

# Understanding athlete brand life cycle

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## **Understanding athlete brand life cycle**

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## **Understanding athlete brand life cycle**

The purpose of this study was to present a framework to aid understanding athlete brand life cycle and how to extend it. A thorough review of the literature was conducted to create the proposed framework. Five stages were identified including brand introduction, brand growth, brand maturity, brand decline, and brand reinvention, as well as athlete capital that may occur for some athletes. This study extends prior research by providing an initial idea on how to develop and manage an athlete brand life cycle throughout his/her career.

Keywords: Athletes; Sport Brand; Life Cycle; Fans.

Subject classification codes: include these here if the journal requires them

### **Introduction**

Athletes may serve as inspiration in contemporary societies, and their popularity often turns them from local heroes into international stars (Kerr and Gladden 2008). As a result, athletes' popularity has attracted commercial brands (McGhee 2012) and big clubs to capture their services and prestige (García 2011). Sport itself has benefited from its star athletes as most of them become celebrities and contribute to the popularity of the respective sports (Greenhalgh et al. 2011), such as Ronda Rousey (Ultimate Fighting Championship wrestler), Usain Bolt (track and field), or Michael Schumacher (Formula 1). Moreover, athletes' activities off the field have become an important complement to their performance on the field promoting both the athlete as a brand and his/her sport (Cortsen 2013). Athletes such as Gareth Edwards (Rugby), Ivan Lendl (Tennis) or Pelé (Football) were past superstars, and they were famous for their sporting qualities. Currently, however, many athletes have established their names as strong brands in non-sporting activities (Parmentier Fischer, and Reuber 2013), and in some cases even ignoring their achievements on the field (e.g. Mario Balotelli in Football or Anna Kournikova in Tennis). Therefore, an athlete brand is now about all the possible

aspects of his/her life, including both on- and off-field aspects (Hasaan et al., 2018; Parmentier and Fischer 2012; Versfeld and Baker 2016).

An athlete brand is related to a unique name, appearance, and other characteristics (e.g., personality and image) that identify and distinguish her/him from other competitors in the market (Parmentier and Fischer 2012; Williams et al. 2015). Therefore, one may argue that a professional athlete, like any given product, can be branded (O'Reilly and Braedley 2008; Parmentier, Fischer, and Reuber 2013), and in fact, numerous studies have referred to athletes and celebrities as human brands (Arai, Carlson and Donovan 2013; Ko, and Kaplanidou 2013; Rindova, Pollock, and Hayward 2006; Thomson 2006). Following this line of reasoning, Gilchrist (2005) suggested that athletes are in a certain extent similar to products, because they are cultural products that can be managed and sold as brands.

A critical objective when managing a brand is to consider it as a source of competitive superiority, having implications to the various features of each stage of brand life (Bivainiene 2010). From this perspective, the long-term life and profitability of the brand can be examined through the lifecycle (Lapašinskaitė and Boguslauskas 2006). Therefore, in the current study, we approach the athlete from a brand life cycle perspective as opposed to a product life cycle because of key differences between a brand and a product. From a tangible good perspective, the product typically has a shorter life cycle than a brand (Thorelli and Burnett 1981). That is, a brand can remain for a very long time after the product has reached extinction. For example, Pan Am and TWA airline companies no longer exist, but the brands are iconic within the airline industry. It is also important to note that a brand may have multiple products. For example, Starbucks Coffee offers various beverages, snacks, and sandwiches, but each has the Starbucks brand. Brands will often use product innovation or design changes to

attempt to extend product life cycle (Fetchko, Roy, and Clow 2018). In this vein, one can argue that sport athletes are commonly non-permanent entities, but athletes such as Muhammad Ali or Michael Jordan became iconic and recognized as brands in the sport industry. Also, through various endorsed products their brands are associated to multiple products.

In the context of human brands, branding varies according to the field of celebrity (Lunardo, Gergaud, and Livat 2015), and celebrity brands are often viewed as more complex and intense due to their constant exposure, reputation and image (Ilicic, Baxter, and Kulczynski 2016). However, sport celebrities (athletes) are sometimes perceived to be different from other celebrities because an athlete brand is more friable in nature. Athletes are sometimes viewed in a more God-like manner by fans. That is why there is high pressure for exemplary behaviour (Arai et al. 2013), and actions such as drinking, fighting, or even killing can harm an athlete's image (Cashmore 2000). As Clemente et al. (2014) suggest, unlike other celebrities, celebrity athletes have a relatively narrow brand image given that they are strongly associated with little else than the sport they play. Because fans look to athletes as winners, there is high pressure and a dip in performance or losing may often harm the athlete's image (Batra and Homer 2004). Ilicic et al. (2016) suggested that athletes have to take care of their brand more than non-sporting celebrities, given that sport fans cannot differentiate between real experiences and those experienced through media (Restak 1991). Additionally, the career of a professional athlete is unique when compared to a non-sporting celebrity, given that athletes often experience a rapid growth in their careers while also potentially suffering a rapid decline (Antoun 2011; Fox, West, and Drew 2012). Athletes' physical abilities and performance usually decrease over time, and thus, their appeal tends to decrease as well. In contrast, this decline in appeal may not occur in other human

celebrities (e.g., music, acting) where performance remains rather stable or may even increase with experience (Lunardo et al. 2015). As Ryan and Martin (2013) noted, age matters more in sporting context. That is, when compared to traditional products, athletes are of a fragile and complex nature given they are often considered to be unstable products due to the risks of injuries or performance slumps (Arai, Ko, and Ross 2014) and their relatively short “shelf-life” (Green 2016). Athletes also tend to be linked to endorsement strategies (Stevens, Lathrop, and Bradish 2003) because they are perceived as sources of credibility (i.e., expertness and trustworthiness) and attractiveness (i.e., familiarity, likeability and/or similarity) (McGuire 1985). Furthermore, an athlete’s brand may be affected by either positive or negative mental associations towards them depending on their performance (Cortsen 2013) (i.e. winning and achievement often cause positive effects while improper behaviour may cause negative effects). Several of these aspects and challenges may not be applicable to the management of traditional products, and therefore create important challenges when managing athletes. Supporting this idea, Chadwick and Burton (2008) mentioned that athlete brands have a highly intense life cycle that is defined by age, maturity, and experience.

Understanding the stages of athlete brand life cycle is important for athletes and managers given that monitoring and managing the life cycle will help to identify strategies for enhancing athletes’ popularity and brand image. In the modern sport marketing environment, it has become increasingly important for professional athletes to build and promote their personal brands. That is, athlete branding is an important focus because much of an athlete’s future success depends on their ability to maintain and promote a sustained positive image (Hodge et al. 2014; Hodge and Walker 2015). It may also contribute to extending the athlete’s brand lifetime, making it more

profitable (Schweizer and Dietl 2015). Hamlin et al. (2006) mentioned that each product has a certain lifespan and goes through different stages, including introduction, growth, maturity, and decline. Arai et al. (2014) further suggest that athletes are considered as products in the context of branding, while Proctor (2008) mentions that athletes have a certain lifespan that goes through different stages of the product lifecycle. Nevertheless, there is dearth of research aiming to describe and propose strategies to manage an athlete brand in all stages of its life cycle. There are many cases of athletes maintaining powerful brands even after finishing their active professional careers (e.g., David Beckham, Michael Jordan); yet, past studies have ignored the dimension of athlete's life after his/her retirement. Following this line of reasoning, this study represents an attempt to fill a gap in the literature by discussing the major stages of an athlete's life cycle during his/her professional career and after retirement, and while doing so, propose a comprehensive framework for the athlete brand life.

## **Theoretical background**

### *Life cycle and athletes*

The Product Life Cycle (PLC) theory proposes that like living creatures, all products also have a life cycle (Altunel 2017). The term 'lifecycle' generally denotes the full set of independent stages to be passed, followed, or performed by a product, from cradle to grave (Dutta, Garetti, and Kiritsis 2010; Kiritsis, Bufardi, and Xirouchakis 2003), with each stage requiring different approaches to its production, distribution, and marketing (Bartlett and Twineham 2003). All products go through a life cycle encompassing introduction, growth, maturity, and decline (Agbadudu and Ogunrin 2006; Berkowitz et al. 2005). As noted by Langerak, Hultik, and Robben (2004), the introduction stage is where the product is introduced to customers, while the growth stage starts with a demand trend for the product; determined mainly by customer acceptance. Acceleration

of demand is then shaped by market, competitors, economic conditions, and socio-cultural factors. At the maturity stage, the product reaches a wide target customer group and at the same time, competition is higher than in the previous stages (Gmelin and Seuring 2014). Finally, in the decline stage the product begins to lose consumer appeal and sales drift downward (Assael 1990).

The PLC framework has been commonly adopted to study various subjects (Taylor and Taylor 2012), and in some instances, supplementary life cycle situations emerge due to new social, political, economic or technological developments that require an evaluation of current practices (Nadeau, Pailhès, and Sebastian 2005). As noted by Rose et al. (2007), today's knowledge-intensive product development environment requires new frameworks for understanding product life cycles, given that life cycle models heavily depend on the product type which then impacts the enterprise business processes (Kiritsis et al. 2003). Global competition, increasing customer expectations, and technological innovations tend to accelerate product life-cycles (Hines, Francis, and Found 2006); an important factor in sport settings (Gordon and Lavalley 2012). For example, the growth stage of the English Premiere League has rapidly increased globally due to the increased popularity and availability to view the product on multiple media outlets. In this changing environment, traditional lifecycle management methods may be ineffective (Basallo-Triana, Rodríguez-Sarasty, and Benitez-Restrepo 2017), requiring innovative strategies to manage each stage of the products lifetime.

Terzi et al. (2007) suggested that the management of the product lifecycle is becoming mandatory for management given that products have changed into an artifact; a complex result of tangible and intangible components. Because of its critical impact on marketing strategy, the PLC has become a central, enduring framework in marketing



(Golder and Tellis 2004), and has been extensively utilized in a wide variety of industries and settings (Rink and Swan 1979). In terms of a celebrity life cycle, it was suggested that it resembles the standard product life cycle (Fox et al. 2012), but there are circumstances that may negatively affect a celebrity's lifecycle appeal (e.g., declining abilities or poor performance) (Hamlin et al. 2006). This is one reason as to why product management teams must contend with competitors by adding new features to differentiate themselves from others within the market. If newly added features and expectations of the customer group overlap, then the growth curve can increase and the product can survive (Altunel 2017). In that context, brand reinvention often represents a key strategy to extend product life cycle (Wood, Dennis, and Franzak 2008). More recently, celebrity athlete research has been a topic of great interest, with many scholars conceptualizing individual athletes as products or brands to be managed (e.g., Cortsen 2013; Parmentier and Fischer 2012).

### ***Athlete brand***

An athlete brand can be defined as the “public persona of an individual athlete who has established their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face or other brand elements in the market” (Arai et al. 2014, 98), and the purpose of establishing an athlete brand is to strengthen the unique bond (i.e., association) between that athlete and his/her fans (Parmentier and Fischer 2012). Khedher (2015) has associated personal brands (i.e., athletes) to goods or services that evolve through concepts of product development and promotion, while Shin (2007) noted that, like any other product, sport products also have a life cycle. Nevertheless, Shilbury, Quick, and Westerbeek (2003) suggested that a sport product life cycle is somehow different from a typical product's one (i.e., good). Mullin, Hardy, and Sutton (2014) further noted that sport brand management has more volatile and unpredictable cycles, while Grant (2006) suggests that athletes are very

unique brands when compared to other products or corporations in terms of their development through their lifetime. An athlete's career is typically multiyear and a lifelong sport activity (Alfermann and Stambulova 2007), given that an athlete brand is dynamic in nature (Williams et al. 2015). Due to the risk of injuries, or significant decreases in quality performance (Arai et al. 2014), a sport brand such as an athlete brand and its life cycle deserves greater attention from researchers (Mullin et al. 2014).

An athlete brand depends in a large extent on the high visibility of the athlete (Hamlin et al. 2006; Summers and Morgan 2008), and one way of achieving it is to get attention from media and public (Andrews and Jackson 2001; Parmentier and Fischer 2012). It is important for athletes to remain competitive at every stage of the career for the sake of their brand success (O'Reilly and Braedley 2008), and the maintenance of an athlete brand depends upon his/her awareness and perceived attributes (Cortsen 2013; Hasaan et al. 2016). Moreover, even after their careers end, athletes with powerful brands can benefit from their built names and images (Parmentier and Fischer 2012), with Michael Jordan being a notable example of that.

Past studies have highlighted the importance of athlete brands while they still have active careers (Arai et al. 2014; Carlson and Donovan 2013; Hasaan et al. 2016), but have ignored the completion of the life cycle process through the examination of the post-career time. This study focuses on the entire life cycle of athlete brands (including post-career) in order to explain the different stages that athletes and managers should be aware of and manage. Also, most of the previous literature on athlete branding has only discussed individual aspects of athlete brand life cycle. For example, Jardine (2006) studied the importance of iconic celebrities among public audiences, while Taylor and Lavallo (2010) focused on an athlete's retirement and post-retirement. Athlete brands are an important topic in the field of sport and management (Carlson and Donovan

2013), but there is lack of comprehensive research explaining the full breadth of athlete brand life cycle (Arai et al., 2014). Therefore, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of athlete brand life cycle by examining all stages that cast positive/negative aspects on athlete brand. In doing so, this study provides contributions toward the understanding of how athlete brands can be managed, both during the active career and after retirement.

### **Proposed framework**

The proposed framework in this study is based on an extensive review of the literature related to sport branding (i.e., team and athlete) and the product life cycle. Based on a search in electronic databases such as ProQuest, EBSCO, and Google Scholar, more than 450 peer reviewed articles, conference proceedings, working papers, and book chapters were identified during the development of this model. The following search terms were used in various combinations: ‘product life cycle’, ‘life cycle’, ‘athlete’, ‘sport’, ‘human’, ‘celebrity’ or ‘iconic’ brand, ‘athlete’s retirement’ and ‘athlete entrepreneur’. Other sources for identifying studies included manual cross-referencing of bibliographies cited in these journals (Biscaia 2016; Teixeira et al. 2015). To understand the topics that were non-existent in the literature related to sport brand (i.e., retirement and iconic status), literature pertaining to psychology and sociology was also consulted for further review. Additionally, published athlete biographies and news articles were consulted to complement academic publications and further understand the life cycle stages for celebrity athletes.

All aspects of athlete life have a direct effect on product (i.e., athlete) life cycle (Kim et al. 2006), and Yang and Shi (2011) contend that an athlete’s career has many ups and downs that may affect the athlete life cycle. Of the very few attempts to examine an athlete life cycle, Schweizer and Dietl (2015) suggested five different stages

including start, rise, peak, decline, and post-retirement, while Acheampong and Malek (2019) described the career of African footballers according to four stages: domestic development (under 18 years), international career development (18-20 years), optimal level (maturity; 20-24 years) and decline (25 years onwards). Even though these studies were important in understanding athletes as sport products to be managed, these authors ignored the potential celebrity capital (Driessens 2013) of some athletes and their increasing roles as entrepreneurs (Ratten 2015). In today's marketplace, many athletes become renowned partially due to people's perceptions of their celebrity capital, and engagement in entrepreneurial activities during the active and post-retirement years (Driessens 2013; Ratten 2015). In this sense, the current study attempts to elaborate upon the idea of athlete brand life cycle via a thorough analysis of five stages, and includes additional aspects related to the capital of the athletes and reinvention of the brand after retirement. Brand reinvention is an important stage of product management (Brown 2016; Ingstrup and Damgaard 2013; Menzel and Fornahl 2009), often representing a source of market expansion (Shove and Pantzar 2005). However, its adoption in the context of athlete branding has yet to be explored.

Following Keller's (1993) model of customer-based brand equity, the establishment of an athlete brand is triggered through his/her awareness among potential fans. This awareness spreads and shapes who the athlete is, what he/she does, and how he/she is different from other athletes (Montoya and Vandehey 2002). Athlete's awareness is the first step in the process of athlete brand establishment and this step increases consumers' ability to identify the brand (Keller 1993). In turn, the awareness then leads to fans creating a certain mental image of the athlete's attributes. To this point, both on-field and off-field attributes are important in the development and cultivation of an athlete's brand image (Hasaan et al. 2018; Parmentier and Fischer

2012; Yu 2005). Once a brand image is established, athletes try to increase the number of fans and take advantage of their loyalty through various aspects (e.g., more visibility and greater following). Athlete retirement from professional sport is considered a phase of athlete brand decline, and tends to cast negative effects on his/her brand (Taylor and Lavallee 2010). Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) noted that 70% of elite female gymnasts experienced a loss of social support when their careers ended. However, as the growth curve can increase through appropriate actions (Altunel 2017), an athlete's status as an icon makes him/her recognizable among fans, and renowned athletes are less affected by retirement or any other activity that may cause popularity loss (Summers and Morgan 2008). An athlete's post-retirement career can also help to rebuild his/her brand (Street 2004). Following this line of reasoning, this study proposes an athlete brand life cycle based on five stages that should be considered and managed (see Figure 1).

(Place figure 1 around here)

### ***Brand introduction***

The first step for an athlete to become a successful brand is being known among potential customers (i.e., fans), as brand awareness is critical in the development of a sport brand (Biscaia et al. 2016; Ross 2006). This stage is known as 'beginning of life' (BOL) in PLC theory where the product meets its customers (Altunel 2017). Arai et al. (2014) mentioned that every professional athlete is a brand, but most of them are unable to achieve success. Every year thousands of athletes start their professional career, and therefore need to stand out to become attractive to fans. According to Ross (2006), increased brand awareness is often achieved through organization-, market-, and experience-related antecedents. Hasaan et al. (2018) further summarised five major antecedents leading to increased awareness of athletes including media, oral communication, impression management, social agents, and team/sports. Through these

antecedents, both positive and negative information may be spread among potential fans of the athlete (Özsoy 2011). Even while negative messages about the athlete may spread faster (Bochenek and Blili 2013), these messages still may lead fans to follow athletes (Laczniak, DeCarlo, and Ramaswami 2001).

Brand awareness (i.e., ability to identify the athlete under different conditions; Aaker, 1991) represents what one may consider the brand introduction stage in athlete brand life cycle. This is because if awareness is not achieved, subsequent stages in brand development will be compromised (Ross 2006). More specifically, if a brand is not recalled or recognized in the market place, the growth and maturity stages will not emerge. Previous examples of athletes in this brand introduction stage include Michael Jordan when he signed with the NBA team Chicago Bulls, making him visible worldwide (Porter 2007), and American-born Bundesliga footballer Christian Pulisic, who debuted with Borussia Dortmund in 2016.

### ***Brand growth***

In the PLC, the growth stage starts with a positive trend in demand for the product, and is mainly determined by customer acceptance (Langerak et al. 2004). The second stage in the proposed athlete brand life cycle is brand growth. This process helps the athlete in establishing a certain image in fans' eyes (Hasaan et al. 2018) through the sum of values and attributes of that individual (Cortsen 2013). A more successful introduction of the athlete brand in the first stage may benefit the brand at this second stage, given that fans begin to recognize the positive characteristics of brands and why one athlete is better than another (Montoya and Vandehey 2002). As Hamlin et al. (2006) suggested, celebrity brands (i.e., athletes) have the ability to grow overnight due to major events or extraordinary performances. Therefore, contingent upon an athlete's actions on and off the field, there might be short or long paths accessible during brand growth. The

development of a unique image of an athlete is the greatest challenge at this stage, because differentiation is vital for brand growth (Abosag, Roper, and Hind 2012; Beech and Chadwick 2007; Milligan 2009). Researchers have mentioned various characteristics of athletes that made them unique and helped to grow and popularize their brands, such as personal charisma (Aiken and Koch 2009), physical appeal (Melnick and Wann 2010), lifestyle (Vincent, Kian, and Pedersen 2011), aesthetic elements (Izzo et al. 2011), ethnicity (Shakib and Veliz 2012), skills and tactics (Agas et al. 2012), professional image and media persona (Parmentier and Fischer 2012), personal appeal and achievements (Carlson and Donovan 2013), athletic performance, and marketable lifestyle (Arai et al. 2013; Arai et al. 2014). Regardless of the multitude of features that have been suggested, athlete brand image can be summarized through the dimensions of on-field attributes and an off-field attributes (Hasaan et al. 2018; Parmentier and Fischer 2012; Versfeld and Baker 2016).

Following previous literature (e.g., Arai et al. 2014; Hasaan et al. 2018), after becoming aware of athletes, consumers start to develop a certain image of the athlete based on both on-field (e.g., athlete's behaviour, team, achievements) and off-field attributes (e.g., physical attraction, lifestyle, ethnicity). Certain qualities of the athletes help them to become popular, while other characteristics may hinder the chances of winning fans' loyalty (e.g., off-field scandals). The rationale underlying this idea is that consumers' knowledge is a central element for brand development (Keller 1993). For instance, professional tennis player Roger Federer's modest personality made him popular among many sport enthusiasts (Stauffer, 2006), while Rafael Nadal is popular among his fans because of his aggressive behaviour (Bodo 2010). Focusing on the example of Michael Jordan, he is known for his skills, sport achievements, behaviour in the field, style of play, as well as based on off-field characteristics such as ethnicity,

physical attraction, personal appeal, and entertainment value (Montoya and Vandehey 2002); all these characteristics being important to grow his athlete brand.

### ***Brand maturity***

Like traditional tangible products, after the introduction and growth stages, an athlete brand tends to move to the maturity stage, which one can associate with a period of stability in fan loyalty. Consistent with the PLC, at the maturity stage, it is observed that the product reaches a wide target customer group, while at the same time, competition is higher than the previous stages (Gmelin and Seuring 2014). This stage of athlete brand life cycle requires devotion of the fans to the athlete. Career success (i.e., quality performance) is essential at this stage because success can help leverage an athlete brand by steering him/her to achieve star status (Ross 2006; Yang and Shi 2011). Exemplary sporting performance is often associated to strong sport brands and fan followership (Arai et al., 2013). That is why superior perceptions of a brand are often linked to consumer loyalty towards that brand (Aaker 1991; Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, and Exler 2008; Biscaia et al. 2016), while slumps in performance or immoral activity by athletes could harm the brand (Arai et al. 2013; Cortsen 2013).

Being loyal to an athlete means that an individual has an emotional attachment to a certain athlete, leading him/her to develop a positive image about that athlete, and thus following him/her as a fan (Arai et al. 2013). Moreover, loyalty towards the athlete brand is often reflected through positive attitudes and behaviours towards that brand (Karjaluoto, Munnukka, and Salmi 2016) and other associated products. For instance, Cristiano Ronaldo has more than 100 million Facebook followers, and his deal with Nike helped the sportswear brand surpass Adidas in the Asian market (Roll, 2006).

This study suggests that fans' loyalty towards the athlete is often a sign of brand maturity stage for athlete brands. Drawing on the Michael Jordan example, it was



estimated that he had an impact worth about \$14 billion on the American economy (Fleck, Korchia, and Le Roy 2012). Also, Michael Jordan facilitated the development of a positive associative link between his fans and his teams and sponsors such as the Chicago Bulls and Nike (Parulekar and Raheja 2006). Previous studies suggest that all brands in the sport industry are connected (e.g. Kunkel, Funk, and Lock, 2017); and thus, fans' goodwill towards the athlete tends to be transferred to the athlete's team (Theysohn et al. 2009) and potentially team sponsors (Biscaia et al., 2013; Dees et al. 2010). Conversely, a sponsors' investment in sport teams may generate a goodwill effect among fans (Madrigal 2001). This transference of goodwill is explained through the associative network model where cognitive attributes linked to the athlete may influence the associative network to the team brand, or vice versa (Kunkel et al. 2016).

### ***Brand decline***

In the PLC, this phase is known as 'End-of-life' where products are retired or discontinued (Bartlett and Twineham 2003). An athlete's retirement from competitive sport is sometimes referred to as "heading to nowhere land" (Kerr and Dacyshyn 2010), very slippery slope (Antoun 2011) and a loss of social status and identity may occur (Taylor and Lavalley 2010). Antoun (2011) noted that the prospects of a career ending is more complicated for athletes than for nonsporting celebrities because it often occurs at a much earlier stage of the working lifecycle (Acheampong and Malek 2019). Athlete retirement is inevitable, and this transition tends to affect athletes both financially and socially. Orłowski, Herter, and Wicker (2017) found that 75% of NFL retirees were unknown, unemployed, and bankrupt within two years of retirement, highlighting the need for managers and athletes to carefully manage this stage. This study proposes an athlete's retirement as a stage of decline for his/her brand. It is at this time when the athlete's notoriety may diminish, and fans attention might shift to other athletes in

growth and maturity phases. Athlete retirement has been discussed from the perspective of sociology (i.e., athlete career transition) and psychology (i.e., athlete's retirement psychological effects), as well as the emotional difficulty upon leaving the sport, the causes of retirement, and social disapproval (Kanyiba, Mwisukha, and Onywera 2015; Lagimodiere and Strachan 2015). However, to the best of our knowledge, there is no study discussing the effects of retirement on athlete brand equity. There are also many anecdotal examples suggesting athlete retirement as a phase of brand decline. For instance, Elaina Oden, one of the 10 greatest American women to ever play volleyball gained significant weight once she retired, and was forgotten by the age 29 (Pearlman, 2004). Ogilvie and Taylor (1993) noted that retirement causes a change in the socio-economic status of the athlete, while Kerr and Dacyhyn (2010) noted that feelings of void and reorientation also tend to emerge when athletes retire. This retirement becomes associated with negative evaluations from the public, as well as negative self-perceptions from the athlete themselves (Taylor and Lavalley 2010), which may ultimately lead to the extinction of the athlete's brand. For example, the extreme skier Nikki Stone won Olympic gold in 1998, but lost her social circle after retirement (Zaslow 2002).

In some cases, however, retirement is a source for enhancement in an athlete brand. That is why some athletes announce early retirement or the date of their last match, and often represent one last moment of adoration (Zaslow 2002). For example, French footballer Zinedine Zidane made a classic farewell at the Santiago Bernabéu with Real Madrid fans (Lowe 2009). Active sport athletes become retired and younger athletes are there to take their place, because they are more visible and notable to public (Schwarz and Hunter 2012). Although retirement is often cause of decline of

an athlete brand, acquisition of celebrity capital and brand reinvention may represent critical aspects to keeping an athlete brand healthy.

### *Athlete capital*

Since all products confront possible decline, marketers attempt to avoid "closing shop" by managing the life cycles of their products through the introduction of a steady stream of new and or improved products (Agbadudu and Ogunrin 2006). In this proposed model of athlete brand life cycle, sport brand capital (i.e., athlete capital) is considered an asset when managing decline. Celebrities hold a kind of capital that is related to their media attention (van Krieken 2012), and can be converted into economic, social, symbolic or political capital (Driessens 2013). In this context, athlete capital is defined in the current study as an accumulated media visibility through recurrent media representations, leading to the creation of high awareness, favourability, and reputation among the public. Hunter, Burger and Davidsson (2009) suggested (as cited in Driessens 2013) that this type of capital is a form a reputational capital that can be used by athletes and their managers to increase their perceived trustworthiness, credibility, and accountability, and thus contribute to extending the lifecycle of an athlete brand.

This study also argues that athlete capital may lead to a status of cultural icon, highlighting the importance of understanding how to extend the lifetime of athlete brand. Still, only very few players can transform themselves into iconic figures, with most athletes never being able to achieve this status. In Argentina, fans often compare Diego Maradona (footballer) to General San Martín, a legendary liberator and war hero from colonial rule (Burns 2010). Even when Maradona was banned from football, loyal fans saw the negative drug test as a plot against him and Argentina (Archetti 2001). Similarly, Holt (2004) discusses Michael Jordan and Muhammad Ali as cultural icons who have been worshiped worldwide.

The term icon is a sociological and popular term in the social context of human brand study. Rojek (2001) suggested that a person becomes a celebrity when media begins to take interest in his/her activities, but an icon is a person who represents a symbol of a set of ideas or values to a certain society (Holt 2004). Thomson (2006) argues that consumers (i.e., fans) often develop strong bonds with celebrities because they are often perceived as sources of attractiveness (i.e., familiarity, likeability and/or similarity) and credibility (i.e., expertness and trustworthiness) (McGuire, 1985). Notwithstanding, brands that deliver innovative cultural expressions tend to become powerful cultural symbols and highly valued by society (Holt 2012). Organizational success is not always related to offering the most innovative products, but by hitting the cultural nerves of the customers at the right time and with the right ideology (Holt and Cameron 2012). In this sense, a celebrity athlete will only transform into a cultural icon by being able to achieve cultural meaning and symbolic value. According to Holt and Cameron (2012), a cultural brand consists of an ideology that depends upon a myth and cultural codes. Consequently, an iconic athlete represents the possibility that he/she has actually entered into the language of the culture and can exist forever (Jardine 2006). An athlete may become renowned due to extraordinary performances during his/her career and by being devoted with both the right, as well as the duty, to play for an entire nation. This is because international competitions give nations a chance to show their power through sports and provide people a chance to feel proud of their nation (Dumitriu 2015). For example, Lionel Messi has been unable to surpass the popularity of Diego Maradona most likely due to Maradona's achievements when representing the national team of Argentina (Edwards 2016; Martín 2017;).

According to Eagar and Lindridge (2014), the process of converting a celebrity into an icon includes four steps: (1) from musician (athlete as it pertains to this study) to

celebrity; (2) when fame dominates achievement; (3) when icon emerges; and (4) when celebrity and icon converge. Furthermore, it is important to note that celebrities have a short duration, while icons last forever. The NBA forward Kris Humphries achieved celebrity status because of his marriage with Kim Kardashian, yet his popularity was only for a short period of time (Pifer et al. 2015). Conversely, athletes like Mohamed Ali or Michael Jordan achieved the status of icon and have never seen their popularity decline. In sum, celebrity status can be achieved due to looks, wealth, publicity or even some scandalous activity or incident, but icons develop through the passage of time and stand for longer periods (Hollander 2010) due to their performance and cultural symbolism. That is, an athlete may become an icon when he/she has a long-lasting list of achievements both on and off the field. Consequently, this study suggests that the iconic status immortalizes an athlete brand, and even his/her retirement does not impact the brand status. For example, even after his retirement from professional basketball, the commodification of Michael Jordan's brand has hardly fallen, and continues to circulate around the globe because of the iconic status he achieved during his playing days (McDonald and Andrews 2001).

### ***Brand reinvention***

An athlete's post-retirement career allows him/her to re-build the sporting image through another line of work, either sport- or non-sport-related (Torregrosa et al. 2004). This is similar to the mythological idea of a phoenix pattern for celebrity life cycles where a person achieves fame, retires (i.e., decline in fame), and then re-markets his/her image (Hamlin et al. 2006). From a PLC point a view, brand reinvention is a pivotal aspect to extend the life cycle of a product (Wood et al., 2008) through economic and symbolic transformations (Nyseth 2016). That is, by integrating new sources of added

value, the brand can be reinvented and provide consumers with new attachment points (Maklan and Knox 1997).

This study considers the athlete post-retirement career as the stage of athlete brand reinvention. A former athlete may have an opportunity to gain attention in a new career (sport or non-sport), and thereby keep him/her in the public eye, potentially maintaining a link with fans during post-retirement era (Parmentier and Fischer 2012). However, athletes and their managers face the challenge of knowing that a viable post-retirement career is not achievable for every athlete, and the likelihood of successful post-retirement careers depends upon the athlete's brand equity prior to retirement. As mentioned by Parmentier and Fischer (2012), after careers end, successful athletes can benefit by lending their names to entrepreneurial endeavours. A post-retirement career is a way for an athlete to get back into the world among fans and media (Amin-ul Islam 2014). Michael Jordan, for example, attempted to play professional baseball after his first retirement from basketball in 1993, formed Michael Jordan Motorsports, a professional closed course motorcycle road racing team in 2003, and is now a majority owner of the NBA's Charlotte Hornets (DailyMail 2017). The array of Michael Jordan's brands is estimated to be worth \$1 billion (Santiago 2014).

Park, Tod, and Lavalley (2012) suggest that coping strategies, pre-retirement planning, social support, and support program involvement can influence the athlete's post-retirement career (i.e. transition from the athletic career to another career). Effective coping is achieved when athletes are able to use/develop the necessary resources to avoid potential transitional barriers (Kuettel, Boyle, and Schmid 2017), while pre-retirement planning provides the readiness to career transition (Alfermann, Stambulova, and Zemaityte 2004). In turn, social support and involvement in support programs help athletes in orienting towards a new role in their life (D'Angelo et al.

2017; Wylleman et al. 2004). Ryba, Ronkainen, and Selänne (2015) further advocate that the dual career (i.e. combination of a sporting career with studies or work) may be a strategic approach for some athletes; yet is often challenging and not compatible with the professional demands of the most successful athletes (Tshube and Feltz 2015).

Debois, Ledon, and Wylleman (2014) noted that sport accomplishments can lead to an athlete's successful career transition (i.e., post-retirement career), while Driessens (2013) mentioned that celebrity capital helps individuals enter into new professional domains. There are a wide range of examples of athletes who re-invented their brands after retirement and successfully transferred their charisma and athlete capital into a new career path. The most appealing shift remains sport-related, with many athletes starting new careers as coaches or media analysts (Leung, Carre, and Fu 2005; ThePsotGame 2014). For example, Zinedine Zidane moved from a notable career as a player to a coach of Real Madrid C.F., while NBA superstar Shaquille O'Neal became a popular basketball analyst. In the case of David Beckham, rather than reinventing his brand in a related industrial category, he decided to extend his playing career with Los Angeles Galaxy, geographically diversifying his brand by moving to the United States (Chadwick and Burton 2008), and becoming part owner of a Major League Soccer (MLS) team. Additionally, the political success of Governor Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger, who were both sport and show business celebrities, may have been related to their prior wrestling and bodybuilding history (Street 2004). Imran Khan, former cricket world cup winner, has expanded his popularity through community activism by building hospitals and becoming a politician (Corrigan 2001). Athletes have great opportunities after retirement to reinvent their brands, and this study suggests that athlete post-retirement career can provide a boost towards brand reinvention.

## **Discussion**

The focus of the current study was to develop a model for explaining athlete brand life cycle and fill the gap in the literature by elucidating how each stage of athlete career could affect his/her brand, the implications of athlete's actions (e.g., retirement) on the brand, and the different stages that should be considered and managed to extend an athlete brand life cycle. The proposed framework of athlete brand life cycle highlights the importance of athlete brand awareness, athlete brand attributes, retirement strategic vision, athlete capital and potential subsequent iconic status, and entrepreneurial actions taken by the athlete during post-retirement. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a model to aid managers and athletes in understanding the proper strategies to manage the athlete brand lifecycle.

Building on product life cycle literature (Altunel 2017; Basallo-Triana et al. 2017; Dutta et al. 2010), and considering athletes as sport products (Arai et al. 2013; Hasaan et al., 2018), we propose a model extending the traditional four stages of product lifecycle; suggesting five stages of an athlete brand life cycle that should be considered by academics and practitioners. These stages are brand introduction, brand growth, brand maturity, brand decline, and brand reinvention, which is achieved through the athlete capital that may occur for some athletes. The first stage of athlete life cycle is brand introduction and is facilitated by increased brand awareness (Hasaan et al. 2018), while the second stage refers to brand growth that is stimulated by fans' perceptions of athlete brand attributes (Arai et al. 2014). The third stage refers to brand maturity and is often a reflection of attaining a stable base of loyal fans. The fourth stage in the life cycle is described as the athlete brand decline by means of athlete retirement (Kerr and Dacyshyn 2010). The final stage to consider in the athlete brand life cycle is related to athlete brand reinvention, and is linked to the athlete post-retirement career (Torregrosa et al. 2004). It is in this stage that we argue the



development of athlete capital is a critical aspect that may contribute to achieving the status of icon only realized by a few athletes.

When an athlete begins a professional career, his/her brand is often introduced to the market, and thus begins the life cycle. Some athletes are able to achieve substantial prominence due to initial media coverage and successful performances within a sport (Summers and Morgan 2008). For example, professional footballer Marko Marin was called the “German Messi” when he started his professional career (Hartnett 2012). These cases provide increased brand awareness to potential customers and may be critical in the introduction stage of athlete brand life cycle. Working towards making the athlete recognisable among sport followers is critical for athletes and those with responsibility in managing their careers because awareness is pivotal for the success of subsequent stages in the athlete brand life cycle. Brand awareness can be achieved through various channels and sources (e.g., media, oral communication; Hasaan et al. 2018), and sport managers should take steps to spread athlete awareness among fans and the public in general. Athlete visibility helps to increase a fan’s identification with the athlete (O’Reilly and Braedley 2008). As an athlete becomes recognizable as a member of the team and/or good performer in the fan’s mind, the development of mental associations necessary for brand growth becomes facilitated (Fox et al. 2012). The growth of athlete brands tends to be linked to strong performance, media coverage, popularity of the teams, as well as an athlete’s proper impression management (Agyemang and Williams 2013). That is, the efforts by an athlete to create and nurture an image held by the target audience are akin to brand management strategy due to its role at increasing awareness and subsequent positive brand associations (Agyemang, Williams, and Kim 2015; Bolino et al. 2008). The length of an athlete’s specific brand growth stage varies according to life events of that particular athlete (sport- and non-

sport related). Some athletes acquire wide media coverage because of a single remarkable event (e.g., Chinese tennis player Li Na winning the 2011 French Open), while others have a gradual growth in their brands. These achievements are highlighted through various media channels (e.g., social media, mass media), and as such, athletes and managers should make effective use of various channels to show their performances and achievements. Social media is often a major contributor to sport brand awareness (Witkemper, Lim, and Waldburger 2012), but other channels (e.g., newspaper or magazine) or even peers are also helpful to spread athlete's awareness. By using various communication channels, athletes can interact more with fans and general public to enhance awareness and preference.

The third stage is a mid-to-late career phase of the playing lifecycle and typically involve the athlete reaching their peak (Fox et al. 2012; Acheampong and Malek 2019). Subsequently, to increase the likelihood of brand maturity, a focus on aspects such as an athlete's on-field and off-field attributes are of paramount importance to create a link with fans and public at large (Hasaan et al. 2018). As noted by Parmentier and Fischer (2012) and Yu (2005), an athlete's field achievements and public interest in off-field activities permit the strengthening of the fan-athlete link, thereby helping to mature the athlete brand. Researchers have identified various on-field and off-field attributes that can help an athlete establishing his/her brand such as athletic expertise, behaviour on the field, achievements (on-field; Arai et al. 2014) and life story or appearance (off-field; Hasaan et al. 2018). These are some of the important issues that should be part of the content developed and spread by athletes and/or their managers when developing long-term relationships with target audiences. In addition, managers should focus on repetition and consistency of athlete's attributes in all marketing communications during this phase because good perceptions of an athlete's

attributes have been suggested to increase fans' psychological commitment towards the respective athlete (Arai et al. 2013).

Important to developing and maintaining athlete brand equity for longer periods of time, we suggest that brand extensions represent an important strategy during the athlete brand life cycle, and will likely be favoured by athlete capital. Brand extensions refer to the use of a pre-established brand name to enter a new product class (Aaker 1991; Walsh and Williams 2015), allowing a brand to sustain strong market presence by taking advantage of existing equity levels (Keller 1998). Managers aiming to extend the life cycle of their athletes could advise athletes to become entrepreneurs and promote the development of these brand extensions (Cortsen 2013). According to Ratten (2015), athlete brand extensions are often related to an athlete's entrepreneurial actions, and Bruton (2015) mentioned that a successful athlete brand extension could generate new revenue sources and improve athlete image. Athletes tend to receive massive amounts of public spotlight (Cortsen 2013) providing opportunities for these brand extensions to be developed (Walsh and Ross 2010; Walsh and Williams 2015). The challenge is to introduce an appropriate brand extension at the right stage of the athletes' career with proper market knowledge. While brand extensions can be introduced in all stages of athlete life cycle, the brand maturity stage of an athlete likely represents the ideal moment to focus on brand extension opportunities due to fans' attachment with the athlete.

There are numerous examples of brand extensions in sports ranging from new leagues and tournaments, to broadcasting stations and pay-per-view programs (Apostolopoulou 2002). Specific to athletes, there are several examples of those who took a step further with their personal brands and launched products carrying their names (Stallen et al. 2010), some with no direct link to sports (Ratten 2015). For

example, Björn Borg, the famous tennis player is currently well known for his bags and underwear (Papp-Váry, 2011). The CR7 brand from Cristiano Ronaldo, David Beckham's perfumes and jeans, Annika of Annika Sorenstam (golfer), Jack Nicklaus Apparel of Jack Nicklaus (golfer), Westbrook XO from Russell Westbrook (NBA player), or EleVen clothing of Venus Williams (tennis) are just a few examples of athletes using their personal brands to extend into other product lines. Mujkic, Staškevičiūtė-Butienė, and Valantinė (2016) noted that the introduction of athlete's own branded products often has a positive impact on his/her image. The extension products may contribute to increased emotional attachment of the consumer towards the athlete (Apostolopoulou 2002), and help attenuate the inevitable phase of an athlete brand decline. The extensions of Michael Jordan's brand were vital to the increased popularity of Air Jordan worldwide (Denzin 2001), and many years after Jordan's retirement, Air Jordan is so popular that on Black Friday shoppers lined up for Air Jordan 3 shoes (MetroNews 2016). These examples highlight the need for athletes' entrepreneurial actions to increase their fame and reinforce the link with fans. In addition, key aspects to a successful brand extension are athlete prestige, distinctiveness and perceived fit of the athlete-product (Walsh and Williams 2017); in addition to an athlete's origin, extension fit, gender, performance, and impression (Hasaan et al. 2018). Thus, we argue that brand extensions represent an important aspect to consider in lengthening the life cycle of an athlete's brand, delaying brand decline, and helping to increase the likeliness for future opportunities of brand reinvention after retirement.

The decline of an athlete brand constitutes a stage that should be managed even more carefully by athletes and their managers. According to Fox et al. (2012), the final stage of the playing lifecycle can be referred to as the transitioning or pre-retirement years. Cortsen (2013) suggests that athlete brands may be damaged if the athlete does

not fulfil fan expectations, and in this context, poor performance may cause a decline in athlete brand even before his/her retirement (Hamlin et al. 2006) An athlete's retirement is an unavoidable situation in any sport career, causing a decline in athlete visibility and sometimes casting negative effects on brand image (Taylor and Lavallee 2010).

Evander Holyfield (former world heavyweight boxing champion) not only lost his popularity, but also lost most of his earnings after retirement. However, this decline may be avoided (or at least delayed) by the acquisition of athlete capital to facilitate the introduction of brand extensions and/or the achievement of an iconic status. Sports managers should be aware that simply being a successful athlete does not guarantee a highly successful brand (Kristiansen and Williams 2015). Muhammad Ali, for example is known as an icon of boxing, sports, and America in general because of not only his athletic success, but also his community work and political activism. Conversely, Floyd Mayweather has a better professional record but is unable to surpass Muhammad Ali's brand status. It is difficult to assess if Mayweather will be as admired as Ali, or whether he will be just another retired former world heavyweight champion (Iole 2015).

Athlete capital is related to the accumulated media visibility of prominent athletes while actively competing, allowing for the development of strong trustworthiness (Driessens 2013; Hunter et al. 2009). Thus, athlete capital may represent a key aspect for achieving an iconic status. High visibility associated with good performance, a reputation of being a representative of the country of origin, and keenly contributing to that country's culture and success are key aspects to promote an athlete's iconic status (Li et al. 2010). Manny Pacquiao, a top athlete, national hero, and idol in the Philippines provides an example of the importance of being role models in all their behaviours on- and off-field (Arai et al. 2013). These positive aspects provide an

opportunity for an athlete to achieve long-lasting position in people's minds (Summers and Morgan 2008) leading to a longer life cycle and postponing brand decline.

Finally, brand reinvention assumes a critical importance in the athlete brand life cycle. As former athletes become more like the remainder of the population (Baillie and Danish 1992), the reinvention of their brands can contribute to once again gaining attention in a new career, whether it be sport-related (e.g., coach, manager, TV commentator) or non-sport-related (e.g., politician, show business personal). This reinvention will help keep the athlete's name alive in people's mind, and contribute to maintaining the link with fans after the end of the athlete's active career. Athletes and managers should focus on athlete brand reinvention by considering suitable alternate careers prior to retirement, and this should be carefully planned beforehand to avoid an accentuated decline. In this respect, the development of educational programs to help former athletes transfer their skills into to new areas of work (and provide them with new workable skills) may be pivotal given that athlete experiences and accumulated knowledge can facilitate the post-retirement era (dos Santos, Nogueira, and Böhme 2016). Boris Becker, who retired long ago and lost a great part of his popularity, only rediscovered the glory of being in the spotlight through recently coaching Novak Djokovic (Clarey 2016).

## **Conclusion**

The current study discussed the athlete brand life cycle by expanding the traditional life cycle used for products. Drawing on product life cycle and athlete brand literature, we suggest that athlete brand life cycle can be explained through five stages. Challenges exist for athletes at each stage, but the choice of appropriate marketing actions (suggested in the examples below) can extend the athlete brand life cycle. Also, the accumulation of athlete capital may prolong the life cycle of an athlete brand due to its

potential to translate to an iconic status (despite being only accessible for very few athletes). Furthermore, the role of brand extensions is crucial in understanding how to extend the athlete brand life cycle. This conceptual framework takes into account the complexity of athlete brands, the instability of continued performance, and the inherent risk of injury (Arai et al. 2014). These characteristics, positive or negative associations with the athletes, age, maturity, and physical limitations create numerous challenges as compared to the life cycle of traditional products. While this study represents an initial attempt to comprehend the athlete brand life cycle in totality, the proposed model allows for numerous research opportunities, while also aiding practitioners on how to understand and extend an athlete's brand life.

### **Limitation and future research direction**

As with any study, there are limitations that should be considered for future research endeavours. First, while this study is conceptual in nature, it is important to collect data in subsequent studies to empirically examine the appropriateness of the proposed model. It is also important to note that although this proposed conceptualization represents an important step to understand athlete brand life cycle, previous studies have suggested that cultural aspects may also affect how consumers react to sport brands (Biscaia et al. 2013; McCracken 1989). In this sense, future studies could collect data in different countries and with different athletes to better understand the development and management of athlete brand life cycle from a cultural perspective. Also, due to the nature of the proposed model, longitudinal studies would be appropriate. This would be particularly important for testing how consumers with different levels of involvement react to athlete brands in different stages of the life cycle, given that previous research has suggested that involvement is an important aspect to better understand reactions towards sport brand and products (Beaton et al. 2011; Fernandes et al. 2013).

Second, the proposed model introduced new concepts that have not been previously discussed in the literature pertaining to athlete brands (i.e., athlete post-retirement career). Therefore, it may be useful to analyse these concepts separately in future studies to understand their unique role and effects in the context of athlete branding. Future studies focused on athlete's retirement and athlete's post-retirement career in the context of athlete branding may also contribute to further understand these two critical stages of athlete brand life cycle. Conducting in depth interviews with fans of active and retired athletes may be necessary to better understand how to manage each stage in the athlete life cycle, including brand reinvention strategies.

Finally, some concepts introduced in this study, such as athlete iconic status, are very sophisticated, complex, and multifaceted in nature. Archetti (2001) suggested that some players can transform themselves into heroes and cultural icons, while others cannot. In this sense, future research could compare iconic athletes with other athletes, and focus on better understanding the paths leading to the achievement of an athlete's iconic status. For example, it may be beneficial to explore examples such as why Diego Maradona is an Argentinian sporting icon while Lionel Messi is not, or why no other professional boxer has ever able to achieve the popularity of Muhammad Ali. These future research opportunities would be fruitful in extending our understanding of athlete brands and their life cycles.

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Figure 1. Proposed model of athlete brand life cycle.

