consumption of goods (Kunkel et al., 2013). In this context, athlete loyalty refers to a psychological commitment to the athlete and intention to consume goods attached to him/her. Loyal fans resist the idea of replacing their favourite athlete (Theysohn et al. 2009). Furthermore, top athletes tend to help clubs attract more people to the stadium (Bodet and Chanavat, 2010; Wann et al., 1996) and to win loyalty abroad as well (Kerr and Gladden, 2008; Yu, 2005). As Richelieu and Desbordes (2009) pointed out, signing star athletes tends to increase brand reputation affinity of the teams among their fans, and this can strengthen fan loyalty towards the team. For instance, when David Beckham moved from Manchester United to Real Madrid, the Asian fans transferred their loyalty towards Beckham's new club, and the same happened when he moved to the Los Angeles Galaxy. Within one year of Beckham's arrival, the club obtained 11,000 season ticket holders, inked a shirt sponsorship deal worth an estimated USD \$20 million with Herbalife, and increased merchandise sales by 700% (Vincent et al., 2009). Real Madrid is also a good example of the importance of signing star athletes. The club claims that although they signed Zidane at price of USD \$80 million (i.e., world transfer record at the time), they gained much more than that as a result of support by foreign and local fans to the team (De Hoyos, 2008).

3.3.2 Team loyalty

According to Tsiotsou (2013), team loyalty refers to the relationship between sport consumers and sport teams in terms of their emotional bonding. Biscaia et al. (2013) discussed team loyalty in terms of positive attitudes and behaviours. While attitudinal loyalty is a result of psychological processes that include the commitment and attitudinal preference, behavioural loyalty refers to the actual purchase behaviour of a person toward the team. As noted above, fans that are loyal to a particular athlete tend to support the team where the athlete is playing

(Kerr and Gladden, 2008). For instance, because of David Beckham, Asian fans of the Far East (e.g., China, Cambodia, Japan) started to support Real Madrid (Yu, 2005).

3.3.3 Purchase intention of sponsored products

In the context of sponsoring brands, purchase intention refers to the person's conscious plan to purchase a brand (Biscaia et al., 2013). Dees et al. (2010) suggested that there is a link between the fans' connection to an athlete and its associated brands. Charbonneau and Garland (2006) highlighted the power of celebrity athletes to influence the actual purchase intentions of their fans. That is, once consumers identify themselves with the athlete, they establish an emotional attachment to the athlete and this emotional attachment often contributes to increasing the purchase habit of associated brands (Carlson and Donovan, 2013). In addition, by understanding how fans view athletes, brands that seek visibility in the sport context may obtain valuable information. Consistent with this view, it has been suggested that celebrities are often perceived as role models (Stever, 1991), and a role model may influence several aspects of life including consumption-related behaviours (e.g., switching products, firing complaints, word-of-mouth and brand loyalty). Kim and Na (2007) explained that celebrity endorsement often represents an effective strategy for brands. That is, when buyers feel a connection between himself/herself and the endorsed athlete, they tend to engage in actual purchase behaviour towards the product that is linked with the athlete. Also, Thomson (2006) noted that celebrity endorsement impacts purchase intentions towards the endorsed products due to a strong feeling of attachment of the fan with the celebrity athlete. Furthermore, Cunningham and Bright (2012) added that different channels can be used to endorse celebrities (e.g., social media, mass media), and all of them tend to be effective at increasing purchase intentions. On the basis of the literature related to the celebrity endorsement, team and athlete loyalty, we propose that:

P7: A fan's loyalty towards an athlete will have a positive influence on his/her loyalty towards the team.

P8: The fan's loyalty towards the athlete will have a positive influence on their intentions to purchase the associated sponsoring brands.

4 Discussion

The current study focused on the linkages between factors affecting an athlete brand as well its subsequent implications for the athlete him/herself, his/her team and associated sponsors. The focal point was to develop a comprehensive model of athlete brand and fill the gap in the literature by explaining how an athlete's brand is created, and how fans increase their linkages with the athletes, their teams and

endorsed brands associated with the athlete. The proposed model highlights the agents that work behind closed doors to spread awareness about the athlete among potential future fans (i.e., antecedents). The role of athletes' actions on the field of play, as well their actions outside the field are also discussed. These on-field and off-field activities of athletes represent the bases for establishing athlete brand. Furthermore, the athlete's brand effect on his/her team and associated sponsors are also discussed in the model.

The model has three different parts. The first is related with the antecedents of an athlete brand. The second refers to the components of an athlete's brand. Next, the third part describes the implications an athlete's brand on the team and the brands endorsed by the athlete. Five major antecedents of the athlete's brand are proposed to act as triggers of the creation of an athlete's brand in fans' minds, including media (mass media, social media, mega event media spectacles and fantasy sport and video games), oral communications (word of mouth, and rumours or narratives), impression management, social agents (parents and teachers, family members, friends, and community), and team and/or sport (sport interest, team interest, and team geographical location). These antecedents are vital to generate the awareness of a certain image. Then, two components help fans create a certain mental image of that specific athlete. These components are on-field attributes and off-field attributes. The on-field attributes include behaviour, team achievements, style of play, and skills. In turn, the off-field attributes concern physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity and entertainment. Subsequently, these attributes will permit a fan to strengthen the link with the athlete, and thus increasing the athlete's loyalty levels. Once the loyalty to the athlete is established, a fan is expected to start liking everything associated with the athlete (Wu et al., 2012). Fans tend to increase the intentions to visit the team at the stadium, watch matches on TV, read news about the favourite athlete, follow the athlete and team via social media, and buy merchandise (Kerr and Gladden, 2008), and even increase their intentions to buy the products or services of the brand sponsoring the athlete (Spry et al., 2011). Through this proposed model, we aim to contribute to the continued understanding of athlete brand creation and its implications, while also displaying a picture of how fans are attracted to certain players, teams and brands linked to the sport context.

Although teams are continuously trying to increase their brand awareness (Richelieu and Desbordes 2009), not all athletes put real effort into this matter. The awareness of an athlete is important to strengthen the link with sport fans, with subsequent benefits for teams and other brands. Cristiano Ronaldo (FIFA Balon D'or in 2008, 2013 and 2014) is a good example of an athlete trying to increase awareness about him and improve his image among the public in general. He recently sold his image rights to the Singaporean Hong Kong-based company Mint Media owned by Peter Lim (Straitstimes, 2015). Thus, it is important for athletes to promote public awareness about them. An athlete can market him or herself by using media to draw attention to aspects such as ethnicity or relevant stories (if these are known

to resonate with the audiences). The first impact will be on the creation of a bond with fans. Next, an indirect effect will spill over to the athlete's club and even associated brands. Clubs in search for new markets should take steps that are not only beneficial for them, but also favour the athletes as well. The condolence letter written by Arsene Wenger (Arsenal's football manager) to a teenager's family in Karachi (Pakistan) that went viral on social media is a good example, as this action allowed the team to get new followers in the country (footyroom, 2014). Also, some players provide good examples of how their own actions can be very important for them and their teams. When Zidane visited Bangladesh in 2006, he mentioned that he was not aware of his popularity in a country so far away from Spain or France (BBC, 2006).

In the present day, media and fans scrutinize athletes' every action, including private life matters. An athlete is often seen as a role model (Stever, 1991), and a single action has the potential to boost his/her popularity in either a negative or positive way. For example, when Cristiano Ronaldo refused to exchange the jersey with an Israeli athlete during a match between Israel and Portugal, his action was widely admired in the Muslim world (Muslimvillage, 2014). Also, Zidane's head-butt in the 2006 World Cup final did not affect his popularity much in the Muslim world, as it was alleged that Materazzi used abusive language toward Zidane's mother (i.e., referred to her as a terrorist) (Morrissey, 2009). Nevertheless, the athletes should be careful about personal and social life activities and think carefully before taking an action or they may damage their image, with subsequent sport- and sponsor-related penalties such as in the case of Luis Suárez (CNN, 2014; International Business Times, 2014).

This proposed model is not only about the athlete brand, but it also establishes athlete-team and athlete-sponsor relationships. It represents an initial step to help establish support for the idea that athlete loyalty will bring along financial benefits to the team in terms of the revenue generated from athlete-related club licensed products, visits to the stadium (gate money) and broadcasting rights. In addition, it highlights the role of celebrity endorsement in the sport context and creates new possibilities for future research directions. To complement these ideas, it may be useful to look for the two most prominent names in the current generation in football: Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid) and Lionel Messi (Barcelona). Messi is considered the greatest footballer of all times by a great number of fans and football specialists alike, and he has won more individual and collective awards than Ronaldo. However, he is clearly beaten by Ronaldo in terms of sponsors and social media battleground that provide a reason to declare Ronaldo as a stronger brand than Messi (Caioli, 2015). To elaborate it more, Settini (2016) called Cristiano Ronaldo a human billboard as the Portuguese footballer made \$29 million from endorsements last year. So, through the rivalry of these two top athletes we can see that a better management of on-field and off-field attributes of an athlete is vital for establishing an athlete brand. In sum, the current framework is a combination of extensive literature combining various links to athlete branding that is potentially

applicable for different types of fans (foreign as well as local fans). Branding in sport is not a new topic, but athlete branding is an emerging topic in the academia. With this article, we expect to contribute to both the academic literature (i.e., first model combining antecedents, components and implications of athlete brand in a single framework) and practitioners working with athletes of different sports, as this model provides guidance on how to increase fans' link with their favourite athletes, associated teams and sponsors.

5 Limitations and future research directions

First, as this study is conceptual in nature, there is the need to collect actual data and to empirically examine the proposed model. Although this proposed conceptualization represents an important step to understand how fans establish a link with favourite players, future studies should collect data in different countries in order to test the robustness of the proposed model to measure athletes' brands, as well as its antecedents and consequences. In addition, due to theoretical considerations, all dimensions included in the model were treated separately. Still, it is important to note that some of these dimensions are naturally interconnected such as the case of impression management, which could be achieved through different channels of media (Rojek, 2001). Similar strong links may also be found between rumours and WOM. Therefore, a subsequent empirical examination of this model would be fruitful to the continued understanding of athlete brand management.

Secondly, the rise of communication technology has paved the way for the creation of satellite fans (Kerr and Gladden, 2008), and the antecedents included in this framework may not contribute with the same strength for specific players living in different countries and different cultures. So, the proposed model could be examined in different cultures to better understand its significance across divergent contexts and highlight which aspects should garner the most attention from sport managers. For example, in the European context, social agents such as parents, family and friends may play a major role while these aspects may not be as important in Asian and/or African contexts (Künzler and Poli, 2012; Richardson and O'Dwyer, 2003). In a similar fashion, the components included in the model to measure on-field and off-field attributes related with the athlete's brand may be evaluated differently depending on the player(s) being examined. For example, attributes such as physical attraction may be linked with athletes like Cristiano Ronaldo or Maria Sharapova because of their looks. Thus, future research may also conduct model comparisons using different celebrity athletes. Also, this model is focused on a specific context of athletes playing mostly team sports (e.g., football), which may limit its generalizability to other sports. Thus, while this model could represent a starting point, future studies should always adapt the proposed model according to the specific sport context.

Third, while this study intends to provide an overall picture about athletes as brands, a particular attention may be devoted to some specific dimensions in future studies. For example, Künzler and Poli (2012) emphasized that rumours and stories are critical aspects for fans to become aware of the athletes. Also, Wang (2004) mentioned that nationality of an athlete has paramount importance in countries such as China as a way to develop an image of a certain athlete. In this sense, future qualitative studies could be developed to further explain the role of these aspects in the creation of athletes' brands in certain countries.

Lastly, it is also important to conduct case study research among fans of a single athlete who would be commonly recognized as strong brands with global impact (e.g., Cristiano Ronaldo, Messi or Neymar – football; LeBron James – basketball; Novak Djokovic – tennis). This kind of study helps to understand the efficiency of big spending by some clubs. For example, a further study could aim to compare Cristiano Ronaldo's image (very expensive) vs Denis Cheryshev (acquired by Real Madrid this season at nominal price). Furthermore, comparison of a solo-sport athlete vs team sport athlete could also provide more details about the model of the athlete brand.

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6.2 ATHLETE BRAND CONSTRUCTION: A PERSPECTIVE BASED ON FANS' PERCEPTIONS

**Ali Hasaan, Katri Kerem, Rui Biscaia and Kwame J.A.
Agyemang**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to develop a framework for understanding the antecedents and components of athlete brand. Based on a set of 21 interviews conducted in three different countries, a detailed framework is proposed including five antecedents and two components of athlete brand. The antecedents are media (social media, mass media, video games and major sport events), oral communications (word of mouth, and rumors and narratives), impression management, social agents (parents, family members, friends and community), and teams and sport (sport interest, team interest and team geographical location). In turn, the components of athlete brand are related with on-field attributes (behavior, team, achievements, style of play and skills) and off-field attributes (physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity and entertainment). Complementarily, these components of athlete brand are proposed to have an impact on fans' loyalty towards the athlete. Implications of these findings for building and managing athlete brand are discussed, and directions for future studies are provided.

Keywords: athlete brand; athlete loyalty; fans; teams

Introduction

Different kinds of sports have extensively influenced modern society^{1,2}. Technological advancements have increased the popularity of sports as a cultural spectacle, and sports stars are considered one of the most visible aspects of modern day sports^{3,4}. Currently, numerous high profile professional athletes have emerged (especially those in highly commercialized fields of sport) whose popularity often surpasses that of the team to which they belong⁵. Perhaps the most relevant example is Cleveland Cavaliers' LeBron James, considering his economic impact on the city of Cleveland⁶. In line with this view, extant studies have suggested that the current era belongs to the domination of professional athletes as standalone entities who are no longer merely associated with their team⁷. Athletes such as Michael Jordan, David Beckham, and Roger Federer have successfully converted their athletic abilities into multimillion dollar endorsements⁸. Kerrigan, Brownlie, Hower, and Daza-LeTouze⁹ asserted that this process is largely related to the mediatization of individuals who essentially become human brands. This means that athletes can be considered as brand entities by themselves^{10,11} and have such effective fan power that fans now follow the athletes instead of just the teams that they play for¹².

Meanwhile, to create value for a brand, consumers (i.e., fans) must develop positive and unique brand associations toward that brand; however, they first need to become familiar with it^{13, 14}. Previous studies have suggested the roles of different sources, such as the media¹⁵, oral communication¹⁶, impression management¹⁷, social agents¹⁸, and team and/or sport¹⁹, on brand and athletes, which help familiarize fans with them. Consistent with this perspective, Montoya²⁰ explained that developing an athlete brand requires fans' awareness about the athlete and an understanding of how he/she is different from other athletes. Subsequently, establishing a brand requires the development of a positive image about their personal lives among the public in general²¹, including aspects related to the on- and off-field attributes of the athletes²². In light of the previous literature, the current study focused on understanding the components of athlete brand including both on- and off-field attributes, as well as the factors that enhance fans' perceptions of those attributes (i.e., antecedents). While the extant literature suggests media, oral communication, impression management, social agents and/or team, or sport as important sources that can help increase fans' awareness of the athletes and develop positive associations with those athletes^{17, 22} there is a dearth of qualitative research to better understand the specific roles and sub-dimensions of the aforementioned factors as possible antecedents of athlete brand awareness among local and foreign fans. The same is important in terms of the components of athlete brand, particularly on how to measure aspects related with the on- and off-field attributes of an athlete. Thus, based on the previous literature, the purpose of this study was to develop a detailed model for understanding the antecedents of athlete brand creation and its components. Through an in-depth qualitative examination of a set of interviews with fans from different countries, the study endeavored to develop a deeper understanding of athlete brand creation and its role in the sport marketplace. In doing so, this study attempts to provide a framework for helping athletes and brand managers in their attempt to establish a recognized athlete brand.

Athlete brand development

As noted by Carter²³, a human brand consists of peoples' opinions about an individual. In this sense, one can say that athlete brand is related with the personality and image of a particular athlete that is perceived by the public^{22, 24}. Carlson and Donavan¹¹ explained that athlete brand basically depends on public perception of an athlete. For example, Tiger Woods and LeBron James earned a brand status from their public persona as a golfer and as a basketball player, respectively. Evidence also explained that athlete brand is related with the personality of the athlete for the public. In this regard, athletes themselves have a strong role in building their personal brands^{22, 25}.

Keller¹³ explained brand knowledge as an essential component of the creation of brand awareness and the development of brand associations. Macdonald and Sharp²⁶ mentioned that consumers must know about the brand first, whereas

Gladden and Funk²⁷ noted that consumers should be aware of the brand, and that such awareness could be positively influenced through a variety of sources. Different factors have been suggested in the literature as possible triggers to develop awareness among potential fans. For example, media channels tend to be beneficial for many sports and/or athletes, aiding them to increase popularity²⁸. Similarly, oral communication conducted by peers and/or other persons often represent a vital source for sharing knowledge about athletes in different cultures and countries¹⁶, whereas impression management is one of the major contributors in the creation of modern-day celebrities²⁹. That is, an athlete's efforts to create, maintain, or change his/her image is vital in enhancing fans' perceptions of them. In addition, social agents (i.e., entities that have some type of societal impact) often have a direct influence on fans' responses to sports properties³⁰. In relation to this, Keegana, Harwood, Spray, and Lavalley³¹ stated that peers and parents play important roles in influencing motivation in the sport environment. Furthermore, the popularity of a team and/or sport commonly acts as a trigger to increase awareness and athlete associations^{32, 33}. For instance, many supporters applaud athletes while they are playing just because they are members of their favorite team³⁴. All of these factors tend to lead to the creation of the athlete brand. Hence, media, oral communication, impression management, social agents, and team and/or sport often contribute to increase athlete awareness, which in turn, can lead to the creation of mental associations about that athlete.

Athlete brand components

Grant, Heere, and Dickson³⁵ stated that athletes tend to become famous due to their field achievements and public interest in off-field activities. For example, Neymar and Cristiano Ronaldo are famous for both their athletic characteristics and features of their private lives. The fans' perceived image about their favorite athlete is based on athletic performance during competition and his/her character in real life³⁶. Therefore, athlete brand is dependent upon two different dimensions of athletes' lives: their on- and off-field attributes. The on-field attributes are related to an athlete's athletic performance, and the excellent performance of an athlete is extremely valuable for establishing an athlete's brand³⁷. In turn, off-field attributes are related with the athlete's personal life behind his/her on-field activities, including such aspects as athletes' personality, athletes' partners and family members, or athletes' hobbies and their looks⁵. The development of an athlete brand is an important aspect for both local and foreign fans, and in several occasions, athletes emerge as important assets at both personal and collective level³⁸. For example, Wayne Gretzky is considered a pride of Canada, and when he announced his engagement to American actress Janet Jones and his transference from the Canadian club Edmonton Oilers to the American club Los Angeles Kings, it created political crisis in Canada and people actually began to go against the proposed free trade between US and Canada³⁹.

With the growing importance of an athlete for marketing purposes, a great stream of studies focusing on athlete brand began to emerge. For example, Williams and Agyemang⁴⁰ focused on the antecedents of athlete brand through three different broad categories: organization-, market-, and athlete-related antecedents. Consistent with this view, other researchers have also provided contributions regarding the antecedents of athlete brand, such as O’Keeffe and Zawadzka¹⁵, who explained that the media has increased the popularity of star athletes, teams, and sports. Künzler and Poli¹⁶ declared that oral communication is a vital platform for sharing knowledge about athletes, whereas Wagg¹⁷ explained that impression management is essential to promote an athlete. Similarly, Ullrich-French and Smith⁴¹ highlighted social agents as factors affecting the behaviors of youth about sports. Furthermore, Best⁴² mentioned that a fan’s interest in a certain team tends to increase his/her interest in the associated athletes, whereas Kunkel, Hill, and Funk⁴³ identified involvement with a sport as a reason to follow a team or athlete. Complementarily, researchers have also studied the components of athlete brand. For example, previous studies developed the model of athlete brand image (MABI) and suggested that an athlete brand depends upon athletes’ athletic performances, their attractive appearances and marketable lifestyles (i.e., on- and off-field attributes of an athlete)^{24, 25}. While all these studies have contributed to the continued understanding of athletes as brands, to date, no study has been developed to include the proposed antecedents and components in a single model. There is also a need to collect fans’ opinions about the proposed dimensions suggested in the literature, in order to obtain in-depth knowledge on the aspects that contribute to the development of athlete brand and the components that must be managed by athletes and managers. Thus, the current study adopted a conceptual framework on the basis of the literature review as a starting point to examine athlete brand construction (Figure 1). The research questions guiding this study are the following:

RQ1: How do media, oral communication, impression management, social agents, and team/or sport contribute to increase fans’ awareness and positive associations about athletes?

RQ2: What are the specific on- and off-field components of athlete brand?

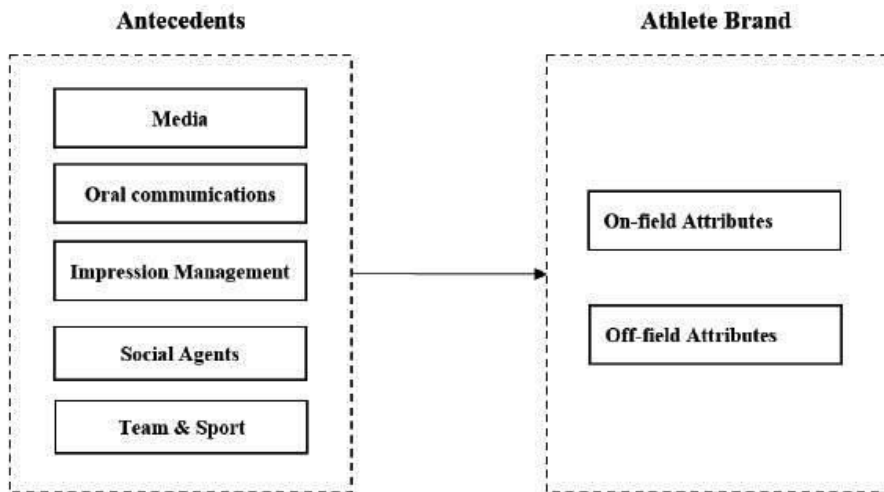


Figure 1 Adopted framework of athlete brand construction based on the literature review.

METHOD

Given the nature of the research questions, this study employed an inductive qualitative design. The authors surmised that this method is the most appropriate in eliciting meaning and gaining in-depth knowledge that is currently absent from the athlete brand literature. Owing to the shortage of in-depth examinations in this area, this approach is intended to be a starting point and a prelude to future investigations that can build upon the existing study.

Sampling of participants

The preliminary stage of sampling involved negotiating access⁴⁴, and this process was eased due to the lead researcher's established relationship with various sports stakeholder groups (i.e., clubs, athletes, sport researchers). Encompassing these relationships, a purposeful convenience sample was employed to select study participants according to a set of predetermined criteria⁴⁵. Participants have to meet all the following conditions: 1) must consider themselves a sports fan, 2) have at least one favorite athlete, 3) has watched at least one game (live or on television) of their favorite athlete during the current season, and 4) has followed this particular athlete for at least one year. The purpose of using these criteria was to select a legitimate "athlete fan" for this study as defined by Crawford⁴⁶: someone who considers himself/ herself obsessed with sports (i.e., team, athlete, celebrity). In line with that view, the first two conditions helped filter fans based on their own perceptions of being a fan, and the third and fourth conditions helped ensure that the sample included more enthusiastic and passionate sport fans. Moreover, the

sampling strategy was deemed convenient given that the participants were easily accessible based on the origins and/or locations of the researchers. This type of sampling strategy is advantageous in situations wherein researchers want to collect data that can be used as a springboard for future studies⁴⁷.

The lead researcher conducted all interviews in settings preferred by the interviewees (e.g., the interviewees' office or a classroom designated by the school for this specific purpose). The final sample comprised 21 football fans from three different countries (Portugal, Estonia, and Pakistan). The purpose of selecting three countries of different cultures and sporting backgrounds was to study fans from various geographical areas of the world. Athletes, teams, and key sponsors are multinational brands aiming to have worldwide good reputation. Hence, the authors decided to conduct the study in three countries with distinctively different background: Portugal already has strong football culture, Estonia is a European country where the popularity of football and football culture is emerging⁴⁸, and Pakistan is mostly regarded as a non-football-playing South Asian country, in which cricket is the most popular sport⁴⁹. The participants, composed of both male and females, came from a diverse range of professions (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participants profile information

	Gander	Country	Profession	Status
1	M	Portugal	Football Expert	Expert/ Player/ Fan
2	M	Portugal	Student	Player/Fan
3	M	Portugal	Student	Fan
4	M	Pakistan	Mechanical Engineer	Fan
5	M	Pakistan	Student	Fan
6	M	Pakistan	Lecturer	Fan
7	M	Pakistan	Student	Fan
8	M	Pakistan	IT-Specialist	Player/Fan
9	M	Pakistan	Salesman	Player/ Fan
10	M	Pakistan	IT-Specialist	Fan
11	M	Pakistan	Football Expert & Journalist	Expert/Fan
12	M	Pakistan	Student	Fan
13	M	Pakistan	Marketing Manager	Player/Fan
14	M	Pakistan	Student	Fan
15	M	Pakistan	IT-Specialist	Fan
16	M	Estonia	Football player	Player/Fan
17	F	Estonia	Lecturer	Fan
18	M	Estonia	Commercial Director	Expert/ Fan
19	M	Estonia	Entrepreneur	Fan
20	F	Estonia	Researcher	Fan
21	M	Estonia	Banker	Player/Fan

Data collection

Interviews were conducted to obtain a deeper understanding of fans' thoughts about their favorite athletes. A qualitative technique was employed to suggest possible associations of the fans towards their favorite athletes on the basis of Keller's¹³ recommendations for measuring the characteristics of brand associations. All interviews were conducted for two months. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Prior to the interviews, all participants were asked to sign a voluntary participation form that explained the purpose of the study.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed, which covered the key issues specified in the literature related to the antecedents of athlete brand and its components. Each interview consisted of two sections. The first section included questions focused on gaining a better understanding of the antecedents of athlete brand, and the section was designed to improve current knowledge about the components of athlete brand. For example, the questions aimed at understanding the following questions: (1) Is on-field performance important for player popularity? Why? (2) What are the on-field characteristics of your favorite player? (3) What off-field characteristics of your favorite player impresses you? The examples of questions about the antecedents were as follows: (1) Do you remember how you became aware of your favorite player? (2) Do you follow your favorite player on mass media and social media? Why? (3) Do you know of any stories about your favorite player that impresses you? If yes, please tell me (in a positive or negative matter) (see Appendix 1 for the detailed interview initial guide).

As is the case with numerous qualitative methods, the researcher serves as the instrument to elicit the data. To do so, probing questions must be asked to extract more details⁵⁰. For instance, real life examples were often used in follow-up questions to clarify participants' replies to questions. The interview guide remained the same in its structure and sequence of questions for every interview. Additionally, it is important to mention that an expert (i.e., a personal related with field of sport) from each country was interviewed separately from the fans in order to gain deeper insights about the questions mentioned. For these interviews, all questions were presented based on two different perspectives (i.e., their opinion as both fan and expert). First, the question was "directed to the fan" (e.g., Do you follow your favorite player on mass media and social media? Why?), and then it was "directed to the expert" (e.g., Do you think fans tend to follow their favorite player on mass media and social media? Why?). Interviews lasted between 15 to 40 minutes depending upon participant interest, information, and willingness to share his/her thoughts. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to further conceal their identities.

Back-translation: All participants from Estonia and Portugal had a solid understanding of the English Language. For instance, some participants were students of a university where most of the courses were taught in English. Meanwhile, the Urdu language was adopted in interviewing the participants

from Pakistan because it was difficult to find sports fans who had a working knowledge of the English language. In translating the interview guide into Urdu, back-translation was used to minimize discrepancies between the original and the translated instruments. The interview guide was first translated into Urdu by one of the researchers and then this was back-translated into English by two different Pakistan professors who were proficient in both languages. The comparison of the two forms ensured that the instruments were conceptually equivalent.

Data analysis

The analysis commenced after conducting the first interview in the current study. This strategy allows the researchers to become more familiar with the participants' responses⁵¹. The lead researcher listened to the interviews and transcribed them verbatim. Along with the field notes that were taken during the interview, the lead author noted the first impressions of the interview, and then proceeded to discuss these initial impressions with the other researchers. Through this process, the researchers were able to discuss ways by which to improve follow-up interviews so that the research team could gain a better understanding and response from the participants.

Two levels of coding were adopted for the current study: the open coding level and the axial level. Open coding was employed for the initial analysis. Corbin and Strauss⁵² described open coding as "Breaking data apart and delineating concepts to stand for blocks of raw data". To do so, interview responses were read until a good grasp of the data was obtained. The researchers then discussed preliminary themes emanating from the first reading of the data. Furthermore, the researchers referred to the study purpose and interview guide in the process of coming up with initial themes.

Coding within the selected passages was done in the second stage to determine emergent patterns. Once the initial themes were identified, the researchers classified them into more defined, concrete themes; in some cases, they combined similar themes and those that could not stand alone. This process is known as «axial coding,» which is defined by Corbin and Strauss⁵² as the process of crosscutting or relating the initial themes to one another. Results in this study were elaborated from the themes arising from the axial coding process.

Finally, trustworthiness was ensured through the guidelines proposed by Lincoln and Guba⁵³, namely, credibility and dependability/ conformability. Research collaborators with competence in qualitative methodology ensured the credibility and dependability of the procedure. Furthermore, the study attempted to provide the participants with a great detail of information with regards the research process. Peer-debriefing sessions were utilized to gain outside perspectives on the themes that emerged from the data, and member checking was employed during the study to ensure that the participants' "voices" were being accurately portrayed. This included follow-up questions and repeating what the participants had stated. For

the purpose of achieving conformability, during the interviews, the interviewers remained unbiased and did not comment about their own opinions about certain matters or about certain athletes.

Findings

The results of the interviews conducted with fans are presented below. The first part of the interviews covered the antecedents of athlete brand, whereas the second part focused on athlete brand components. Overall, the findings are in line with the proposed model in Figure 1, and give us a better understanding of the roles of media, oral communication, impression management, social agents, and team and/or sport in the creation of athlete brand among fans. Moreover, the findings contribute to a deeper knowledge on how to measure the on- and off-field components of athlete brand. This study’s results section initially focuses on the antecedents of athlete brand followed by a presentation of its components.

Antecedents of athlete brand

Table 2 shows the participants’ responses about the factors that serve as antecedents of athlete brand. The participants’ responses, which were based on their favorite athlete, indicate the vital role of media. In fact, 20 participants acknowledged some form of media as the first source of connection with their favorite athlete (see Appendix 2). For instance, one of the participants described media as a whole, and media channels, in particular as follows:

Media is all around the football clubs and football players [they are] on 24 hours of the day and 7 days a week. From the time a player arrives to the stadium until he goes home, media is covering everything. <...>. For example, nowadays, social media is important for everything, especially in football. Players are starting to understand this like Cristiano Ronaldo who have a lot of fans on Facebook. Fans often use Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. You can track what football players are doing just by connecting with them on [their] Facebook page [Tiago].

Table 2 Participant’s discussion about the antecedents.

Antecedent	Participants’ responses
Media	
Mass Media	“I watched lots of their matches on TV, I read about them.” [Shoaib]
Social Media	“Messi was kind a hot thing, I watched him on YouTube videos and I realized he is a magician player.” [Waqas]
Major Sport Events	“During the 2006 World Cup, I came to know about Ronaldo.” [Abid]

Antecedent	Participants' responses
Media	
Video Games	"I came close to Ronaldo while playing Play Station as I always choose him for my team." [Farhan]
Oral Communication	
Word-of-Mouth	"I always mention Messi as a fabulous player in my chats with friends." [Waqas]
Rumors/Narratives	"I started to like him when I heard the story that he refused to exchange shirt with an Israeli player after the match." [Nouman]
Impression Management	"The one which impress me the most is the how hard working Ronaldo is and how he shows that to all of us." [Tiago/ Ricardo]
Social Agents	
Parents	"My father played football, my grandfather was a football player and a referee, so I decided to adopt football." [Shoaib]
Family Members	"My cousins discussed all the time about him so I knew him from their talks." [Sohail]
Friends	"My friend told me about Messi when we were watching a football game." [Muzamil]
Community	"I played Cricket like any other child as every new child born automatically attract towards cricket in Pakistan." [Shoaib]
Team and Sport	
Sport Interest	"As a football player myself, I chose my favorite player due to the similarities in the playing ground." [Zemenu]
Team Interest	"My favorite player plays in my favorite team and he is the captain and a very loyal player." [Pedro]
Team Geographical Location	"My favorite player played in sporting Lisbon, which is my favorite team because I live in Lisbon and played for Sporting when I was younger." [Ricardo]

The participants' responses concerning the role of the media further highlighted specific types of media channels, such as mass media, social media, major sport events, and video games (see Table 2), and their roles in increasing awareness levels about a certain athlete among both actual and prospective fans.

The role of oral communication as an antecedent of athlete brand also received positive responses from the participants. A total of 12 participants (see Appendix 2) acknowledged that oral communication plays a major role in the process of providing information and getting them closer to their favorite athlete. As mentioned by one of the participants:

At the beginning, when the players are starting to become important, people just tell lies about them, they often get confused about the players and say incorrect things about them, but then some of these comments about the players will aid at building their career, for sure. I think the stories behind the players have a lot to do with loyalty, how much fans like the players, where they came from, and their social lives outside the field. I really don't believe in the relationship between Ronaldo and his Russian girlfriend, for example. I think it is all [done] to get social attention. I think they are showing themselves because it is good for both actually [Tiago].

After interviewing fans, two types of oral communication emerged. Specifically, participants' responses resulted in the identification of word-of-mouth (WOM) and rumors/narratives. Examples of these two types of oral communication are presented in Table 2.

Complementarily, five participants acknowledged the role of impression management performed by an athlete as a direct source of information for them; they recognized that such effort can be an antecedent of athlete brand. It is also important to note that media channels are often a good source through which fans can become aware of impression management actions taken by athletes. As noted by one of the participants:

While I was living in Germany, FC Bayern München and German player Bastian Schweinsteiger was once asked during the press conference about some political issue and he said: "I am sorry, I am not [an] expert in this field; you should ask me about football. I cannot answer this." So, [I think a] player should maintain his natural image among fans [Triin].

Meanwhile, another participant who highlighted the role of impression management shared the following sentiment:

Recently, a child wanted to get a Messi autograph, but Messi misbehaved with that child. Later, Messi apologized and took a few pictures with the kid. So, instead of [having] a bad feeling, I felt positive feelings for Messi because he had the courage to accept his mistake. He apologized for what he had done wrong and tried to compensate for his mistake [Bilal].

In addition, most participants agreed upon the fact that athletes should act while keeping in mind their goal of creating a good image, even in countries and regions where their kind of sport is not so popular. As one of the participants mentioned:

Sponsors want to capture new markets, and Asia is a big market. So recently, we watched an advertisement of a Japanese company, in which Messi is showing his skills. I think that is the best example of a player advertising himself in new

market. So, players can introduce themselves to a new market through charity work, advertisements, coaching clinics, interactions with fans of new markets, or playing in friendly exhibition matches [Najaf].

Social agents also seem to play a vital role as antecedents of athlete brands, which is something that has been mentioned by 19 participants. No matter the country, some social agent is playing an important role and even fans are recognizing that, although a certain social agent may not work in their cases, social agents usually work for the majority. The interviews resulted in the identification of four different types of social agents, such as parents, family members, friends, and community, as described in Table 2. As highlighted by one of the participants:

The problem sometimes is with parents who failed at becoming football players and then put pressure on their kids to fulfill their own failed dreams. I saw six- or seven years-old kids arriving the stadium with their parents who then start training them as goalkeeper for two or three hours. This is ridiculous. On the other hand, there are some parents who do not put pressure on their kids and just support them, whatever the decisions are, whatever the results are, or whatever the kid's performances are. There are parents that manage to do that. The greatest influence of the family members on kids is when they are building the career, and sometimes even to help creating stability for an established career [Tiago].

The role of a team and/or sport also seems to have a positive influence on athlete brand. According to 13 participants, if a fan is familiar with certain types of sports and certain teams, it becomes easier to recognize and start liking an associated athlete. In turn, athletes from non-popular sports or teams have to work harder to gain the approval of fans and other people with interest in sports. Based on participants' responses, sport interest, team interest, and team geographical location were identified as the three important factors that can help in better understanding the roles of team and sport in the creation of athlete brand. As one of the participants said during the interview:

Cricket is very popular in Pakistan. So, even an average cricket player is well-known in Pakistan. But when it comes to football or other sports that are not popular in Pakistan, only a handful players are well-known here. For example, if a very good player is playing in some small team he won't become as popular as the average player of a big team. Not only team performance, but also team location is a big thing in this regard. A player who is playing in a Karachi team becomes automatically popular among Karachi fans [Najaf].

Components of athlete brand

Table 3 presents extracts of participants' answers about the on- and off-field attributes of an athlete that they consider while selecting their favorite. As noted by one of the participants:

On-field performance is a major criterion for an athlete to become popular, but there are some other elements as well that one has to achieve to become a star. There are many players who perform really well both individually and collectively, but they are not superstars because of marketing techniques [Saad].

Table 3: Participant's discussions about the on-field attributes and off-field attributes of athlete brand.

Components of athlete brand	Participants' responses
On-field attributes	
Behavior	"He is a fighter. He is a team player, very mature in the field." [Saad]
Team	"He is the captain of my favorite team." [Pedro]
Achievements	"He won golden boot with Manchester United" [Saad]
Style of play	"He has extreme good reactions as goalkeeper and the best thing is that he is kind of a half defender." [Triin]
Skills	"His shoots and free kicks are like a tomahawk missile." [Ricardo]
Off-field attributes	
Physical Attraction	"I find him very sexy." [Abid]
Lifestyle	"He is devoted to his family and he does charity work for people of Gaza." [Umair]
Personal Appeal	"His personality has groom much, and now he has a good personal appeal." [Waqas]
Ethnicity	"I like him because he is an Estonian playing in Germany." [Oleg]
Entertainment	"His life has enough entertainment factor to entertain us." [Waqas]

All participants have mentioned that an athlete's on-field activity is paramount for them to like a certain athlete. Responses to the interviews also allowed the researchers to identify five main categories related to on-field attributes: behavior, team, achievements, skills, and style of play. For example, two of the participants mentioned that:

He was a fighter, an honest player. He never fell down. He never accepted defeat.
He was the leader of the team that he represented. He won everything apart

from the World Cup. His skills and style of play were unique and attractive. This is why I like him very much [Oleg].

I started to like Ronaldo because of his speed and skills. I felt he was a game changer. At the time when he started to create an impact at the English Premier League, Arsenal was at top. But Ronaldo with his quality of play, helped Manchester United compete with Arsenal FC to get [the] top spot again [Saad].

Complementarily, 17 participants noted that the off-field attributes of their favorite athletes impressed them in a positive manner. In particular, the interviews allowed the researchers to identify five types of off-field attributes: physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity, and entertainment. As an elaboration, one of the participants mentioned that:

Not only a philanthropist, but he has [also] kept close contact with his family and friends. He protests against things that are wrong and stands up for what he firmly believes in. It's normal for football players to be hard-partying and arrogant individuals but he is not one of them. He keeps a very healthy lifestyle [Zemenu].

One interesting observation is that the participants seemed to relate a positive athlete brand to their increased loyalty towards that athlete. All participants pointed out that the on-field attributes of an athlete motivated them to follow the athlete and become loyal to him/her. For example, one participant shared the following:

I followed Ronaldo on Facebook, Twitter, and on Instagram. My mobile phone is full of Ronaldo's pictures. As he posts his recent picture, I download and save it. I am a member of many pages and groups where they regularly post updates about Ronaldo. I try my best to watch every game of Ronaldo and if I failed to watch it live, I try to watch highlights of that match as early as possible. Whatever team he is playing for (Real Madrid or Portugal), I never missed any of his goal [Farhan].

The same was observed in the case of off-field attributes. A total of 17 participants acknowledged that they were impressed with certain off-field attributes of their favorite athletes and started to like these athletes based on those characteristics. These responses suggest a link between athlete brand and athlete loyalty via on- and off-field attributes. Concerning the off-field attributes, one participant mentioned that:

I knew Ronaldo before, but he became my favorite player when he refused to exchange his shirt with an Israeli player after Portugal vs. Israel match. I think that it showed how Ronaldo has strong character and cares with what is happening in the world. That really impressed me a lot and I started to follow him [Nouman].

DISCUSSION

The current study focused on examining previously proposed antecedents and components of athlete brands through a set of interviews with fans from three different countries. The main goal was to capture fans’ opinions so as to gain a deeper understanding of athlete brand creation and its measurement. This study contributes to the literature by (1) combining different ideas from past studies into a single model about athlete brand, and (2) providing a more comprehensive framework that can help scholars and practitioners target the dimensions they should focus on when promoting athletes. The findings from this study, as summarized in Figure 2, allows for a better understanding of the factors that contribute to the creation of athlete brand.

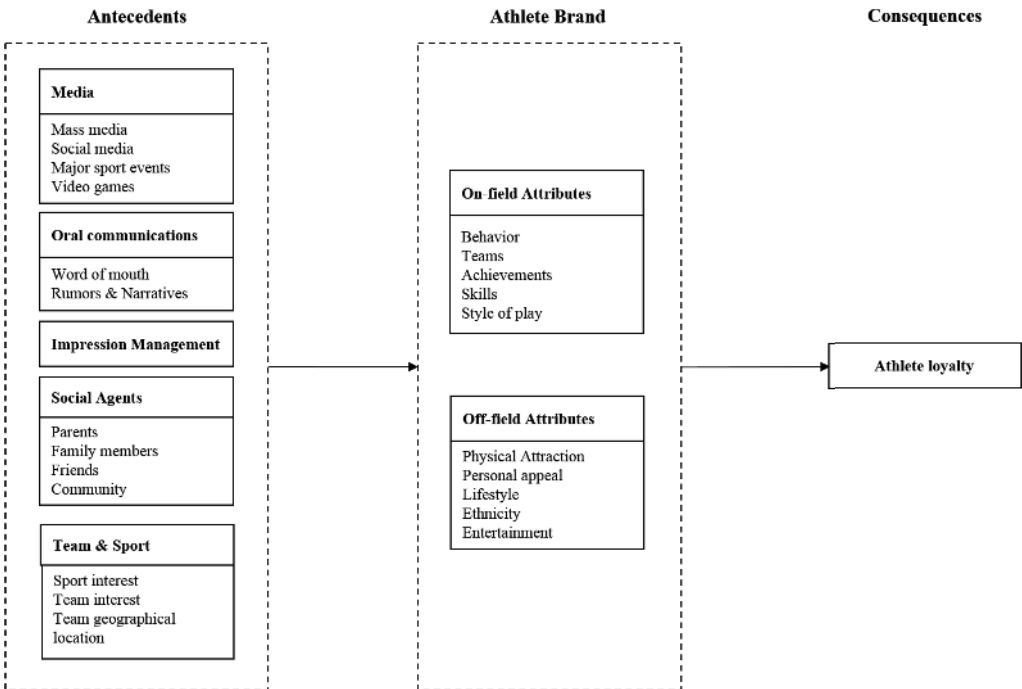


Figure 2. Final framework of athlete brand construction after participants’ interviews.

The dimension of media was further categorized into four main sub-dimensions. Specifically, for the participants in the three countries where the data were collected, mass media, social media, major sport events, and video games were identified as media sources that increase fans’ awareness. These findings are consistent with those reported by Summers and Johnson⁵⁴, thereby suggesting the important role of mass media in the process of creating and spreading an athlete’s good image. Sierra, Taute, and Heiser⁵⁵ mentioned that social media helps generate interest in

and deepens fans' knowledge about athletes. A participant (Farhan) presented an example of social media influence by saying, "I became aware about Ronaldo via media and then social media provided further information about him." Meanwhile, Goodman, Duke, and Sutherland⁵⁶ stated that major sport events have the power to affect many segments of the population. In relation to this, it is important to mention that most of the Pakistani participants in the current study mentioned that they only heard about football and some famous players during the 2014 FIFA World Cup hosted in Brazil. For example, one of the participants (Abid) stated that «During the World Cup, I came to know about Cristiano Ronaldo as there was hype created in the media because of his name and performance.» Furthermore, the role of video games as part of digital media⁵⁷ was also highlighted by the participants of the study, who thought that video games helped sports fans develop an emotional bond with their favorite athletes⁵⁸. One of the interviewees (Peeter) was very specific about this correlation, saying that "Every fan of sport video games knows Messi because of Messi's picture on FIFA games' box cover page."

Regarding oral communication, two further sub-dimensions were identified, including WOM and rumors/narratives. These findings provide support for previous findings, such as those of Kim and Trail⁵⁹, who acknowledged that WOM is the most effective source of product awareness in the sports domain in many cases. Lovelock and Wirtz⁶⁰ mentioned that WOM communication is important, as people tend to believe more in friends and other family members than in an organization's official communications. A very characteristic link between WOM and trust was highlighted by one participant (Shoaib), who stated that "Word-of-mouth from trusted ones is an important factor [increasing] athlete awareness."

In the same vein, Künzler and Poli¹⁶ highlighted the role of rumors/narratives in enhancing awareness through examples in the African context, in which rumors and stories about certain athletes often contribute to enhance their image among fans and the general populations. For example, one of the participants (Umair) mentioned that "Ronaldo's story about charity for the Gaza people introduced me to him."

Complementarily, impression management was confirmed as an important antecedent of athlete brand when some participants acknowledged how the image presentation of their favorite athlete impressed them. This finding is consistent with previous studies stating it is fast becoming an essential practice among famous athletes⁶¹. Thornton, Audesse, Ryckman, and Burckle⁶² mentioned that impression management has long been used to facilitate social interactions and affect positive outcomes. Similarly, Prapavessis, Grove, and Eklund⁶³ highlighted the importance of impression management, which helps spread awareness about an athlete and build his/her image among fans. Nowadays, athletes can employ different strategies to help them create an image that is targeted towards fans. For example, Real Madrid and French football player Karim Benzema recently acknowledged that some of his contemporaries, including Cristiano Ronaldo and David Beckham,

are being accused of caring too much about their image, so he declared that “I’m not an actor or show-off and my game is my image”⁶⁴. The participants of this study also recognized the efforts exerted by athletes to manage their impressions. A participant (Tiago) perfectly captured this by sharing the following observation: “Top athletes are also focusing on efforts of creating awareness through impression management.”

The dimension of social agents in this study was further developed into four sub-dimensions: parents, family members, friends, and community. These results provide support to the study of Dionísio, Leal, and Moutinho⁶⁵, who suggested that socializing is a learning process that starts in childhood and occurs primarily with the help of one’s parents and family. Dionísio, Leal, Moutinho⁶⁵ reported that the majority of fans start to follow a club in their childhood under the influence of some person who are close to them. In the same view, Papaioannou, Ampatzoglou, Kalogiannis, and Sagovits⁶⁶ described parents as a basic source of influence who shape their children’s interest in sport. A participant (Shoaib) shared the following recollection: “My father was a football player so even in the living of Cricket loving country I choose to play football instead.” On a similar note, Hsieh³⁰ mentioned that family members and friends might have an influence on other family members and friends.

At the same time, a community (i.e., a group of people having common interests) is considered another important socializing agent in the context of sports^{67, 68, 69}. For instance, Carmelo Anthony, an American professional basketball player who currently plays for the New York Knicks of the National Basketball Association (NBA), is an example of someone who has achieved popularity because he represents the specific community of Baltimore, which is suffering from poverty, drugs, and crimes⁷⁰.

The team and sport itself can also be the bases for informing people about certain athletes, and the results of this study allowed the researchers to identify three sub-dimensions related to this: sport interest, team interest, and team geographic location. As noted by Kunkel, Hill, Funk⁴³, the interest in a specific sport is often a reason to follow an athlete, and more than half of the participants of the current study highlighted the role of sports in the context of athlete brand. Complementary, Best⁴² explained that the interest in a certain team leads to an interest in their athletes, which is consistent with the current research findings. For example, participants mentioned the role of the team in selecting their favorite athlete: Steven Gerrard because of Liverpool (Ricardo), Ryan Giggs because of Manchester United (Najaf), and Gary Lineker because of Everton (Oleg). The participants’ responses are also in line with the result of Hay and Joel⁷¹, who suggested that the geographical location of the team could have a positive impact on athlete brand and fans’ loyalty towards the athlete. To this respect, one Portuguese and one Estonian fan acknowledged that one of the reasons for liking their favorite athlete is team location. For example, people who see Brazil as a major football-playing country

often develop a good impression about Brazilian players and start following them. As in the game of Cricket, Pakistan is famous for producing fast bowlers, which make them popular all around the world and good enough to draw applause even from their rivals⁷².

In relation to the components of athlete brand, the on-field attributes can be divided into five sub-dimensions according to the participants' responses: behavior, team, achievements, style of play, and skills. The importance of athlete behavior on the field is consistent with the study of Daley and Wolfson⁷³, who suggested that fans expect their favorite athletes to lead the team upfront. A participant (Bilal) agreed with this finding, mentioning that "Performance is an important thing as my favorite player constantly attack oppositions' goal and this creates panic in the opponent team."

Complementarily, Chadwick and Burton⁵ noted the team(s) that the athlete represented in the past or is currently representing could change athlete ranks. This idea was expressed by one of the participants (Triin) who mentioned, "Cesc Fàbregas was my favorite player until he joined Chelsea Football Club." Certain achievements help in recognizing persons in any field of life and this is also the case in the field of sports. Grant, Heere, Dickson³⁵ explained that football athletes become famous because of their achievements. In line with this view, the participants mentioned their favorite athletes' achievements, such as the golden boot (Saad) and the fact they earned few disciplinary actions during the career (Najaf, Oleg) as important aspects for them.

The sub-dimension of style of play, which has been identified in the current study, suggests a link with prior studies as Morrissey⁷⁴ called Zidane a "magician" because of his style of play. For example, one of the participants (Triin) referred to German and FC Bayern München goalkeeper Manuel Neuer as a "half defender" because of his style of play. In addition, the identification of skills as a sub-dimension of on-field attributes is in line with the study of Theysohn, Hinz, Nosworthy, and Kirchner⁷⁵, who highlighted that some fans intend to watch athletes' skills more than to see the team winning.

Regarding the off-field attributes of athlete brand, five new sub-dimensions have been identified based on the interviews: physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity, and entertainment. These dimensions are consistent with the finding of Cortsen²³, who highlighted that a personal brand is related with life stories, values, charisma, authenticity, and believability. Lee and Kwak⁷⁶ mentioned that the immoral activities of celebrities (e.g., athletes) could harm their popularity. Van Amsterdam, Knoppers, and Jongmans⁷⁷ stated that an athlete's physical attraction is important for fans, and the responses of the participants lend support to this idea. For example, two of the participants referred to physical attraction of their favorite athlete using the word "sexy" (Abid, Nouman). The lifestyle of an athlete is also important for 15 participants as they mentioned athlete lifestyle as a

reason why they like their favorite athlete. In line with this idea, Woodhouse and Williams⁷⁸ noted that fans are really interested in athletes' lifestyles. In fact, two of the participants quoted their favorite player as a "family man" (Ricardo; Umair). In addition, García⁷⁹ mentioned that the charisma or appeal of an athlete (i.e., his/her star quality) is capable of entertaining fans outside the arena, and 14 participants mentioned that personal appeal is important when choosing their favorite athlete. Complementarily, two of the participants (Ricardo and Oleg) noted that they kept the ethnicity of the athlete in their mind when choosing their favorite athlete. To this respect, Shakib and Veliz⁸⁰ mentioned that African-American and other big communities support their own ethnic members, whereas other reported that that British-Asians cheer for athletes and teams that represent their ethnical groups⁸¹. Furthermore, entertainment emerged as a sub-dimension of the off-field attributes of an athlete brand as this aspect is mentioned by 10 of the participants. This is consistent with Künzler and Poli's¹² suggestion that when athletes are popular, people want to know more about them. Overall, studying the off-field attributes of athletes suggested that fans who live abroad are less interested in the personal lives of athletes (i.e., four of 12 Pakistani fans denied any kind of off-field interest in their favorite athletes). To the best of our knowledge, no study has discussed and compared the interests of local and foreign fans. Thus, the current study could be a starting point for studying how the loyalty of home and away fans can be affected by cultures and regions.

Another aspect of the construction of the athlete brand is athlete brand re-construction. As mentioned above in the case of Cesc Fàbregas, the question is whether it would be possible to win loyalties again. One of the participants (Pedro) mentioned, «The «famous slip» of Steven Gerard that cost Liverpool FC Premier League didn't affect my loyalty to Gerrard. I am still a fan of Gerard.»

Just like in foreign fans, the literature about re-construction is also nonexistent. There are many examples all around the world of an athlete destroying his/her brand and having to re-construct it from scratch. Some examples are John «Bone» Jones, Lance Armstrong, and Luis Suárez. The latest example is Muhammad Amir, a Pakistani international cricketer. He was recognized as the most promising fast bowler at the young age of 17. However, he was charged in allegations of match-fixing and was eventually imposed with a five-year ban. On his recent return, he managed to win back the loyalty of many fans with his excellent performance in a short time period such that he is once again a celebrated athlete in his field⁸².

In summary, the current study aimed at providing a basis through which we can gain a better understanding of athletes as brands. In doing so, this study conducted interviews with fans from three different countries, and with different favorite athletes. While all participants in this study had football players as their favorite athletes, one can argue that these findings are applicable to athletes from other popular team sports (e.g., the style of play or ethnicity are important aspects for athletes who play football and those who play baseball, basketball, or other

popular team sports). The findings indicate that media (mass media, social media, major sport events, and video games), oral communication (WOM and rumors/narratives), impression management, social agents (parents, family members, friends, and community) and team or sport (sport interest, team interest, and team geographical location) act as antecedents of athlete brand. In turn, athlete brand components can be divided according to the on-field attributes (behavior, team, achievements, style of play, and skills) and off-field attributes (physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity, and entertainment) of the athletes. Furthermore, a positive perception of the athletes seems to have a positive role in increasing fans' loyalty to an athlete.

Limitations and future research directions

As with any study, there are limitations that should be acknowledged and considered for future research. The first limitation is related with the sample composition. Previous studies suggested that consumers' opinions about brands tend to vary according to the cultural setting^{14, 83}. Thus, even though the current sample includes fans from three different countries, future studies could try to conduct interviews in more countries. In doing so, future studies must collect larger samples to verify whether differences exist in athlete brand creation and its components in different sports or cultural settings. Furthermore, considering fans' loyalty, future studies should also discuss different categories of followers, following, for example, Giulianotti's⁸⁴ categorization of fans into supporters, followers, fans, and flaneurs, or the distinction of fans and fanatics as proposed by Zucal⁸⁵. This kind of study would provide further insights into the context of athlete branding and aid marketers who wish to establish and develop athlete brands for various kinds of customers and stakeholders. Second, the creation of a scale based on the model shown in Figure 2, followed by an empirical examination with a large sample of sport fans can help complement our understanding of athlete brand construction and its components. It would also be interesting to examine each antecedent individually so that one can better examine the importance of each antecedent in different cultures. As Luszczynska, Scholz, and Schwarzer⁸⁶ mentioned, the outcome of multi-country data could vary owing to different cultures, economic situations, religions, and social or political situations. This type of study can provide more strength to the study of athlete brand by nominating common factors among fans around the world (i.e., home and away) regarding the selection of favorite athlete.

Third, while this study focused upon the creation of athlete brand, it is also important to understand the array of consequences of athlete brand. Specifically, the suggested positive link between athlete brand and athlete loyalty⁸⁷ should be discussed in future research in order to create a more complete picture of athlete brand. It would also be interesting to examine other potential consequences. In some cases, athletes themselves establish a lifestyle brand using their names. For instance, Portuguese and Real Madrid footballer Cristiano Ronaldo has his own

clothing and shoe brand called “CR7”⁸⁸. Swedish female golfer Annika Sörenstam established the “Annika-brand” of golf-related products and activities after her retirement²². In light of these life examples, it would be interesting to understand the consequences of athlete brand with a particular focus on fans’ loyalty to the athletes and teams⁸⁹ as well as his/her endorsers.¹⁰ Finally, there is need to test the model not only based on different cultures and countries, but to also for specific athletes as well. For example, are the mechanisms leading to the creation of Cristiano Ronaldo’s brand were same as those for the brands of LeBron James or Rafael Nadal? Chadwick and Burton⁵ explained the common points of interest in developing two football athletes (i.e., Cristiano Ronaldo and David Beckham), whereas Braunstein-Minkove, Zhang, and Trail⁹⁰ established a framework that describes athlete effectiveness as an endorser of non-sporting goods apart from their team and sport. In this sense, additional research could focus on the examination of different branded athletes.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview guide to start the research

This research is part of a project intended to understand how fans became aware and what they think about their favorite players.

I will now ask you some questions about the factors that may trigger your awareness and mental associations to your favorite player(s)

- Do you remember how you became aware of your favorite player?
- What were the role of media, oral communication, social agents, impression management and the sport and team itself in providing you information about your favorite player(s) when you were not a fan yet?
- Do you follow your favorite player on mass media and social media? Why?
- Do you remember any story told by friends about your favorite player that impresses you? If yes, please tell me (in a positive or negative matter).
- Do you believe in the stories about your favorite player without confirming from authentic sources? Do you tell others those stories as well? Do you remember any story?
- If someone tells a bad story about your favorite player do you believe him/her? And what about a positive story?
- What are the social agents that you believe are more important to influence a fan to start following a specific player? (e.g., family members, friends, peers)
- Do you think players need to work on their own in order to create awareness among football fans? If yes do you have an idea how? Or should they wait for teams to get popular?
- Who is your favorite football player?
- Can you tell me how you started to like that specific player?
- Do you see anything common between you and your favorite player?

I will now ask you some questions about your favorite player(s):

- Do you like the team in which your favorite player is currently playing? Is your favorite team the same as the one from your favorite player? If yes, is that why you follow the team?
- Is the on-field performance important for player popularity? Why?
- What are the on-field characteristics of your favorite player?
- Are the off-field activities of player important for player popularity? Why?
- What are the off-field characteristics of your favorite player?
- Is it possible for a player to become popular without having such a high profile career? If so, what aspects make him/her so popular?
- Can players become brands by themselves or they just enjoy the status as a part of the team's brand?

- Do you remember any special performance of your favorite player? Please tell me.

Overall

- What is your favorite team and player inside the country and outside the country where you live? Why?
- Is there any other thing you would like to say in this interview?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR CONTRIBUTION

Appendix 2

Appendix 2. Summary results of the interviews (Participants 1-11).

Participant	Tiago	Ricardo	Pedro	Saad	Abid	Bilal	Sohail	Shoaib	Rehan	Waqas	Najaf
Favorite Player	CR	CR	SG	CR	CR	LM	LM	AI	XH	LM	RG
Antecedents Media		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
					X	X	X		X		
				X	X	X			X		
Oral Communication		X	X		X	X					
		X	X								
Impression management Social Agents											
Team & Sport		X	X								
		X	X	X							

Appendix 2. Summary results of the interviews (Participants 12-21).

	Zemenu									
	Farhan	Nouman	Muzamil	Umair	Aat	Triin	Peeter	Oleg	Aili	
	CR	CR	LM	CR	LM	MN	WH	GLRK	LM	CR
Antecedents Media										
	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	X		X				X			
		X	X			X				
Oral Communication										
	X									
	X	X	X		X			X		
	X	X								
Impression management Social Agents										
		X						X	X	X
		X						X		
Team & Sport										
	X	X	X							
	X									
Team geographical Location										

		Farhan	Nouman	Muzamil	Umair	Aat	Triin	Peeter	Oleg	Aili	Zemenu
Athlete Brand On-field Attributes	Behavior	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Team	X			X	X	X	X		X	X
	Achievements	X	X	X	X						
	Style of Play	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Skills	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Off-field Attributes	Physical	X	X						X		
	Attraction										
	Lifestyle	X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X
	Personal Appeal	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
	Ethnicity							X			
	Entertainment	X	X	X					X	X	X

Note: CR = Cristiano Ronaldo; SG = Steven Gerrard; LM = Lionel Messi; AI = Andrés Iniesta; XH = Xavi Hernández; RG = Ryan Giggs; MN = Manuel Neuer; WH = Will Hughes; GL = Gary Lineker; RK = Ragnar Klavan.

6.3 UNDERSTANDING THE IMPLICATIONS OF ATHLETE BRAND AMONG FANS

**Ali Hasaan, Katri Kerem, Rui Biscaia and
Kwame J.A. Agyemang**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the implications of athlete brand among fans. Using a conceptual framework derived from a literature review as a starting point, a set of interviews was conducted with fans from three different countries in order to develop a better understanding of the role of athlete brand on fans' responses towards an athlete, and the associated teams and sponsors. The findings indicate that fans' responses towards an athlete include media following, creating their own narratives, positive word-of-mouth, and resistance to changing a favourite athlete. In addition, responses to the athlete's team include potential team substitution when the athlete is transferred, support for multiple teams and increased revenue generation. Finally, the sponsors of the athletes may also have benefits among fans including brand recognition, positive image, purchase intentions and ignoring rival sponsors. The implications of these findings for building and managing an athlete's brand are discussed, and directions for future studies are provided.

Keywords: Athlete Brand, Loyalty, Teams, Sponsors, Sports

1. Introduction

The turn of the century brought technological changes that have helped to increase the intensity of what are referred to as winner-takes-all markets, and one of these winners is the star athlete [1]. Melnick and Jackson [2] state that athletes are public heroes and superstars because of their good performance at the international level helping them to achieve higher popularity and star status. That is why athletes are used as endorsers more often than any other celebrity [3]. In line with these views many star athletes, such as David Beckham, Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods, have emerged and become powerful global brands with fans worldwide [4].

A human brand could be explained as any well-known persona in terms of marketing efforts, and celebrities (e.g. athletes) are types of human brands that possess additional associations and features of traditional brands [5]. Being a successful brand is advantageous in the sense that one's brand becomes an intangible asset [6]. This permits such individuals to achieve marketing accomplishments through the positive value attached to their names (i.e. honesty, dedication, brilliance) and represent great commercial potential [7]. For example, although renowned boxer Muhammad Ali retired decades ago, he still represents an example of a successful

brand for fans worldwide. Therefore, the establishment of a brand is becoming a paramount aspect for athletes, as brand management for athletes tends to elicit a long-lasting, emotional attachment with their fans [8]. This emotional attachment is demonstrated by several present-day athlete brands. For example, footballer star Cristiano Ronaldo maintains more Facebook followers than anyone else in the world. Other examples include the economic impact of Cleveland Cavaliers' LeBron James on the city of Cleveland or the admiration of Hakeem Olajuwon of the Houston Rockets among the citizens of Houston [9]. Athletes who achieve the status of brands not only help themselves, but also tend to return the favour to their teams and sport. The cyclist Lance Armstrong, for instance, was of major importance in increasing the popularity of road cycling in the United States [10]. In addition, another direction of athlete brand is athlete effect on its sponsors. Over the past few decades, athlete endorsements have risen enormously and more athletes are being selected as the face of brands [4]. McGhee [3] justified the selection of athletes as brand ambassadors as it enhanced their sales. In this respect, the agreement between Cristiano Ronaldo and Nike helped this sports brand to win the Asian market that was previously dominated by Adidas [11]. To summarize, when an athlete achieves the status of a brand, this brand may be valuable in three different directions: the athlete him or herself (i.e. more fans following and popularity, becoming a media celebrity), the team represented by the athlete (i.e. increases in popularity, gate money and merchandise sales), and athlete sponsors (i.e. increases in sales of products/services and more intentions to purchase in the future).

While previous studies have discussed the implications of athlete brand, there are yet to be qualitative studies that have examined the implications of athlete brand with an understanding of all the possible beneficiaries of athlete brand (athlete, team and sponsor). In light of previous literature, the current study was developed using a set of interviews with fans in order to develop a deeper understanding of the consequences of establishing an athlete brand for him/herself and its stakeholders (i.e. teams and sponsors). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to develop a deeper understanding of the role of establishing an athlete brand and how an athlete brand may impact fan responses toward the athlete, his/her team and associated sponsors. In doing so, this study attempts to provide a framework for helping athletes and brand managers in establishing a recognized brand, and therefore, enhancing the benefits of athlete branding.

2. Literature review

2.1 Athlete brand

Carter [12] explained that a personal brand is related to one's opinion about a particular individual. That is, an athlete brand could be explained as the personality of an individual athlete for the public [13]. Also, Montoya [14] explains that the

process of establishing an athlete brand occurs through fan attachment to their favourite athlete, while Yu [15] mentioned that the link of a fan to a certain athlete depends upon the athletes' successful career and positive images of their personal lives. Furthermore, Grant et al. [16] stated that football athletes become famous due to their on-field performance and off-field activities.

The establishment of a brand is important for athletes seen as star players due to the brand's enduring and profitable relationship with its customers [13]. Hausman and Leonard [17] found that NBA superstars such as Michael Jordan and Shaquille O'Neal have a large impact on TV ratings and game attendance. As a result, teams compete for the best athletes due to both their performance on the field and impact off the field. Kerr and Gladden [18] explained that star athletes have the ability to almost single-handedly develop brand equity for their clubs and enjoy almost cult-like status. Yang and colleagues [4] further stated that although the team's performance depends on the entire team, several fans tend to visit the stadium or watch games on TV because they are attracted by a star athlete. This is one of the reasons why companies often try to sponsor athletes, because it can enhance brand awareness among potential consumers [19].

2.2 Positive implications of athlete brand

Understanding the impact of branded athletes among fans is paramount due to its potential benefits in terms of increased loyalty towards the athlete him/herself [15], the athlete's team [20] and even the athlete's sponsors [3]. Loyalty can be described as an allegiance to a person or cause [19]. Similarly, fan loyalty refers to the level of emotional attachment an individual develops with a particular sport, team or athlete [21]. When focusing on athletes, being loyal to an athlete can be described as an individual's emotional attachment to a certain athlete leading him/her to develop a positive image about that athlete [13]. In this vein, Dwyer [22] noted that a loyal consumer displays intense behaviour and a strong, positive attitude toward a brand. For instance, the Cristiano Ronaldo presentation ceremony in Madrid comprised 80,000 fans in the stadium in addition to millions on TV screens worldwide [23].

Another benefit of athlete brand is related to the team in which the athlete plays. Due to attachment with the athlete, fans often develop an attachment with the athlete's team. That is, when fans are loyal to a particular athlete, they tend to support the associated team [18]. For instance, Real Madrid used David Beckham to earn the loyalty of Asian fans in the Far East and to sell shirts among local and international fans [15]. In addition, Neale and Funk [20] described athlete interest among fans as one of the major factors for increasing game day attendance. Brandes et al. [24] further noted that superstar presence in the team squad is a cause of increases in attendance for a team at both home and away matches. Athletes can also contribute to increasing the number of TV viewers, as several fans tend to

watch matches because of a certain athlete as Kerr and Gladden [18] reported that Japanese television stations agreed to broadcast Spanish League games in Japan after David Beckham’s transfer to Real Madrid. That is, a star athlete adds value to the team via his performance on the field and enhanced the popularity of the team as well.

In addition, in recent years athlete sponsorships have become ever-more common, as sponsors want to capitalize on well-known athlete brands in order to boost their product, brand and/or good that is sold to the public [15]. Dees et al. [21] suggest that there is a link between the fans, their favourite athlete and associated brands. Athletes seen as brands provide several important benefits over unknown sponsors, as they easily win viewers’ attention [25]. Also, Rindova et al. [26] noted that a high level of public attention and positive emotional responses are obtained when some famous person is involved in marketing activities. This means that when athletes endorse a product or service, these branded products or services tend to achieve public recognition and increased sales due to the athletes’ own brand status.

All these studies have contributed to understanding the implications of athletes as brands. Still, there is lack of one comprehensive study focusing on the positive implications of athlete loyalty in a single model. Furthermore, it is important to develop a deeper understanding of how athlete loyalty, team loyalty and sponsor loyalty manifest among sport fans who follow their favourite athletes. Therefore, the current study adopts a conceptual framework based on a literature review as a starting point to develop a deeper understanding of the positive implications of athlete brand for the athlete himself/herself, as well as for his/her teams and sponsors (see Figure 1). The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

RQ1: How does an athlete brand contribute to fans’ responses towards that athlete?

RQ2: How does an athlete brand contribute to fans’ responses towards the athlete’s team and its endorsers/sponsors?

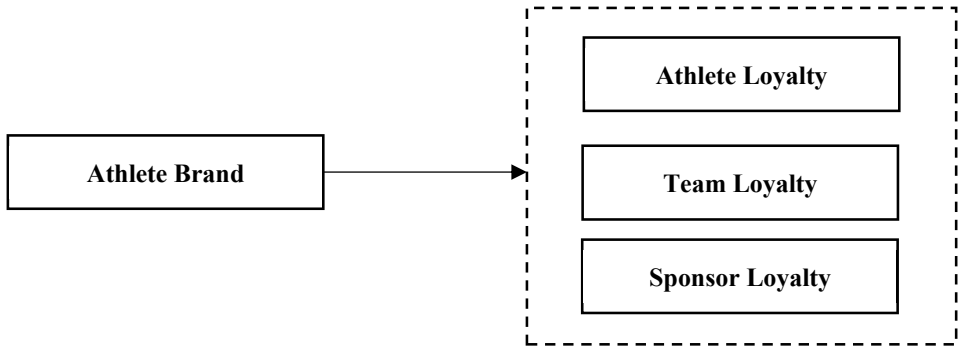


Figure 1. Implications of athlete brand based on the literature review.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sampling of participants

A purposeful, convenience sample was employed to select our study participants. Patton [27] noted that criterion sampling is a type of purposeful sampling, which calls for participants to meet predetermined criteria for selection. For this study, participants had to meet the following criteria: 1) they must consider themselves a sports fan, 2) they have at least one favourite athlete, 3) they have watched at least one game (live or through television) of their favourite athlete during the current season, and 4) they have been following this particular athlete for at least one year on various media channels (i.e. mass media, social media). All interviews were conducted by the lead researcher in settings preferred by the interviewees (e.g. the interviewee's office or a class room at the author's home institution for this specific purpose). The final sample comprised of 21 football fans from three different countries: a Baltic, Northern European nation (Estonia), a south western European nation (Portugal), and an Asian nation (Pakistan). The participants included both males and females and came from a diverse range of professions. The sample included participants that were just fans, as well as amateur and former players, which offered an especially interesting viewpoint to our study (See Table 1).

Table 1. Sample characteristics

	Pseudonyms	Gender	Country	Profession
1	Anton	M	Estonia	Football player
2	Eha	F	Estonia	Lecturer
3	Edvin	M	Estonia	Commercial Director of football club
4	Heino	M	Estonia	Entrepreneur
5	Kadri	F	Estonia	PhD Researcher
6	Kalev	M	Estonia	Bank employee
7	Abdul	M	Pakistan	Mechanical Engineer
8	Tariq	M	Pakistan	Student
9	Adnan	M	Pakistan	Lecturer
10	Ibrahim	M	Pakistan	Student
11	Imran	M	Pakistan	IT-Specialist
12	Farooq	M	Pakistan	Salesman
13	Kashif	M	Pakistan	IT-Specialist
14	Zeeshan	M	Pakistan	Sports Journalist
15	Farid	M	Pakistan	Student
16	Awais	M	Pakistan	Marketing Manager
17	Shahid	M	Pakistan	Student
18	Fazal	M	Pakistan	IT-Specialist

19	Martim	M	Portugal	Scholar and sport journalist
20	Afonso	M	Portugal	Student
21	Dinis	M	Portugal	Student

3.2 Data collection

Data were collected through a set of 21 interviews. All interviews were conducted during a period of two months and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants were asked to sign a voluntary participation form that explained the purpose of the study and their acceptance to participate in the study.

A semi-structured interview guide was created in accordance with the interview guidelines proposed by Patton [27]. Through the interviews, we tried to cover the issues mentioned in the literature related to the implications of athlete brands among fans. Each interview consisted of questions about fan loyalty towards the athlete, loyalty towards the athletes' team, and loyalty towards the athlete's sponsor(s). For example, we asked: (1) Do you feel a connection with your favourite player? (2) Do you like the team in which your player is currently playing? (3) Are you more willing to buy the products of the brands that are sponsoring your favourite player?

3.3 Instrumentation

To achieve in-depth knowledge the researcher serves as an instrument to elicit the data. Probing questions were asked to extract more details [27]. For instance, real-life examples were often used in follow-up questions to gain more clarity about the participants' concepts and beliefs about certain athletes. The interview guide remained the same in its structure and sequence of questions for every interview. The interviews lasted from 15 to 40 minutes depending upon participant interest, and willingness to share his/her thoughts. For the sake of concealing their identities, we assigned pseudonyms to each of our participants (see Table 1).

Back translation: All participants selected in Estonia and Portugal had a solid understanding of the English Language, and therefore, the interviews were conducted in English. In turn, the Urdu language was adopted in Pakistan due to the difficulties in finding sports fans that had good English skills. To translate the questionnaire into Urdu, back translation was used to minimize discrepancies between the original instrument and the translated instrument. The questionnaire was first translated into Urdu by one of the researchers of the current study and then back-translated into English by two different professors who are proficient in both languages (i.e. English and Urdu). The comparison of the two forms made it clear that the two instruments were conceptually equivalent.

3.4 Data analysis

The data analysis was initiated after conducting the first interview as it permits researchers to become more familiar with the participants' responses [28]. The lead researcher listened to the interview and transcribed it verbatim. After converting the interview into written form, the lead author noted the first impressions of the interview. Next, the initial impressions of the interview were discussed with the other researchers. Through this process, the researchers were able to discuss how to improve subsequent interviews after each interview so that the research team could gain a better understanding and response from the participants.

There were two levels of coding adopted for the current study (i.e. the open coding level and the axial level). For the initial analysis, we employed open coding (i.e. "Breaking data apart and delineating concepts to stand for blocks of raw data"; [28, p.195]. Interview responses were read until data were completely understood. We discussed preliminary themes originating from the first read of the data, and through this process we were able to select passages to determine emergent patterns. Once initial themes were recognized, we established it into more defined, concrete themes or in some cases, combined themes if they were similar and could not stand alone. Corbin and Strauss [28] defined this process as axial coding – the process of combining or relating the initial themes to one another. Axial coding helped to elaborate the result of this study from the initial themes.

The trustworthiness of the data analysis was assured through Patton's [27] guidelines for achieving trustworthiness in the study through credibility and dependability/conformability. For the purpose of credibility and dependability, researchers with competence in the area of inquiry were part of the study. Furthermore, we did our best to provide all sorts of details about the research process to our participants. Peer-debriefing sessions were held to gain an outside perspective on the themes emerging from the data. We crosschecked that the participants' voices were being accurately portrayed through comparing written and recorded interviews by another researcher of the study. For the purpose of achieving conformability, during the interviews, the interviewer remained unbiased and never commented about their own opinion about certain matters or athletes.

4 Findings

The results of the interviews conducted with fans are presented in three parts. The first part of the interviews covered aspects related to fan loyalty towards the athletes. The second part focused on fan loyalty towards the athlete's team, while the third part is related to fan loyalty towards the athlete's sponsor(s). Overall, the findings are in line with previous studies and allow a deeper understanding of the model proposed in Figure 1. The results of the interviews are presented below and summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants' discussion about the implications of athlete brand

Antecedent	Participants' responses
Athlete Loyalty	
Media following	"I have my mobile full of pictures of Cristiano Ronaldo, and I saved pictures from him wherever these pictures are posted: on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Newspaper" [Farid]
Own narratives	"I think Ronaldo has converted to Islam, but he did not declare it publically" [Abdul]
Positive WOM	"I usually mention to my friends that I follow Iniesta because of his example of humbleness, even knowing he wants to succeed" [Imran]
Creation of links	"I am a hard worker like Ronaldo though I have less success" [Fazal]
Resistance to change	
Team Loyalty	
Team substitution	"I was a Barcelona fan, but after Ronaldo's transfer I started to follow Real Madrid" [Anton/ Martim/ Abdul]
Support to multiple teams	"If Gerrard would move to Inter Milan I would start supporting them as well, although Liverpool would also be my favourite team" [Dinis]
Revenue generation	"I have a Barcelona scarf already, and I used to watch their matches on TV. Still, I would like to visit Barcelona to watch a live match in the stadium" [Kadri]
Sponsor Loyalty	
Brand recognition	"I remember Cristiano Ronaldo was the face of a Bank in Portugal. Although the bank almost closed, I still remember the name because of Ronaldo" [Afonso]
Positive image	"When my favourite athlete appears in a TV commercial, I have faith that he has tested that product himself" [Awais]
Purchase intentions	"If my favourite player is involved in marketing strategy from a brand, I would love to buy that product at least once" [Heino/ Afonso/ Tariql]
Ignoring rival sponsors	"Nobody in Portugal bought a Pepsi when the brand campaigned against Cristiano Ronaldo" [Martim].

4.1 Athlete loyalty

Table 2 shows the participants' responses about their link with the favourite athlete highlighting five manifestations of athlete loyalty: media following, own narratives, positive word-of-mouth (WOM), creation of links and resistance to change.

Media Following: Athlete loyalty seems to lead fans to know more about their favourite athlete, and as a result, fans tend to start following the athlete on social media platforms. In the current study, all 21 participants acknowledged they follow their favourite athlete. Also, once they recognize a certain athlete as their favourite, they start to follow him through different media platforms in order to know more and more. For example, one of the participants mentioned that:

I started to follow him when he was playing for Manchester United. After that, he kept working hard in Real Madrid. Last year he won the golden boot again. He has been among the top contenders for 'Ballon d'or' for many years and these reasons were my basis for following him through the media [Abdul].

Following an athlete through the media may also enhance a fan's perception of that athlete, given that social media brings fans and athlete closer. In this respect, two participants noted that:

Fans follow their favourite athlete on mass media and social media because they want to keep up to date about the player's activities. The other thing is they feel a connection with their favourite player when they interact through social media and mass media. It creates a psycho-social connection and with awareness they can relate daily life things with their favourite player, for example, when they go out to eat in some hotel they prefer the hotel where their favourite athlete dines, they know this hotel is their favourite player's favourite hotel as well [Zeeshan].

I read a lot about Messi. In future, I want to read books about Messi. I don't have a twitter account but I follow him on Facebook. I follow him on Facebook because it is easy to access [Anton]

Own narratives: The second aspect related to athlete loyalty and highlighted through the interviews is the fan's own narratives around the favourite athlete. Of the total sample, 20 participants in this study believe whatever good aspect related to their favourite athlete regardless of whether it might be the truth or a lie. Fans listened to unconfirmed pieces of information, started to believe good things from that and created new narratives and stories according to their thoughts and their culture, while they also resist the idea of accepting bad things related to their athlete. For example, one of the participants mentioned that:

Messi is financing many children for the treatment of the same disease that Messi had when he was a child [Kashif].

Creating narratives is not only about good things or good stories. It is a vast field of trust and love that fans create according to their thoughts, their love and their passion for their favourite athlete. That is the utopic world of their favourite athlete where they start to believe everything good related to their favourite athlete, no matter whether they heard that story through a reliable source or it is just a rumour.

In this respect, we present some stories below which our participants believe, but that are not in fact true:

He is basically Muslim, though he does not declare it publically, and he is not openly involved in charitable works but behind the scenes he is involved in many charity works [Abdul talking about Cristiano Ronaldo].

When it happened that Maradona hit the goal post three times, he requested the officials measure the length of the goal and it turned out that the goal was shorter than usual and the officials awarded three goals to his team. Maradona later commented, how is it possible that Maradona kicked the ball and it did not go into the goal? [Farooq talking about a rumour that is more often attributed to Pelé, the former Brazilian football player]

Furthermore, narratives seem to lead the fans to a world where turning negative news into positive stories is possible according. For example, two of the participants mentioned that:

I never believed in bad things related to Messi. As there was one story that he pushed a child who wanted Messi's autograph, I searched on the internet and came to know that later he apologized to that child and took pictures with him. So, instead of a bad feeling, I felt positive about Messi because he accepted his mistake, apologized and tried to pay for his mistake [Adnan].

Even fans of Luis Suarez would find some excuse for his biting habit, because it is impossible for fans to stop following their favourite players and they have excuses for everything their favourite player has done [Kashif].

Positive word-of-mouth (WOM): Fans not only appreciate their favourite athlete, but they also try to impose their choices upon others and engage in a campaign to advertise their favourite athlete. In the current study, 19 participants mentioned their habit of spreading positive things about their favourite athletes in daily communications with friends and in conversations about sport. They suggested their favourite athlete to friends who are not attached to an athlete and mentioned examples about their favourite athlete in daily life so introducing that athlete even to those who do not have an interest in that sport or athlete yet. For example, two participants mentioned that:

I only speak about Ronaldo with my friends and all the stories I know about Ronaldo. When I tell others these stories I improvise a little bit and make them bigger than they actually are [Afonso].

In my own case I push a few of my office friends towards Messi loyalty, before that they were not interested in football. I quote examples about Messi wherever I can during my normal chats with friends [Kashif].

Creation of Links: Fans seem to relate everything to their favourite athlete and always try to create some kind of link between them and the athlete. They often start to live in a world that is built around their favourite athlete. They feel proud of that mutual property, and proudly tell others their link with the favourite athlete. In the current study, a total of 18 participants acknowledged that in order to keep close to the favourite athlete, they created some kind of link and tried to make a special connection with the athlete. For example, some participants mentioned that:

I am a hard worker like Ronaldo, but with less consistency and hunger for success [Fazal].

To some extent you can say, Passion. We both have the same interest. Football is the bonding between us [Abdul].

Ronaldo and I share attacking mind thinking [Tariq].

Resistance to change: The expression “once a fan, always a fan” seems to be appropriate to describe our participants. A total of 20 participants mentioned that once a favourite athlete is chosen, it is impossible to change unless the athlete retires or does something that is directly against one’s beliefs. Otherwise, the fan always resists the idea to change their favourite athlete. As noted by some of the participants:

There is a possibility if you go against the values of fans you might lose loyalty. If I am a Luis Suárez fan how can I defend him in public when his action is against my cultural values [Martim].

Is it possible, but there are many levels of favourites. For example, my favourite player is Messi. It is impossible that I would stop liking him. But I have a few second best players. For example, Ronaldo and Marco Reus. These favourites could change if their performance dipped or bad off-field activities. If someone’s top favourite is Suárez even his fans won’t stop following him because of his biting habit though he might lose his fans because of changing clubs [Kashif].

4.2 Team loyalty

A deeper understanding of aspects related to fan loyalty towards the team of their favourite athlete is presented through Table 3. The participants’ responses indicate that team loyalty manifests through aspects such as team substitution, support for multiple teams and revenue generation.

Table 3. Participant's response highlighting the athlete and team relationship

Participant	Favourite player	Favourite Team	Opinion about the player and the team
Anton	Lionel Messi	Barcelona (Spain)	Liked Barcelona before Messi, and will follow both Barcelona and Messi in the new team if he leaves.
Eha	Manuel Neuer	Bayern Munich (Germany)	Likes both the player and the team. If Neuer moves to a team that she does not like, she will change her favourite player but in any case will follow Bayern.
Edvin	Will Hughes	Derby County (England)	Liked Derby County before, and will follow both Hughes and Derby County if Hughes leaves.
Heino	Gary Lineker	Everton (England)	Liked Everton before Lineker because of the team, and kept following both after his transfer.
Kadri	Lionel Messi	Atletico Madrid (Spain)	Likes Barcelona because of Messi, and will follow only Messi in case he changes team in the future.
Kalev	Cristiano Ronaldo	Real Madrid (Spain)	Likes both the player and the team, and will follow both Real Madrid and Ronaldo if Ronaldo leaves.
Abdul	Cristiano Ronaldo	Real Madrid (Spain)	Likes Real Madrid because of Ronaldo, and will follow only Ronaldo if he leaves.
Tariq	Cristiano Ronaldo	Real Madrid (Spain)	Likes Real Madrid because of Ronaldo, and will follow only Ronaldo if he leaves.
Adnan	Lionel Messi	Barcelona (Spain)	Likes Barcelona because of Messi, and will follow only Messi if he leaves.
Ibrahim	Lionel Messi	Barcelona (Spain)	Likes Barcelona because of Messi, and will follow only Messi if he leaves.
Imran	Andrés Iniesta	Barcelona (Spain)	Likes Barcelona because of Iniesta, and will follow both Iniesta and Barcelona if Iniesta leaves.
Farooq	Lionel Messi	Barcelona (Spain)	Likes both the player and the team, and will follow both Barcelona and Messi if he leaves.
Kashif	Lionel Messi	Barcelona (Spain)	Likes Barcelona because of Messi, and will follow both Barcelona and Messi if he leaves.

Zeeshan	Ryan Giggs	Manchester United (England)	Liked Manchester United before Giggs, and if Giggs had left Manchester United he would have followed both Manchester United and Giggs.
Farid	Cristiano Ronaldo	Real Madrid (Spain)	Likes Real Madrid because of Ronaldo, and will follow only Ronaldo if he leaves.
Awais	Cristiano Ronaldo	Real Madrid (Spain)	Likes Real Madrid because of Ronaldo, and will follow only Ronaldo if he leaves.
Shahid	Lionel Messi	Barcelona (Spain)	Likes Barcelona because of Messi, and will follow only Messi if he leaves.
Fazal	Cristiano Ronaldo	Manchester United (England)	Likes Real Madrid because of Ronaldo, and was a former supporter of Manchester United. Now, he follows Ronaldo, Real Madrid and Manchester United.
Martim	Cristiano Ronaldo	Real Madrid (Spain)	Likes Real Madrid because of Ronaldo, and will follow only Ronaldo if he leaves.
Afonso	Cristiano Ronaldo	Sporting Lisbon (Portugal)	Likes Ronaldo because of Sporting Lisbon, and has been following Ronaldo and his teams while still being a fan of Sporting Lisbon as well.
Dinis	Steven Gerard	Liverpool (England)	Liked Liverpool before Gerard, and will follow both Liverpool and Gerrard if he leaves.

Team Substitution: It was always a thought that teams come first and players come and go. Nevertheless, the results of the current study highlight that most participants started to like a certain team because of their favourite athlete. The participants acknowledged the role of the athlete as being superior to the team, and they accepted that they would change their loyalty to another team because of a transfer of their favourite athlete. In some cases, they did not even like that specific team before their athlete arrived. Furthermore, some participants doubt that they would stick to their current team if their favourite athlete transferred to another team. A few examples of this idea are presented below:

I liked Barcelona in the Spanish League. But now, because of Ronaldo, I started to like Real Madrid while they gradually raise their aggressiveness and slandered in the game as well [Abdul].

My favourite team is Real Madrid because of Cristiano Ronaldo and Mourinho [Martim].

If Steven Gerard moves to Inter, of course I will follow him there [Dinis].

Support for multiple teams: Athletes help the teams they represent to increase the number of fans, as fans tend to show commitment to an athlete's team as well. In the current study, a total of 15 participants noted that if they were unable to transfer their allegiance to another team with an athlete's transfer, they would start to follow them as second favourite team. Fans tend to have a favourite player in every league and they often watch and support multiple teams because of those athletes (see Table 3 for team-athlete relations). For example, two participants noted that:

In Portugal, I like Sporting, but in Spain my favourite team is Real Madrid because of Ronaldo [Afonso].

Fans who are more attached to teams always stay loyal to their favourite team, and when player's change team instead of shifting their loyalty towards the new team they stay loyal to their favourite team. However, they started to remain in touch with the players' new team. For instance, when Cristiano Ronaldo moved to Real Madrid, fans of Ronaldo started to follow Real Madrid. But, on other hand, neither Ronaldo nor his fans dismissed Manchester United. Both have a soft corner for United because they know it was Manchester United that was the former home of Ronaldo. But off course, the past is past so they become loyal to Real Madrid. Loyal fans of Manchester United remained die-hard fans of Manchester United, but in same time they started to get regular updates about Real Madrid and started to support Real Madrid in La Liga [Imran].

Revenue Generation: While helping the team to increase its fan base and success on the field, important athletes also contribute to improving the team's financial performance. In the current study, a total of 20 participants mentioned actions thought to indirectly favour the economics of the athlete's team including purchasing the athlete's jersey or asking the cable operator to tune in TV channels that broadcast live matches of the team. Below, we present the ideas of two participants that highlighted the influence of an athlete on the team's economic conditions through revenue generation:

That is the case in Asia with Cristiano Ronaldo when he moved to Real Madrid. Cristiano Ronaldo sold 1.5 million Real Madrid shirts alone with his name printed. Each shirt cost almost €70. So, his transfer paid through shirt sale. And there are indirect benefits as well. For example, many pay-per view TV programs related with Real Madrid were sold because of Cristiano Ronaldo. All Bayern Munich players sold 1 million shirts in total, and Cristiano Ronaldo sold 1.5 million alone. The team success because of his play is just a bonus for Real Madrid [Martim].

People start to buy more season tickets just because a good player was coming. I think that when Real Madrid bought Ronaldo's pass, it made more people follow the team on every media and they immediately sold thousands of shirts of Ronaldo around the world [Kalev].

4.3 Sponsor loyalty

The participants' responses about the athlete's sponsors indicate that these sponsors can also benefit through brand recognition, positive image, and increased intentions among the fans to purchase products or services and to ignore rival sponsors.

Brand recognition: All the participants in this study correctly recognized the brands sponsoring his/her favourite athletes, which is a paramount aspect for the brands engaged with professional athletes. Even when the fans do not intend to buy the products of the sponsors, they still recognize the brand sponsoring their favourite athlete. As noted by one of the participants:

Currently, Manuel Neuer is in the Coca Cola Zero or Light commercial [Eha].

Ronaldo was the face of a bank, although the bank has closed but I still remember that bank [Afonso].

Positive image: When a fan's favourite athlete is advertising some sort of brand, it creates a positive image in the minds of the fans and they develop a positive image about that brand. A total of 20 participants in the current study reported that when their favourite athlete is involved in an advertisement, they tend to have positive feelings about the endorser. Furthermore, when their favourite athlete is the 'face of the brand', they tend to have positive feelings about the brand and consider this brand as being better than rival brands.

There are many people I know who have a positive idea about the brands endorsing their favourite athletes and they love to buy everything related with their favourite player [Afonso].

If Ronaldo wears Nike, it means Nike is better than Adidas and other sporting brands automatically [Abdul].

Intention to purchase: During the interviews, eight participants claimed that they have already bought something related to their favourite athlete. It is also important to note the positive element discovered among the participants that they develop favourable intentions towards the sponsors of their favourite athlete, as 16 participants showed the intention to purchase athlete related items. The participant's responses suggest that when their favourite athlete advertises some product they will consider the product in future purchases. As noted by two of the participants in this study:

I myself bought 'clear' shampoo when Ronaldo was in the commercial for that product [Tariq].

For example, if a player started to wear Puma instead of Nike, in my opinion, his fans will notice that change and they will start to buy Puma [Edvin].

I already bought a shirt by Nike, the sponsor of my favourite player, Cristiano Ronaldo, and I hope to buy Nike shoes as well [Farid].

Ignoring rival sponsors: Findings also suggest that fans have such a strong allegiance to their favourite athlete that they deny everything that occurs against their favourite athlete. This allegiance is not only tied to the favourite athlete, but everything related with the athlete (i.e., sponsors, teams). In line with this view, a total of 11 of our participants acknowledged that they try their best to avoid rival teams and brands associated with other players. A good example is the case of PEPSI's advertisement when the company launched a campaign against Cristiano Ronaldo before a game between Sweden and Portugal. In this respect, one of the participants said that:

For instance, do you remember the PEPSI advertisement that trashed Cristiano Ronaldo as some Swedish guy put Swedish flag knocking out Cristiano Ronaldo. They had to pay five hundred thousand euros to apologize. No one in Portugal bought PEPSI because of that. PEPSI had a huge problem in Portugal as no one wanted to buy PEPSI so they had to pay Ronaldo and try to show everything is fine now in order to get things back again [Martim].

5. Discussion

The current study focused on the implications of athlete brands in terms of fan perceptions about the athlete him/herself, the teams represented by the athlete, and his/her sponsors. The main goal was to gather the fans' opinions in order to provide a deeper understanding of the positive implications the athlete brand has for the actual athlete, his/her team and associated sponsors. This study contributes to the literature by (1) combining different ideas from past studies into a single model about the consequences of the athlete brand, and (2) providing a more comprehensive framework to aid scholars and practitioners on the dimensions they should work on to promote the benefits of athlete branding. The findings from this study are summarized in Figure 2 allowing a better understanding of the benefits of athlete brands.

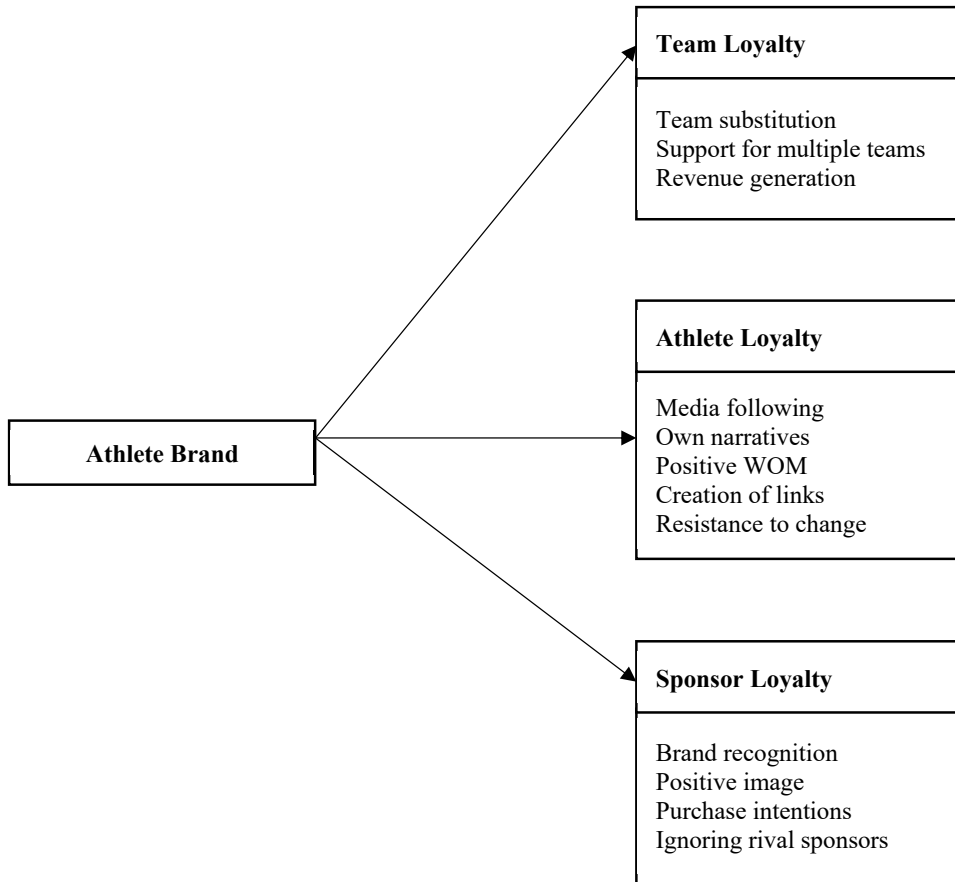


Figure 2. Final framework of the positive implications of athlete brand after participant interviews

The dimension of athlete loyalty was further categorized through five sub-dimensions: media following, own narratives, positive WOM, creation of links, and resistance to change. In regard to the first sub-dimension, this means fans tend to follow their favourite athletes on different media channels. This is in line with Frederick et al. [29], who mention that loyal fans follow their favourite athlete on different media channels to increase interpersonal closeness based on the interaction with their favourite athlete. The second sub-dimension indicates that fans tend to create their own narratives based upon their experiences and true or false stories or rumours they hear about the favourite athlete. Dubois et al. [30] stated that people start believing in positive rumours and stories and neglect bad things about their favourite brand when they have certainty in their beliefs about their favourite brand, while Grant et al. [16] refer to this process as fans' creating their own narratives. We found that fans not only create narratives about their favourite athletes, but also transfer true or false stories to others (potential fans)

through positive WOM. This is consistent with the conclusions from Bush et al. [31] mentioning that young women spread positive WOM regarding their favourite athlete. Furthermore, the findings suggest that fans create a link with the athlete that is based upon some common ground and they connect themselves with their favourite athlete in a positive manner through that link. Fink et al. [32] explained that highly identified fans see the team as a reflection of themselves, and the same seems to be the case here about individual athletes. The last sub-dimension of athlete loyalty is resistance to change the favourite athlete. This aspect highlights that loyal fans tend to resist the idea of changing their favourite athlete even when the athlete is not in good shape [20].

The role of the athlete brand on team loyalty allowed us to identify three sub-dimensions: team substitution, support for multiple teams and revenue generation. This means that when a fan likes an athlete, he/she tends to follow the team in which the athlete plays. In some cases, the fans can change their favourite team due to the athlete's presence in a certain team, and this situation leads to supporting multiple teams. For example, when a fan's favourite athlete moves to another team, the fan may start to have more than one favourite team (i.e., fans start to follow both the former and the new team of favourite athlete) and this often becomes a source of revenue generation for those teams through merchandise sales, TV viewership and stadium visits. In regard to the first sub-dimension, the idea of team substitution is in line with Yu [15], who mentions that athletes often have the power to win the loyalty of fans for the team he/she represents. For instance, David Beckham's transfer to Real Madrid caused a substantial increase in the total number of Asian fans for Real Madrid [33]. On the other hand, the concept of support for multiple teams in this study emerged because fans tend to follow different teams associated with the athlete, which is in line with McDonald et al. [34], who indicate that fans do not stick to a single team. Instead, they follow multiple teams even in the same sport as mentioned by some of our participants. Fans' responses also indicate the role of athlete brand on revenue generation for the team. In this respect, Vincent et al. [33] noted that David Beckham's transfer to Los Angeles Galaxy allowed an increase in the benefits for the team (i.e. increased gate money, sponsorship deals, TV rights, as well as improved performance on the field). Also, Yang and Shi [5] state that star athletes are often profitable, as their fans watch their games, wear their jerseys, follow their news, and purchase the products they have endorsed. Based on this study's findings, large expenditures on top athletes seems to be justified for the club managers (e.g. Manchester City, PSG or Real Madrid). On one hand, the athletes help to increase gate revenue for the teams they represent. On the other hand, they contribute to increased loyalty towards the team.

The third positive implications regarding athlete brand concerns fan loyalty towards the sponsors that are associated with the athlete. These positive implications are related to sponsor brand recognition, increased image of the sponsor, purchase

intentions and ignoring rival sponsors. The results indicate that fans commonly recognize the brands associated with their favourite athlete, which is consistent with the idea that when an athlete endorses some brand, the ability of fans to recognize the brand effectively increases [25]. In addition, fans tend to develop a positive image about the brand due to its association with the favourite athlete. This is a very important aspect given that fans' favourable opinions about sponsors are often important to enhance their willingness to engage in purchase behaviours towards the sponsor products [19]. In fact, positive purchase intentions towards the athlete's sponsors was another aspect highlighted by the participants of this study. Support for this finding is also provided by Charbonneau et al. [25], as the authors noted the power of celebrity athletes to influence the purchase intentions of fans. Lastly, the findings of this study highlight that fans even tend to avoid brands associated with rival teams or athletes. This is of paramount importance and suggests that the sponsoring brands obtain benefits through an increase in fan willingness to purchase its products or services, as well as the elimination of rival brands from the fans evoked set.

The current study highlights the importance of achieving 'brand status' for athletes. Fan responses suggest when an athlete successfully becomes a brand, this situation tends to generate benefits for the athlete him/herself. The creation of a brand is important to ensure that an athlete won't lose the support of the fans even in difficult moments (e.g. bad performance or immoral personal activity). In some cases, this scenario even helps an athlete to become a celebrity leading him/her to emerge as a 'real life hero'. For instance, Didier Drogba, a famous footballer used his status to play an influential role in bringing peace to the Ivory Coast during the civil war [35]. In addition, athletes that have established themselves as a brand tend to have a beneficial role on their teams, as they help to increase team supporters and to persuade fans to spend more money related to game day attendance and other team-related services. Furthermore, branded athletes also tend to provide an important contribution for their sponsors, as fans tend to respond positively to the brands sponsoring their favourite athletes. In summary, the current study aimed to provide a better understanding of the implications of athlete brand according to fan perceptions. For that purpose, we conducted interviews with fans in three different countries to obtain a variety of responses and allowing for a better understanding of the concept. We found that athlete brands have the potential to have a positive impact on fan loyalty towards the athlete him/herself (through media, own narratives, positive WOM, creation of links and resistance to change), the team(s) where the athlete plays (through team substitution, support for multiple teams and revenue generation) and the sponsors associated with the athlete (through brand recognition, positive image, purchase intention and ignoring rival brands).

6. Limitations and future directions

The current study is intended to represent a springboard for future studies, and therefore, limitations and future research suggestions are now provided. First, while the current study includes a sample of fans from three different countries, other resources involving sample collection and selection could bring more detailed results. That is, future research should collect larger volumes of data using fans from different cultural backgrounds, as previous studies suggest that consumer opinions about brands are culturally sensitive [19]. Furthermore, even though qualitative data provides an in-depth understanding of this topic, future studies could employ quantitative methods in order to provide further support for these findings with a larger sample of sports fans.

A second limitation and research opportunity may be related to case studies. That is, while this study was not designed for a specific athlete, it is also important to conduct studies based upon individual athletes commonly recognized as strong brands with global impact (e.g. Cristiano Ronaldo or Messi – football; LeBron James – basketball; Floyd Mayweather or Manny Pacquiao – boxing; Roger Federer – Tennis). Further, multi-sport fans in a single study (i.e. fans of cricket players, fans of football players), can offer a better understanding of such sports. Furthermore, more diversity could be achieved via data collection for specific female athletes (e.g. Maria Sharapova or Serena Williams – Tennis). These types of studies could provide more strength to the study of athlete brand by identifying common factors in fans around the world regarding the selection of a favourite athlete.

Moreover, a stronger focus on aspects such as ‘second favourite athlete’ or ‘like multiple teams’ would represent an important contribution to both the sport management literature and practitioners working directly with star athletes. This is because the current study illustrated that most fans have a tendency to follow more than one team. Also, the current study suggests that fans not only have a second favourite team but a second favourite athlete in some cases. In this sense, it would be interesting to conduct a study about second best players of the game (e.g. football athletes apart from Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi).

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SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Käesolev doktoritöö põhineb kolmel teadusartiklil, mis on avaldatud akadeemilistes ajakirjades 2016. aastal.

Sportlaste imago ja fännide lojaalsust sportlaste suhtes on käsitletud ka varasemates teadusuuringutes kuid siiani on teadlased keskendunud rohkem sportlastele kui brändide reklaamnägudele ja kõneisikutele. Lojaalsust on uuritud ka seoses sportlaste poolt reklaamitud brändide väärtuse tekkimisega ning samuti on vaadeldud seda, kuidas sportlase maine mõjutab meeskonna mainet. Spordifänni huvi sportlase suhtes on senistes uuringutes olnud eelkõige sisendiks sellele, kuidas kujuneb fänni huvi ja lojaalsus meeskonna või tiimi suhtes.

Viimastel aastakümnetel on hakatud sportlasi aina enam rakendama kommertsbrändide reklaamnägudena ja seega on uuringutes vaadeldud ka seda, mida toob kaasa ühe või teise sportlase turunduseesmärkidel kasutamine brändi jaoks. Samuti on teadlaste tähelepanu pälvinud asjaolu, et varem ainult kohalikul tasemel huvi pakkunud spordialade ja sportlaste populaarsus on laienenud üle riigipiiride. Siiski võib öelda, et varasemad uuringud on keskendunud sportase brändi kujunemise piiratud aspektidele ja puuduvad uuringud, mis vaatleksid sportlase kui brändi kujunemise kõiki aspekte, sealhulgas brändi kujunemiseks vajalikke eeldusi ja sportlasbrändi olemasolust tulenevaid mõjusid kõigile asjaga seotud osapooltele (sportlane ise; meeskonnad, mida ta esindab; sportlasega seotud brandid) nii kohalikel kui ka rahvusvahelistel turgudel.

Niisiis on käesoleva doktoritöö laiemaks eesmärgiks luua **kõiki sportlasbrändi kujunemise aspekte hõlmav mudel**, milles sisalduksid nii vajalikud eeltingimused ja –tegurid kui ka järelmõjud (ingl k. *antecedents and consequences*). Doktoritöö teaduslik panus seisneb laiendatud mudeli loomises ja töö praktilise väärtusena võib välja tuua, et sportlasbrändi kujunemise alased teadmised võimaldavad osapooltel paremini korraldada tegevusi, mis toetavad brändi kujunemist. Mudeli abil on võimalik mõista, millised tegevused suurendavad fännide seotust sportlastega ja mil moel see toob kasu nii sponsoritele kui ka meeskondadele.

Töö eesmärgi saavutamiseks ja uurimisküsimuste lahendamiseks kasutas autor nii teoreetilisi kui ka empiirilisi **meetodeid**. Teoreetilises uurimuses oli autori eesmärgiks luua sportlase brändi mudel lähtuvalt akadeemilisest teaduskirjandusest. Empiirilises osas viidi läbi kvalitatiivuuring 21 spordifänni seas, et täpsustada mudeli komponente ja tuvastada nende alamkategoriaid.

Käesoleva töö ülevaateartikkel ja esimene avaldatud artikkel keskenduvad teoreetilise mudeli loomisele. Selleks otstarbeks teostas autor põhjaliku ja süstemaatilise akadeemilise kirjanduse uuringu, mis hõlmas kõiki sportlasbrändi kujunemisega seotud alamteemasid. Analüüsitud teadusartiklid ja muud

publikatsioonid pärinesid sporditurunduse ja spordi juhtimise valdkonnast ning kaetud said järgmised alamteemad: bränding ja brändiväärtus; kuulsused, nende kujunemine ja kasutamine turunduses; lojaalsus ja selle kujunemine; sporditurundus; sportlane kui bränd. Teoreetilise analüüsi esimeses faasis töötas autor läbi enam kui 400 temaatilist ingliskeelset eelretsenseeritud artiklit, konverentsiartiklit ja raamatupeatükki. Teises faasis jäid sõelale 168 kõige asjakohasemat ja kvaliteetsemat artiklit, mille põhjalik analüüs oli aluseks mudeli loomisele. Autor ei seadnud piiranguid artiklite vanusele, esimene temaatiline teadustöö pärines aastast 1963 ja viimased artiklid olid ilmunud aastal 2015.

Käesoleva doktoritöö **esimeseks uurimisküsimuseks** oli kuidas kujuneb sportlasbränd ja kuidas saab sportlane brändi kujunemist suunata. Mudeli ja läbi viidud uuringu põhjal võib väita, et sarnaselt tootebrändi kujunemisele on ka sportlasbrändi kujunemise aluseks sihtrühma teadlikkus sportlasest. Teadlikkuse tekkimist mõjutavateks teguriteks on uuringu tulemusel meedia (mis omakorda jaotub alamkategoriatesse, milleks on massimeedia, sotsiaalmeedia, suured rahvusvahelised spordivõistlused ja sporditeemalised videomängud), suusõnaline kommunikatsioon (inimestevaheline suhtlus, kuulujutud, lood), muljete juhtimine (ingl k *impression management*) ja sotsialiseerumise agendid (vanemad, perekonnaliikmed, sõbrad, kogukond) ja spordivaldkond/tiim (huvi spordiala vastu, huvi meeskonna vastu, geograafiline päritolu).

Kui spordifänn saab sportlasest teadlikuks ja sportlane hakkab talle aja jooksul rohkem meeldima, pöörab fänn oma lemmikule senisest enam tähelepanu. Nüüd muutuvad oluliseks sportlase kui brändi atribuudid, mille abil kujuneb välja side fänni ja tema lemmiksportlase vahel. Sportlasbrändi atribuudid on uuringu põhjal jagatud kahte kategooriasse: spordiga seotud (ingl k *on-field attributes*) ja spordivälised (ingl k *off field attributes*) tegurid. Spordiga seotud tegurite hulka kuuluvad sportlase käitumine võistlussituatsioonis, meeskonnakuuluvus, sportlikud saavutused, sportlik stiil ja oskused ning spordiväliste tegurite hulka kuuluvad sportlase füüsiline atraktiivsus, elustiil, isiklik karisma, rahvus ja meelelahutusväärtus. Spordifännid valivad oma lemmikuid nende atribuutide kombinatsioonidele tuginedes. Kui teadlikkuse tekkimisele järgneb põhjalikum sportlase tundmaõppimine ja positiivse arvamuse kujundamine, on järgmiseks sportlase ja fänni suhte kujunemise etapiks fänni lojaalsus sportlase suhtes. Fännide lojaalsus on kasulik ka nendele meeskondadele mida sportlane esindab, sest reeglina kandub fänni imetus sportlase suhtes üle meeskonnale kui tervikule. Samuti lõikavad spordifänni suhtest sportlasega kasu ka sponsorid, kes antud sportlast oma reklaamides kasutavad või muul viisil sportlast toetavad, sest fänni lojaalsus ja positiivsed tunded kanduvad üle sportlasega seotud brändidele ja see omakorda on aluseks ostukavatsuse tekkimisele.

Teine uurimisküsimus tegeles sellega, et mõista paremini kuidas meedia, suusõnaline kommunikatsioon, muljete juhtimine (ingl k *impression management*), sotsialiseerumise agendid, meeskonnakuuluvus ja spordiala aitavad kaasa fännide

teadlikkuse tekkele ja positiivsete tunnete kujunemisele sportlase suhtes. Uuringu tulemusena kategoriseeriti meedia mõjurid nelja alamkategoriasse: massimeedia, sotsiaalmeedia, suured rahvusvahelised spordivõistlused ja sporditeemalised videomängud. Suuri rahvusvahelisi spordivõistluseid (näiteks Olümpiamängud, Jalgpalli Maailmameistrivõistlused) käsitletakse meedia alamkategoriana seetõttu, et nende võistluste korraldajate üheks eesmärgiks on luua sündmus, mille meediaväärtus ja kajastus on prioriteetne võrreldes kohapealse pealtvaatajaskonna ja kajastusega. Tavaliselt ületab sellistes spordiüritustel „osalevate“ meediakanalite esindajate arv sportlaste arvu. Teise olulise peakategoriana, mis mõjutab fännide teadlikkuse teket ja lojaalsuse kujunemist identifitseeriti suusõnaline kommunikatsioon, millel on kaks alamdimensiooni: inimestevaheline suhtlus ning kuulujutud ja lood. Kolmanda kategoriana avaldus uuringu tulemusena muljete juhtimine (ingl k *impression management*) – mitmed uuringus osalejad väljendasid kogemusi, kuidas nende lemmiksportlase kuvandi esitlemine on neile tekitanud meeldejääva elamusi. Neljas kategooria, sotsialiseerumise agendid, võtab kokku selle, kuidas vanemad, perekonnaliikmed, sõbrad ja kogukond mõjutavad fänni teadlikkust sportlasest ja aitavad kaasa lojaalsuse kujunemisele. Viiendaks mõjutavaks kategooriaks on spordivaldkond ja meeskond. Selle kategooria alamosadeks on huvi spordiala enese vastu, huvi meeskonna vastu, meeskonna geograafiline päritolu.

Kolmandaks uurimisküsimuseks oli tuvastada, millest täpsemalt koosnevad spordiga seotud (ingl k *on-field attributes*) ja spordivälised (ingl k *offfield attributes*) sportlase brändi imidžit kujundavad tegurid. Intervjuude põhjal selgus, et mõlemad komponendid on lojaalsuse arendamisel ja püsimisel ühtviisi olulised. Spordiga seotud tegurite alamkategoriatena identifitseeriti intervjuude põhjal järgmised tegurid: sportlase käitumine võistlussituatsioonis, meeskonnakuuluvus, sportlikud saavutused, sportlik stiil ja oskused. Spordiväliste tegurite alamkategoriate hulka kuuluvad sportlase füüsiline atraktiivsus, elustiil, isiklik karisma, rahvus ja meelelahutusväärtus. Kõik need tegurid mängivad rolli selles, kuidas kujuneb fänni seotus oma lemmiksportlasega.

Neljandas uurimisküsimuses keskendus autor sellele, et selgitada välja, milline mõju on sportlase brändi kujunemisel fännide reaktsioonidele ja käitumisele. Uuringus jõuti järeldusele, et kui on tekkinud esmane lojaalsus ja positiivne hoiak sportlase suhtes, siis suure tõenäosusega hakkab lojaalsus tugevnema, kuna fänn pöörab senisest enam tähelepanu sportlasega seotud meediakajastusele, loob oma mõttemaailmas sportlasega seotud narratiive ja edastab oma mõtted ja tundeid mitteformaalses kommunikatsioonis. Fännid võivad hakata otsima sarnasusi ja looma kujuteldavaid seoseid enda ja oma lemmiksportlase vahel ja kõige selle tulemusena muutuvad fännid resistentseks muutuste suhtes – nende lojaalsust ja fänniks olemist on raske kõigutada ja samuti ei vahetata enam selles staadiumis oma lemmiksportlasi nii lihtsasti. Käesolevas uuringus joonistub väga olulisena välja see, kui tähtis on sportlase jaoks oma brändi tekkimine ja kujundamine. Fännide arvamused ja hinnangud näitavad, et kui sportlane on juba kujunenud

brändiks oma fännide meeltes, kaasneb sellega mitmeid positiivseid kaasnähtusi nii sportlase enda kui ka teiste asjaga seotud osapoolte jaoks. Tugeva brändi olemasolu tagab sportlasele, et ka ajutise ebaedu ja raskete hetkede puhul ei kiirusta fännid sportlast „maha jätma“ vaid toetavad teda ja usuvad temasse stabiilselt.

Käesoleva doktoritöö **viies uurimisküsimus** selgitas, milline mõju on fänni lojaalsusel sportlase suhtes meeskondadele, mida sportlane esindab ja brändidele, millega sportlane on seotud sponsorlepingute või reklaamilepingutega. Uuringu tulemuste analüüs näitas, et fännidel on kombeks nõ. liikuda sportlasega kaasa – see tähendab, et kui sportlane vahetab meeskonda, siis tema fännid pigem hakkavad toetama sportlase uue kodumeeskonda kui jäävad truuks vanale meeskonnale ja ütlevad lahti oma lemmiksportlase fänniks olemisest. Teatud juhtudel võivad fännid toetada samaaegselt mitmeid meeskondi, mida sportlane esindab (nt. klubimeeskond ja rahvusmeeskond). Sportlasbrändi positiivne imidž kandub üle ka sportlasega seotud brändidele ja fännid laiendavad neile oma positiivseid tundeid. Üldreeglina teavad fännid sportlasega seotud brände, hindavad kõrgelt sportlast toetavaid brände ja arvestavad oma lemmiksportlasega seotud brändidega oma ostude planeerimisel. Täiendava positiivse mõjuna sportlasega seotud brändidele võib välja tuua konkureerivate brändide ignoreerimise või välistamise.

Käesoleva doktoritöö **teaduslikuks panuseks** on sportlasbrändi tervikliku mudeli loomine. Uus mudel erineb varasematest oma põhjalikkuse tõttu, kaasatud on nii brändi tekkimiseks vajalikud eeltingimused kui ka brändi tekkimisele järgnevad positiivsed järelmõjud erinevatele huvigruppidele.

Töö **praktiliseks väärtuseks** on sisendinfo neile spordijuhtidele, meeskondade juhtidele, sportlasbrändi arendamisega tegelevatele professionaalidele ja brändidele kes teevad sportlastega koostööd. Mudel selgitab, kuidas kujuneb fänni ja sportlase suhe ja milliste tegurite modifitseerimine aitab suhet tugevdada. Oluline on ka spordiväliste tegurite tähtsustamine. Sageli keskendutakse sportlastega seotud otsuste tegemisel ja nende populaarsusest rääkimisel pelgalt sportlikele saavutustele, kuid fännide jaoks on samavõrra olulised spordivälised tegurid. Spordiväliste tegurite „juhtimine“ pole võimalik (kui sportlane ise selleks motiveeritud pole) kuid nende kaardistamine ja nendega arvestamine võimaldab spordijuhtidel teha paremaid otsuseid ja hinnata ühe või teise sportlase mõju tiimile kui tervikule.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Personal Information:

Date of Birth: 09 January 1984

Nationality: Pakistani

E-mail: aili_hasaan@hotmail.com

Phone +372 5623 0886

Education:

2012-Current: Doctoral Student, Estonian Business School

2009-2011: Master of Science, International Economics Wyższa Szkoła
Handlu i Finansów Międzynarodowych im. Fryderyka Skarbka w
Warszawie (Skarbek University), Warsaw, Poland

2002-2007: Bachelor of Science, Information Technology;
Virtual University of Pakistan

Athlete Brand Construction: a Conceptual Framework and a Perspective Based on Fans' Perceptions

The aim of this dissertation is to develop a comprehensive framework of athlete brand including its antecedents and consequences. The main question of this thesis is "How can an athlete build a brand and/or establish himself/herself as a brand?" This question is addressed in three empirical papers via a thorough review of the literature related to celebrity branding, brand equity, brand loyalty and athlete branding and according to the perception of the fans from three different countries (Portugal, Estonia and Pakistan). This study contributes to the literature by combining different ideas from past studies into a single model about the athlete brand and providing a comprehensive framework to aid scholars and practitioners to understand athlete branding.

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