The Role of Self-Brand Connection on the Relationship Between Athlete Brand Image and Fan Outcomes

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The role of self-brand connection on the relationship between athlete brand image and fan outcomes

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35   **The role of self-brand connection on the relationship between athlete brand image and**

36   **fan outcomes**

37   **Abstract**

38   This research explores the role of athlete on-field and off-field brand image on consumer

39   commitment toward the athlete and associated team, preference by athlete's sponsor, and the

40   mediating effect of consumers' self-brand connection on these relationships. Data were

41   collected from fans of soccer players through a cross-sectional survey promoted on social

42   media platforms. A partial least squares structural equation model examined the direct effects

43   of both athlete brand dimensions on athlete commitment, team commitment and athlete

44   sponsor preference, and the indirect effects mediated via self-brand connection. The results

45   indicate that athlete on-field image is significantly related to athlete sponsor preference, while

46   the off-field image influences athlete commitment and team commitment. Self-brand

47   connection is influenced by athlete off-field image, and mediates the relationship between

48   off-field image and athlete commitment. This study contributes to a better understanding of

49   how to manage athlete brands and linkages between fans, athletes and associated entities.

50

51   **Keywords:** Athlete Brand; Brand Associations; Fan Commitment; Sponsorship; Spill-over

52   Effects; Self-brand Connection.

53   **Introduction**

54   Athletes enjoy increasing levels of social influence extending well beyond the sports

55   in which they compete (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2013; Parmentier, 2011). Today's athletes

56   often inspire their supporters (Kerr & Gladden, 2008) and many serve as multiplatform

57   promotional entities that draw attention from media and corporate sponsors (Arai et al., 2013;

58   Summers & Johnson Morgan, 2008). As illustrated by Forbes' (2017) inclusion of athletes in

59   their yearly "Most Valuable Sports Brands" list, athletes themselves have become brands

60   (Chadwick & Burton, 2008). This trend has been exacerbated by the global expansion of

61   social media platforms, which has shifted away from team-following toward athlete-

62   following (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). For example, in May 2019, Cristiano Ronaldo

63   (165 million) had more than double the number of Instagram followers than his former club

64   Real Madrid (71 million) and eight times the amount of his current club Juventus (26

65   million); and has signed a one-billion dollar lifetime endorsement deal with Nike in 2016

66   because of his image and reach (Badenhausen, 2016). Similarly, Ben Simmons (4.2 million)

67   had more than double the number of followers on Instagram than his team, the Philadelphia

68   76ers (1.8 million). These athletes often act as entrepreneurs of their own brands (Ratten,

69   2015), and require strategic growth management guidance to build their audience

70   (Agyemang, Williams, & Kim, 2015).

71   Athlete branding has become a topic of academic inquiry, not just a trend in

72   marketing. Recent studies have focused on the conceptualization of athletes' brand image

73   (e.g., Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010). Arai et al.

74   (2014) proposed a model based on athletic performance (e.g., skills, performance), attractive

75   appearance (e.g., physical attractiveness, personal style), and marketable life style (e.g., off-

76   field life story, role model). Parmentier and Fisher (2012) suggested that athlete brand image

77   depends on professional image (e.g., playing opportunities) and his/her media persona (e.g.,

78   end-consumer awareness), and Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) categorized Instagram

79 posts into two types: front stage (e.g., on-field performance) and backstage (e.g., personal

80 life). Although there is no consensus on the most relevant athlete brand associations, there

81 seems to be agreement among researchers that on-field image and off-field image are the two

82 key dimensions to properly understand athlete brands (e.g., Eagleman-Geurin & Burch,

83 2016). Following this reasoning, Hasaan, Kerem, Biscaia, and Agyemang (2018) have

84 proposed a framework based on on-field and off-field image, although the model has not

85 been empirically tested.

86   Previous studies have suggested that brand image influences attitudinal and

87 behavioral outcomes linked with the athlete and related entities, such as the athlete's team

88 and sponsors (Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Yu, 2005; Williams, Kim, Agyemang, Martin,

89 2015). Research on sport brand architecture indicates that brands are evaluated in context,

90 rather than in isolation, and that image spill-over happens between brands in a portfolio (e.g.,

91 Cobbs, Groza, & Rich, 2015). Despite the common understanding of athletes as brands,

92 studies utilizing branding theories to expound the phenomena still require further

93 development to better understand fan reactions to athletes and related entities (Arai et al.,

94 2013; Hasaan et al., 2018). Star players are regularly cited as brand associations of teams

95 (e.g., Daniels, Kunkel, & Karg, 2019) and superstar athletes have the potential to impact the

96 gate revenue of their team (e.g., Shapiro, DeShriver, & Rasher, 2017). Similarly, high profile

97 athletes are regularly used as brand endorsers (Chanavat, Desbordes, & Dickson, 2016; Fink,

98 Parker, Cunningham, & Cuneen, 2012) and some have become entrepreneurs through

99 leveraging the value of their personal brand and social reach (Ratten, 2015). However, the

100 unique influence of athletes' on-field and off-field brand image on fan's attitude toward the

101 athletes, their teams and sponsors requires empirical testing (Summers & Johnson Morgan,

102 2008).

103   The recognition of athletes' positive on-field and off-field image may not always

104 translate into favorable attitudes toward the athlete and related entities. For example, statistics

105   indicate that Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi have similar outstanding achievements

106   differentiating them from other soccer athletes, yet people have strong opinions (positive &

107   negative) toward them (The Guardian, 2017). This difference may be related with the on-field

108   and off-field brand image of the athlete, as well as fans' self-brand connection, given that

109   extant branding research shows that consumers support brands that are congruent with their

110   self-brand image (Escalas & Bettman, 2003) and a strong self-brand connection often leads

111   consumers to develop and maintain a committed relationship with the brand (Fournier, 1998).

112   In a celebrity endorsement context, self-brand connection has been suggested to partly

113   mediate the relationship between the perceived credibility of an endorser and the subsequent

114   endorsed brand equity (Dwivedi, Johnson, & McDonald, 2015). Consequently, self-brand

115   connection may play a role on the relationship between athlete brand image and consumers'

116   commitment toward the athlete; (2) the athlete's team; and (3) the athlete's sponsor.

117   The purpose of this research was threefold. First, we examined the relationship

118   between athlete's on-field and off-field brand image and consumers' commitment to the

119   athlete. Second, we tested the impact of athlete brand image on consumer outcomes toward

120   related entities, such as his/her commitment to the team and sponsor preference. Third, we

121   examined whether these relationships were mediated by consumers' self-brand connection to

122   the athletes. Data were collected from social media users who supported professional soccer

123   athletes. This research contributes to both sport marketing research and practice by

124   examining the specific brand associations that form the on-field and off-field brand image of

125   athletes, their impact on consumers' reactions toward the athlete and related entities, and the

126   mediating role of self-brand connection to the athlete. The research findings provide insights

127   for agents and athletes building their own brands as entrepreneurs, as well as teams and

128   sponsors investing in athletes to build their brand.

129   **Literature Review**

130   **Athlete branding**

131   A brand represents a "repository of meanings fueled by a combination of marketers'

132   intentions, consumers' interpretations, and numerous sociocultural networks' associations"

133   (Parmentier, 2011, p. 219). This means that the value of a brand lies in all descriptive and

134   evaluative information held in consumers' memory. Information processing theories form the

135   basis for branding research (Allen, Fournier, & Miller, 2008). For example, Keller's (1993)

136   seminal work of customer-based brand equity model was based on the associative network

137   memory model (Anderson, 1983), premising consumers' various decision making largely

138   depends on their knowledge of the brand and the thoughts they link with the brand. When

139   applied to athletes, this brand knowledge consists of awareness of the athlete and his/her

140   brand image (e.g., Arai et al., 2014). As such, an athlete's brand image refers to the set of

141   associations that people identify with a particular athlete (e.g., Parmentier, Fischer, & Reuber,

142   2013), and its development requires fans' awareness of the athlete and an understanding of

143   how the athlete is different from other athletes (Montoya, 2002; Hasaan et al., 2018). While

144   athlete brand awareness is often generated through team/sport prominence and socializing

145   agents such as media and peer group influence (Hasaan et al., 2018), brand image generation

146   is more controllable by the athlete (Arai et al., 2014).

147   Athlete brand image is multi-faceted. While Keller's original customer-based brand

148   equity model (1993) categorized brand associations into attributes (consumer associations of

149   the product's descriptive characteristics), benefits (personal value consumer attach to the

150   product) and attitudes (overall consumer evaluation of the brand), brand attributes have been

151   suggested to represent controllable aspects of the athlete brand and important predictors of

152   consumers' subsequent reactions to the athletes and associated brands (Arai et al., 2014).

153   Consequently, Arai et al. (2013; 2014) proposed and empirically tested a model of athlete

154   brand image (MABI) consisting of 10 associations across three key dimensions: athletic

155 performance, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle. These studies were instrumental

156 in understanding athletes as brands and highlighted how on-field performance (e.g., athletic

157 performance) does not capture every facet of an athlete's brand, and that there are other

158 associations not related to on-field performance (e.g., marketable lifestyle or social

159 attractiveness) that contribute to creating an athlete brand in fans' minds. Yu (2005) further

160 argued that a fan's connection to a certain athlete is influenced by his/her successful career

161 and personal life's appeal, and Arai et al. (2013) highlighted that athletes achieve their status

162 as brands through their outstanding performance on the field but also via their distinctive

163 lifestyle. For example, athletes such as David Beckham or Cristiano Ronaldo are strong

164 brands in the marketplace that have heavily relied on both on-field and off-field brand

165 building activities (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

166   It follows then that both on-field and off-field image should be considered when

167 examining an athlete's brand (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). Following Braunstein and Zhang

168 (2005) and Arai et al. (2013; 2014), Hasaan et al. (2018) conducted a literature review and

169 proposed a conceptual framework of athlete brand based on-field and off-field image. Given

170 that athletes primarily develop their brand status based on continued excellence and success

171 in their sport, on-field image attributes represent a crucial component of athlete brand image

172 (Arai et al., 2013). The on-field image attributes refer to performance-related characteristics

173 of an athlete (Arai et al., 2014) and in the current research include the dimensions of *Fair*

174 *Play, Effort, Achievements*, *Style of Play, Impact,* and *Skills* (Arai et al., 2013; Chadwick &

175 Burton, 2008; Hasaan et al., 2018). Additionally, the public persona of an athlete is important

176 to brand status (Walsh & Williams, 2017), given how off-field activities tend to contribute to

177 an athlete's broad public perception (Arai et al., 2014; Summers & Johnson Morgan, 2008).

178   Parmentier and Fischer (2012) further posited that, unlike products and services that

179 are produced purely to serve markets, person brands have purposes beyond bringing profit to

180 themselves or the organization they work in. Similarly, Thomson (2006) refers that

181   connections with human brands imply a bona fine human being (e.g., David Beckham) and

182   not an inanimate object (e.g., book). To this end, the off-field image of an athlete is related to

183   his/her life beyond the sport activity, and are conceptualized in the current research through

184   the dimensions of *Physical Attraction*, *Body Conditioning, Lifestyle*, *Personality*, *Cultural*

185   *Background*, *Social Responsibility,* and *Role Model* (e.g., Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al,

186   2018; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). The definitions of the on-field and off-field image used in

187   this study, theoretical support, and examples for each association are provided in Table 1.

188   ====================**INSERT TABLE 1 HERE**====================

189   **Hypotheses development**

190   Researchers have proposed that both the on-field and off-field image of athletes are

191   important parts of establishing and sustaining a connection with fans (e.g., Arai et al., 2013;

192   Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). However, there is a lack of empirical evidence demonstrating

193   the impact of athlete associations on fans' loyalty toward the athlete. Examining sport brand

194   elements that drive fans' reactions is paramount to increase brand health (Biscaia et al., 2016),

195   which suggests the importance of understanding how consumer perceptions of an athlete's

196   on-field and off-field image influence their commitment to support that athlete. Building on

197   the fact consumer commitment is a vital component of loyalty toward brands (Arai et al.,

198   2014; Oliver, 1999; Tsiotsou, 2013; Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000), the current study measures

199   consumers' psychological commitment to an athlete (i.e. athlete commitment) and examines

200   how it is impacted by both the on-field and off-field image of that athlete.

201   Thomson (2006) posits human brands (e.g., athletes) are often perceived as sources of

202   attractiveness (familiarity, likeability, and/or similarity) and credibility (expertise and

203   trustworthiness), and evidence from daily life indicates that attractiveness and lifestyle are

204   often the subject of great fan interest (The Guardian, 2016). Source credibility and

205   attractiveness models (McGuire, 1985) can be used to explain the impact of athlete image on

206   consumer perceptions of the athlete. That is, athletes who are well known and liked by

207   individuals are likely to be the object of strong interest and followership (Geurin-Eagleman &

208   Burch, 2016; Väätäinen & Dickenson, 2018). Thomson (2006)'s study indicates consumers

209   can develop committed relationship with human brands (e.g., athletes) that are similar to real

210   interpersonal relationship. By repeatedly being exposed to the image of a human brand,

211   consumers feel emotional security and fulfilment of fundamental needs (i.e., autonomy,

212   relatedness, and competence) provided by the human brand, and subsequently develop

213   satisfied, trusting, and committed relationships. This process provides initial evidence how

214   athlete image can affect consumers' commitment toward that athlete.

215   Additionally, findings from brand research demonstrate that team brand associations

216   affect consumer reactions (e.g., Biscaia et al., 2016; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Kunkel, Doyle,

217   Funk, Du, & McDonald, 2016; Moore & Homer, 2008; Watkins, 2014), and the Fan Attitude

218   Network (FAN) model (Funk & James, 2004) posits that consumers develop a positive

219   attitude toward a sport brand when they perceive that the brand has attractive attributes (e.g.,

220   Funk, Beaton & Alexandris, 2012). For instance, Lunardo, Gergaud, and Livat (2015) found

221   that personality dimensions (i.e., sophistication, sincerity, competence, excitement, and

222   appeal) have a positive impact on a celebrity's appeal. Moreover, consumer commitment with

223   athletes and teams throughout time is an important pillar for the sport industry to succeed

224   (e.g., Wang, Zhang, & Tsuji, 2011; Wu, Tsai, & Hung, 2012; Gladden & Funk, 2001) and,

225   regardless of the focal entity, brand associations are often suggested to be paramount to

226   understand the level of commitment toward a brand (Arai et al., 2014; Kunkel et al., 2016;

227   Yoo et al., 2000). As such, Summers and Johnson Morgan (2008) indicate consumers expect

228   exemplary behavior both on- and off-field from athletes. However, sports fans can generally

229   separate the on- and off-field behaviors of athletes (Lee & Kwak, 2016; Summer & Johnson

230   Morgan, 2008) and are willing to manage their expectations accordingly. Consequently, the

231   following hypotheses were developed to examine how an athlete's on-field and off-field

232   image affects consumers' commitment to that athlete:

233   **Hypothesis 1a**: Consumers' perceptions of an athlete's on-field image are positively

234   related with athlete commitment.

235   **Hypothesis 1b**: Consumers' perceptions of an athlete's off-field image are positively

236   related with athlete commitment.

237   Research in sport brand architecture—the organizing structure of a brand portfolio—

238   indicates that entities at all levels in the sport industry are connected (Cobbs et al., 2015;

239   Williams et al., 2015). For example, in the context of professional spectator sport, a league

240   often represents the master brand that provides the framework for teams to compete, while

241   teams represent sub-brands that provide the core product within the portfolio of the league

242   (Kunkel, Funk, & King, 2014). Similarly, it has been proposed that athletes are integrated

243   into the brand portfolio of their teams (Williams et al., 2015). Leagues and teams both

244   influence consumer involvement (Stevens & Rosenberger, 2010), because they are in a

245   mixed-branding brand architecture where they are visibly connected, and consumer

246   perceptions of the team influence consumer perceptions of the league (Kunkel, Funk, &

247   Lock, 2017). Studies have demonstrated that sub-brands can affect the evaluation of the

248   master brand by either diluting or enhancing its corporate brand image (Balachander &

249   Ghose, 2003). Consequently, it is important to investigate the impact of athletes on their

250   related entities in the framework of sport brand architecture.

251   Researchers have highlighted the impact of athletes on their teams (e.g., Brandes,

252   Franck, & Nüesch, 2008), leagues (e.g., Shapiro et al., 2017), and sponsors (e.g., Fink et al.,

253   2012). Drawing on the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1986), which posits that

254   meaning is transferred in the mind of consumers between related brands, we extend Kunkel et

255   al.'s (2014) conceptualization of sport brand architecture to athletes. That is, athletes can be

256   considered as sub-brands that are visibly connected to their respective teams, which represent

257   the master brand from a structural perspective (i.e., the team governs the athlete). For

258   example, the transfer of David Beckham to Major League Soccer (MLS) contributed to the

259   brand image and revenue of the MLS as a whole and his new team, LA Galaxy (Shapiro et

260   al., 2017). Following this rationale, understanding how perceptions of an athlete's on- and

261   off-field brand image affects consumers' psychological commitment to the associated team

262   (i.e., team commitment) represents an important step when managing the brands within the

263   sport ecosystem. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were developed.

264   **Hypothesis 2a**: Consumers' perceptions of an athlete's on-field image are positively

265   related with team commitment.

266   **Hypothesis 2b**: Consumers' perceptions of an athlete's off-field image are positively

267   related with team commitment.

268   In a similar way, research has also indicated that athletes influence consumers'

269   reactions of their sponsors. Like with athletes, teams and leagues, consumers transfer the

270   meanings associated with an endorser to a brand when an associative link is established

271   between them (Amos, Holmes, & Strutton, 2008; Fink et al., 2012). This relationship has also

272   been demonstrated for leagues and their sponsors (e.g., Farrelly & Quester, 2005), teams and

273   their sponsors (e.g., Biscaia, Correia, Ross, Rosado, & Marôco, 2013), and athletes and their

274   sponsors (e.g., Yu, 2005). Given the mixed-branding architecture of sport brands, athlete

275   brand image has been proposed to transfer to their sponsors (e.g., Chanavat et al., 2016,

276   Chanavat, Martinent, & Ferrand, 2009). The social attractiveness and professional

277   trustworthiness of the athletes often make them marketable for sponsorship deals (Ratten,

278   2015; Summer & Johnson Morgan, 2008), and the ultimate goal of sponsors is to orient

279   consumer preferences toward their products (Barros & Silvestre, 2006), as sponsors expect

280   return on the investments on the athletes (Yu, 2005). Thus, examining how athlete's on-field

281   and off-field image influences athlete sponsor preference (i.e., consumers' positive

282   evaluations of athlete sponsors and willingness to purchase associated products) is critical to

283   optimize athlete-sponsor relationships. Based on the mixed-branding architecture of sport

284   brands, the following hypotheses were developed:

285   **Hypothesis 3a**: Consumers' perceptions of an athlete's on-field image are positively

286   related with athlete sponsor preference.

287   **Hypothesis 3b**: Consumers' perceptions of an athlete's off-field image are positively

288   related with athlete sponsor preference.

289   Fans create connections with brands (Escalas & Bettman, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman &

290   Burch, 2016). For example, action sports athletes (e.g., snowboarders) frame their athletic life

291   under an extreme environment allowing them to actively communicate a symbolic meaning

292   that fosters a sense of identification and attract loyal audiences. Consistent with this view,

293   self-brand connections are formed when consumers engage in a matching process to identify

294   brands that are congruent with their self-images (Chaplin & John, 2005). The current study

295   theorizes that the meaning linked to athlete brands is vital for consumers to develop a self-

296   brand connection with certain athletes.

297   Self-brand connection is defined as the degree to which a brand delivers on important

298   identity concerns, tasks or themes, thereby expressing a significant aspect of self, including to

299   past (nostalgic), current and future (possible or desired) selves (Fournier, 1998). Fournier

300   (1998) argued that self-brand connection and commitment are two related but different

301   aspects contributing to strengthen the ties between consumers and brands. While self-brand

302   connection refers to fans' perception of how closely the athlete represents themselves (e.g.,

303   Escalas, 2004), fans' commitment toward the athlete is a subsequent response indicating their

304   promise to the relationship with the athlete, as described for teams in the FAN model (Funk

305   & James, 2004). The self-brand connection framework contends that people use brands to

306   create and represent their (desired) self-concept and to present their self-concept internally

307   and externally (Chaplin & John, 2005; Escalas, 2004). Escalas and Bettman (2015) further

308   argued that the set of brand associations is more meaningful for consumers when it is closely

309   linked to their self-concept because it can be used to construct their self-image. Furthermore,

310   according to the self-expansion theory (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), people possess an

311   inherent motivation to incorporate others (i.e. brands) into their self-concept, and consumers

312   for whom self-brand connection is high are likely to commit to a relationship with a brand

313   leading to greater loyalty (Parks, MacInnis, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). For example, a

314   fan who feels strongly self-connected to Stephen Curry is likely to become loyal to him.

315   Thus, consumers matching their self-image with the athlete is a key aspect preceding a

316   consumer to commit to a relationship with the athlete brand.

317   Moreover, previous studies considered sports celebrities as product endorsers and

318   examined how consumers form self-brand connections through the symbolic brand meaning

319   derived from the celebrity endorser (Dwivedi et al., 2015; Escalas & Bettman, 2015, 2017).

320   Based on the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1986), symbolic properties are first

321   associated with the brands the celebrity endorses and the symbolic meanings are transferred from

322   the celebrity to consumers (Escalas & Bettman, 2009). When the symbolic meaning associated

323   with the celebrities is used to communicate the self-concept to others, the meaning is internalized

324   to consumers and a self-brand connection is formed. By applying the rationale to the athlete

325   brand context, the current study argues that on-field and off-field image of an athlete may

326   convey a symbolic meaning to consumers, who will likely form a self-brand connection with

327   that athlete if they identify with those symbolic properties. Dwivedi et al. (2015) further

328   investigated the impact of celebrity endorsers' image on endorsed brand outcomes and found that

329   self-brand connection partly mediates the relationship between the endorser and associated

330   products. In addition, self-brand connection has been suggested to increase brand relationship

331   durability regardless of the circumstances (Fournier, 1998; Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli,

332   2007). These studies provide support to the idea that celebrities are a direct source of symbolic

333   meaning for consumers and that self-brand connections influence reactions toward the athlete

334   brand and endorsed brands. Thus, the following hypotheses were developed, and all

335   hypotheses are visually presented in Figure 1.

336   **Hypothesis 4a:** Consumers' perceptions of an athlete's on-field image are positively

337   related with self-brand connection.

338   **Hypothesis 4b:** Consumers' perceptions of an athlete's off-field image are positively

339   related with self-brand connection.

340   **Hypothesis 5:** Self-brand connection has a positive relationship with a) athlete

341   commitment; b) team commitment; c) athlete sponsor preference.

342   **Hypothesis 6:** Self-brand connection partially mediates the relationship between on-field

343   image and a) athlete commitment; b) team commitment; c) athlete sponsor preference.

344   **Hypothesis 7:** Self-brand connection partially mediates the relationship between off-field

345   image and a) athlete commitment; b) team commitment; c) athlete sponsor preference.

346   ===================**INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE**====================

347   **Method**

348   A cross-sectional survey design was used to examine the relationships between athlete

349   brand image (conceptualized based on both on-field and off-field associations), self-brand

350   connection, athlete commitment, team commitment and athlete sponsor preference. We

351   choose one sport to eliminate sport-specific differences, focusing on soccer because of its

352   global prominence. Because consumers' perceptions of athlete brands are socially

353   constructed and dependent on various aspects, such as culture and context (e.g., Aaker,

354   Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001), we focused on measuring those brand associations that

355   are applicable to the most athletes.

356   **Procedures and Participants**

357   Quantitative data were collected to test the proposed hypotheses. Participants were

358   recruited via Twitter and Facebook through a video created by the authors titled "Who is your

359   favorite soccer player?" The video description included hashtags relevant to the topic, such as

360   #football, #soccer, #FIFA, #MLS and #EPL, and contained a link to a survey hosted by

361   Qualtrics. The video was promoted to individuals who 'liked' soccer-specific Facebook

362   pages, were in soccer-specific groups, or followed high-profile soccer athletes. Respondents

363   had a chance to win prizes, such as $100 vouchers for Amazon. A total of $200 was spent on

364   promoted posts on Facebook and $150 on promoted posts on Twitter.

365   A total of 455 respondents started the questionnaire during a period of two weeks.

366   After data cleaning, 279 responses were eliminated because they either completed the

367   questionnaire in an unrealistically short time, marked the same answer for every question,

368   provided inconsistent combinations, failed the attention check (i.e., "Click strongly disagree

369   to demonstrate that you are paying attention to the questions."), had duplicate IP addresses, or

370   did not answer the sponsorship question correctly. Subsequently, a total of 177 respondents,

371   representing a useable response rate of 38.9%, were included in the data analysis. Despite the

372   response rate and the use of a convenience sample, in a review of survey research best

373   practices, Hulland, Baumgartner and Smith (2018) highlighted that low response rate do not

374   necessarily represent a problem for theory testing, and that the use of convenience samples

375   suffice when the aim is to test the veracity of proposed relationships. It is also important to

376   note that although the sample size is slightly below the targeted 200 participants (Hair,

377   Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 2005), there is no absolute standard regarding adequate sample

378   size (Muthen & Muthen, 2002) and this rule of thumb has been suggested by some to be

379   simplistic (Wolf, Harrington, Clark, & Miller, 2013). Following Hinkin's (1995)

380   recommendations for an item-to-response ratio ranging from 1:4 to 1:10, an acceptable

381   sample size in the current study would be between 88 and 200 subjects. Also, through a

382   power analysis program with an anticipated effect size of .20 at a probability level of .05 and

383   at a statistical power level of .80 (Westland, 2010), the researchers concluded that 123

384   respondents would suffice for the current study. Additionally, the PLS algorithm that was

385   used to analyze data in the current research is not sensitive to small sample sizes (Hair,

386   Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011). Thus, the current sample was deemed suitable to test the research

387   hypotheses of this research.

388   Respondents were between 18 and 67 years old (M = 27.11; SD = 9.27). The majority

389   of the sample was male (59.4%) and had a university degree (70%). Most respondents were

390   from the United States (42.4%), Mexico (24.3%), and the United Kingdom (8.5%). A total of

391   86 different soccer players were mentioned as participants' favorite players, of which 90.7%

392   played in one of the top five European leagues (i.e. England, Germany, Spain, Italy and

393   France) and only 2.8% were female. The five most mentioned players were Lionel Messi

394   (12.9%), Cristiano Ronaldo (6.7%), Javier "Chicharito' Hernandez (6.2%), Mesut Ozil

395   (5.6%), and Thomas Mueller (3.4%). The wide range of mentioned athletes made it possible

396   to have a better understanding of athlete brands because it was not focused on one specific

397   athlete brand.

Materials

399   The questionnaire contained items measuring athlete brand image, consumer self-

400   brand connection, athlete commitment, team commitment and athlete sponsor preference.

401   These measures were adapted from existing literature (e.g., Arai et al., 2013; Biscaia et al.,

402   2013; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Ross, Russell, & Bang, 2008; Tsiotsou, 2013) and a process

403   of content and face validity. To capture athlete on-field and off-field associations, a list of

404   items influencing athlete brand image was developed based on Arai et al. (2013, 2014),

405   Hasaan et al. (2018) and Ross et al. (2008). The content and face validity of the items was

406   assessed by a panel of experts. Eight sport management academics were provided with

407   detailed information about the purpose of this study, a list of constructs containing the

408   associated definition and items. These academics were asked to rate each item on a 5-point

409   Likert scale *(1 = does not reflect construct at all; 5 = reflects construct very well)* in terms of

410   each criteria; relevance, representativeness and clarity. They were also asked to provide

411   qualitative feedback to improve the face validity of each item. Items with an average rating

412   below four (80% threshold; Polit & Beck, 2006) were removed. The item most accurately

413   measuring the core of each brand association was selected to be included in the questionnaire.

414   The use of single-item measures followed previous brand association research (e.g., Kunkel

415   et al., 2014; 2017), and was deemed appropriate because they captured the core of each brand

416   association (for a review see Rossiter, 2002) as determined in the expert feedback.

417   Additionally, single-item measures have been deemed preferable to multi-item measures for

418   online data collection as respondent fatigue was reduced and respondent frustration for

419   addressing similar questions about the same construct, such as asking three times whether an

420   athlete is attractive, could be avoided (cf., Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007). Thus, athlete on-field

421   image was measured with six items and athlete off-field image was measured with seven

422   items.

423   Consumer self-brand connection, athlete commitment, team commitment and athlete

424   sponsor preference were measured with multi-item constructs as they represented complex

425   psychographic constructs (cf., Rossiter, 2002). Consumer self-brand connection was

426   measured with three items adapted from Escalas and Bettman (2003) and Dwivedi et al.

427   (2015). Athlete commitment was measured with two items adapted from Tsiotsou (2013) and

428   Sumino and Harada (2004), while two items were also used to capture team commitment that

429   were derived from Wu et al. (2012) and Sumino and Harada (2004). In turn, athlete sponsor

430   preference was measured with two items derived from Biscaia et al. (2013). The

431   questionnaire was optimized for mobile devices and 5-point Likert scale items anchored from

432   *[1] = strongly disagree* to *[5] = strongly agree* were used. At the beginning of the

433   questionnaire, participants were asked who their favorite player was. Then, before being

434   exposed to the sponsor-related questions, they were asked "Which of the following brands

435   sponsor the athlete" with leading sport equipment manufacturers being listed (i.e., Nike,

436   Adidas, Reebok, Umbro, Under Armour). The sponsorship questions were then linked to the

437   sponsor that the respondent indicated and only respondents who correctly indicated the actual

438   sponsor of the athlete were included in the data analysis.

439   Given the study is cross-sectional with both independent and dependent variables

440   being collected from the same source at one moment in time, procedural remedies to alleviate

441   concerns about common method variance (CMV) bias were adopted (Hulland et al., 2018;

442   Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). First, the draft questionnaire was subjected

443   to a content and face validity procedure by an expert panel (Polit & Beck, 2006). Then, the

444   final items were randomized with a separation of dependent (athlete commitment, team

445   commitment, sponsor preference) and independent variables (on-field attributes, off-field

446   attributes, and self-brand connection) into different sections of the questionnaire (Hulland et

447   al., 2018). A complete list of the items is presented in Table 2.

448   **Data Analysis**

449   Data were analyzed via SPSS version 24 and SmartPLS version 3. Skewness and

450   Kurtosis were examined to evaluate data distribution. The proposed hypotheses were tested

451   using structural equation modeling (SEM). Data analysis was guided by considerations of the

452   direction of causality between a construct and its measures to avoid inaccurate conclusions

453   about the structural relationships between constructs (Jarvis, MacKenzie, Podsakoff, 2003).

454   Consequently, we followed recommendations to treat athlete brand image associations as

455   formative measures (i.e. direction of causality is from items to construct) where the meaning

456   of the brand was derived from the cumulative effect of the unique brand associations (for a

457   detailed review, see Kunkel et al., 2017). Following a formative approach, the items form the

458   latent constructs with arrows pointing from the item to the construct. Thus, unique brand

459   associations did not have to be conceptually interchangeable, did not have to covary, and

460   could have different antecedents (cf., Finn & Wang, 2014; Jarvis et al., 2003). This approach

461   is consistent with previous literature on sport consumers (e.g. Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012)

462   and followed Kunkel et al.'s (2017) recommendation that formative measures are preferred to

463   reflective measures when analyzing sport brand associations. For example, Kunkel and

464   colleagues treated consumers' evaluation of the logo of a sport league and whether the league

465   has star players as factors forming the brand image of the sport league. Similarly, an athlete

466   could have an interesting life story but not be physically attractive, yet, these associations are

467   both related to off-field image. Psychographic constructs such as consumer self-brand

468   connection, athlete commitment, team commitment and athlete sponsor preference were

469   treated as reflective measures. To evaluate psychometric properties of these measures,

470   internal consistency, average variance extracted (AVE) and squared-correlation tests of

471   discriminant validity were conducted (Hair et al., 2011).

472   Partial Least Squares (PLS) SEM regression analysis with bootstrapping was

473   employed to analyze the hypothesized model. PLS-SEM analysis was selected over

474   covariance-based SEM, as it allowed for the inclusion of formative and reflective measures

475   and can handle small sample sizes (Hair et al., 2011). Guidelines recommended by Hair et al.

476   (2011) were followed to assess the model. To evaluate formative constructs, tests for multi-

477   collinearity examined whether each indicator's variance inflation factor (VIF) was less than

478   the recommended threshold of five [5], and tests for validity examined whether the parameter

479   estimates for each indicator was statistically significant (at the 5% level) after a

480   nonparametric bootstrapping procedure of 5,000 resamples (Hair et al., 2011). These tests

481   replace standard tests of covariance-based SEM, such as the average variance extracted of the

482   latent formative construct or factor loading thresholds of over .60 (for a detailed review, see

483   Hair et al., 2011). This process represents the preferred method for examining models with

484   mediating variables (Cheung & Lau, 2008) and followed previous sport management research

485   (cf., Magnusen, Kim, & Kim, 2012). Mediation effects examined whether the confidence

486   intervals for bootstrapping procedures were significantly different from zero. These

487   bootstrapping tests provided a robustness check on the standard error and corresponding

488   statistical significance of the proposed mediation effects. The direct, indirect, and total effects

489   of the proposed model were tested via PLS-SEM regression analysis.

490   **Results**

491   **Assessment of the measures**

492   Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2. Data were positively skewed with

493   mean scores significantly above three (3), which represents the mid-point of the 5-point

494   Likert scale items, for all athlete brand image associations. However, skewness (values

495   smaller than -1.779) and kurtosis (values smaller than 3.364) indicated that data distribution,

496   and consequently multi-collinearity, was not an issue (Hair et al., 2011). The validity

497   assessment of on-field and off-field image associations showed that *Fair Play, Impact,* and

498   *Skill* had no statistically significant relationship with on-field brand image associations; yet,

499   following Jarvis et al.'s (2003) recommendations for formative models, these items were

500   retained to avoid omitting unique parts of the composite variable and prevent restricting the

501   theoretical domain of the construct. The mean score for on-field image ($M = 4.54$, $SD = .779$)

502   was higher than for off-field image ($M = 3.96$, $SD = .959$), while athlete commitment was the

503   outcome variable with the highest mean score ($M = 4.23$, $SD = .923$). In addition, Cronbach α

504   scores and composite reliability (CR) scores of the reflective constructs exceeded the

505   recommended threshold of .70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), providing support for the

506   internal consistency of these constructs.

507   =====================**ENTER TABLE 2 HERE** =====================

508   The correlation matrix for the constructs and average variance extracted (AVE) tests

509   of discriminant validity are presented in Table 3. The AVE scores varied from .655 (self-

510   brand connection) to .899 (athlete sponsor preference), exceeding the recommended threshold

511   of .50, and provided evidence of convergent validity. In addition, evidence of discriminant

512   validity was accepted given that the correlation coefficients were lower than the suggested

513   criterion of .85 (Kline, 2005) and none of the squared correlations exceeded the AVE values

514   for each associated construct (Hair et al., 2011). Both formative constructs (on-field and off-

515   field brand image) and reflective constructs (self-brand connection, athlete commitment, team

516   commitment and athlete sponsor preference) showed good psychometric properties.

517   Consequently, the structural model was examined.

518   =====================ENTER TABLE 3 HERE =====================

519   **Hypotheses testing**

520   The results of the structural model are pictorially presented in Figure 2 and

521   bootstrapping results are presented in Table 4. The model explained 39.2% of self-brand

522   connection, 46.2% athlete commitment, 11.9% team commitment, and 11.3% athlete sponsor

523   preference. The path coefficients from on-field image to athlete commitment and team

524   commitment were not significant ($p > .05$). As such, *H1a* and *H2a* were not supported; yet,

525   there was a significant positive effect of on-field image on athlete sponsor preference ($\beta =$

526   .251, $p < .05$) supporting *H3a*. In turn, off-field image was positively related to athlete

527   commitment ($\beta = .313$, $p < .05$) and team commitment ($\beta = .326$, $p < .05$), but not to athlete

528   sponsor preference ($p > .05$). Therefore, *H1b* and *H2b* were supported while *H3b* was not

529   supported. The relationship between athlete image and self-brand connection was only

530   significant for on-field image ($\beta = .602$), thus supporting *H4a,* but not *H4b.* In turn, self-

531   brand connection showed a significant positive effect on athlete commitment ($\beta = .490$), but

532   not on neither team commitment nor athlete sponsor preference ($p > .05$). Therefore, *H5a* was

533   supported while *H5b* and *H5c* were not supported. Self-brand connection did not show a

534   significant mediating effect on the relationship between on-field image with athlete

535   commitment, team commitment and athlete sponsor preference ($p > .05$) not supporting *H6a,*

536   *H6b* and *H6c*. Finally, self-brand connection partially mediated the relationship between off-

537   field image and athlete commitment ($\beta = .295$), supporting *H7a,* but the effect was not

538   significant for team commitment and athlete sponsor preference. Therefore, *H7b* and *H7c*

539   were not supported.

540   ===============ENTER TABLE 4 & FIGURE 2 HERE =================

541   **Discussion**

542   The purpose of this study was to explore the role of athlete brand image dimensions

543   (on-field and off-field) on athlete commitment, team commitment and athlete sponsorship

544   preference, as well as the mediating effects of self-brand connection on these relationships.

545   The current study extends previous research by conceptualizing and measuring on-field and

546   off-field associations that contribute to athlete brand image, as well as by examining the role

547   of these associations on fan outcomes to different brands in the sport ecosystem. More

548   specifically, it extends the body of knowledge related to athlete branding by (1) empirically

549   testing the associations that contribute to athletes' on-field and off-field brand image, (2)

550   exploring the impact of athlete brand image on consumer commitment toward the athlete and

551   associated team and preference of athlete-related sponsors, and (3) examining the mediating

552   role of self-brand connection on the relationship between athlete brand image and other

553   outcomes (i.e., athlete commitment, team commitment, and athlete sponsor preference. We

554   extend previous studies focusing on athlete brand outcomes that have either not incorporated

555   fans' view (e.g. Hasaan et al., 2018; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012) or simply examined fan

556   reactions to athletes (Arai et al., 2013) by examining reactions to teams and sponsors. Also,

557   the current study extends previous research by conceptualizing and measuring on-field and

558   off-field associations that contribute to athlete brand image, as well as by examining the

559   effect of these associations on the athlete's team and sponsors. This is of vital importance

560   because brands do not act in isolation and the sport ecosystem is composed by a variety of

561   brands with potential to influence each other (Chanavat et al., 2016).

562   **Athlete brand image**

563   The results show that respondents evaluated on-field brand associations positively

564   with all mean scores above the mid-point. The positive evaluation is related to the fact that

565   the mentioned favorite athletes competed at the highest level, with many having global star

566   status. The brand associations of *Effort, Achievement,* and *Style of Play* had a significant

567   positive relationship with athletes' on-field brand image, whereas the brand associations *Fair*

568   *Play, Impact,* and *Skill* did not show a significant positive relationship with athletes' on-field

569   brand image. These findings indicate that while consumers acknowledged the *Skill* and

570   *Impact* of a player on the field, supporting propositions by previous athlete brand research

571   (e.g., Arai et al., 2013, 2014; Braunstein & Zhang, 2005), these associations did not

572   distinguish the athlete brand from other athletes who also have a high level of skill and are

573   impactful on the field. This may have been related to the fact the athletes in our sample have

574   all a high-profile. Nevertheless, there may be instances where athletes have built their brand

575   on unique associations that are not-significant for the majority of athletes. Brand associations

576   such as *Skill* may represent the foundation to generate brand awareness which together with

577   brand image form brand equity. Conversely, the athlete's individual *Style of Play* and *Effort*

578   on the field, as well as personal *Achievements*, seem to build the on-field brand more

579   effectively, providing initial empirical support for recent athlete brand research (e.g., Arai et

580   al., 2013, 2014; Hasaan et al., 2018; Väätäinen & Dickenson, 2018).

581   The examined off-field brand associations were also evaluated positively with all

582   mean scores above the mid-point, and all examined associations showed a significant positive

583   relationship with athletes' on-field brand image. The findings related to the associations *Body*

584   *Fitness* and *Physical Appearance* support Arai et al.'s (2013, 2014) propositions that physical

585   attractiveness contributes to athletes' brand image. Similarly, results generalize Geurin-

586   Eagleman and Burch's (2016) findings that posting sexually suggestive photos generates

587   higher engagement than other content on athletes' social media profiles does. It is also in line

588   with sponsorship effectiveness research suggesting that physical appeal moderates the

589   effectiveness of the endorser (e.g., Till & Busler, 2000; Yu, 2005). Similarly, the significant

590   effects of *Lifestyle, Personality, Social Responsibility,* and *Role Model* support Arai et al.'s

591   (2013, 2014) propositions that a marketable lifestyle adds to an athlete's brand image; while

592   findings for *Personality* and *Culture* are consistent with Hassan et al.'s (2018) propositions.

593   Overall, the formative approach to measuring brand image revealed the brand

594   associations that significantly influenced athlete brand image, and indicates that there are

595   several aspects that contribute to an athlete's brand image. For example, Cristiano Ronaldo

596   has on-field achievements with his current (i.e., Juventus) and former clubs (e.g., Manchester

597   United and Real Madrid), and the Portuguese National team, while his off-field brand can be

598   linked to being a father, sex-symbol, a model, and entrepreneur (The Guardian, 2016). As

599   such, a valuable athlete image might consist both of sport-related performance and personal

600   life (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Parmentier et al., 2013; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

601   This is evident in the current study through the significant and positive correlation between

602   on-field image and off-field image (.468; Table 3). In this sense, one can argue that athletes

603   have the potential to become recognizable personalities outside of the sports environment,

604   and the combination of their athletic performances and public personas is vital for the

605   development of a strong brand (Walsh & Williams, 2017). The current study extends

606   previous research by conceptualizing and measuring on-field and off-field associations that

607   contribute to athlete brand image and its subsequent effects on associated brands.

608   **The influence of brand image on outcome variables**

609   The two athlete brand image dimensions influenced outcome variables differently.

610   The current study broaden research findings on team brand associations (e.g., Kunkel et al.,

611   2016) and the FAN model (Funk & James, 2004) to athletes, indicating that consumers'

612   perceptions of the on- and off-field athlete brand impact their connection to the athlete (Arai

613   et al., 2013, 2014; Hassan et al., 2018) and brands that are related to the athlete brand (Yu,

614   2005). Consequently, the findings provide empirical support to the theoretical propositions by

615   Williams et al. (2015) that athletes hold various roles in a sport organization's brand

616   architecture. The spill-over effect observed from teams to their league (Kunkel et al., 2017)

617   also applies for athletes and their teams extending knowledge from the associative network

618   memory model (Anderson, 1983) and meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1986) to the

619   athlete branding domain.

620   Spill-over effects from athlete brand image to related entities differ by entity, which

621   contributes to deepen the understanding of how to manage an athlete's brand image. Athlete

622   sponsor preference was influenced by athletes' on-field image. As Carlson and Donovan

623   (2013, p. 193) stated, "numerous firms tie their brands to successful athletes with the

624   expectation that doing so will transfer the athlete's positive attributes onto the brand".

625   Likewise, the findings of this research indicate that on-field associations are more important

626   for sponsors than off-field associations. This suggests that sponsorship success follows on-

627   field success (Biscaia, Trail, Ross, & Yoshida, 2017). To this respect, footwear and apparel

628   maker Under Armour signing NBA star Stephen Curry has led to a strong growth of the

629   company's basketball footwear (Business Insider, 2017). Conversely, athlete commitment

630   and team commitment were influenced by the athlete's off-field image, highlighting the

631   importance for teams to hire athletes with strong off-field brand images. These findings

632   suggest that athletes are hybrid brands (Cortsen, 2013) and that the way their image is

633   managed outside the field of play is vital to increase followership for them and their teams

634   (Agyemang et al., 2015; Guerin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). For example, David Beckham

635   has been commonly acknowledged as an example of how an athlete's off-field image may

636   play a significant role to increase commitment toward their favorite team (Kerr & Gladden,

637   2008).

638   Consequently, these findings extend previous research on athlete brand by empirically

639   supporting the notion that both on-field and off-field brand image is important (Pegoraro &

640   Jinnah, 2012; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012) to invoke positive fan reactions. While previous

641   studies have suggested the existence of spill-over effects among brands within the sport

642   ecosystem (e.g. Biscaia et al., 2017; Kunkel et al., 2017), athlete's on-field and off-field

643   brand image were not equally effective at predicting athlete commitment, team commitment

644   and athlete sponsor preference. Based on the current findings, performance-related

645   characteristics are more effective at promoting positive reactions toward athletes' associated

646   sponsors, while life beyond the sport activity represents a more valuable component to

647   promote commitment toward the athlete and his/her team. Still, the athletes examined in this

648   study were among the top soccer players worldwide (e.g. Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo) and

649   the lack of variability in participants' responses regarding on-field image may have limited a

650   deeper understanding of its role on fans' reactions. However, the findings indicate that for

651   athletes at the top level, off-field associations rather than on-field associations influence fans'

652   connection with the athlete.

653   **The role of self-brand connection**

654   The current study illuminates the role of self-brand connection on the relationship

655   fans establish with their favorite athletes and associated teams and sponsors. As the findings

656   indicate, self-brand connection played a role in the relationship between athlete brand image

657   and consumer's commitment with the athlete. Notably, self-brand connection was not

658   significantly related to team commitment and athlete sponsor preference. These findings

659   suggest that fans' personal feelings toward an athlete do not necessarily translate into positive

660   outcomes for related entities. Indeed, a strong athlete brand image is more important than

661   athletes who are relatable. However, findings show that self-brand connection directly

662   affected athlete commitment and mediated the relationship between off-field image and

663   athlete commitment. These findings support the assumption that people use brands to

664   represent self-images, and that this representation of the self is an important element in the

665   development of consumer loyalty toward athlete brands (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). For

666   example, Steph Curry has been described as "the rare superstar where an 8-year-old kid can

667   go, 'He looks just like me. Maybe I can do it.'" (Pandian, 2017).

668   On-field brand image was not significantly related with self-brand connection

669   suggesting that participants did not perceive their self-concept to be reflected by the athlete

670   professional expertise. As noted by Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, and Grohmann

671   (2015), brands play an important role in consumers' identity, given that they tend to rely on

672   brands to express themselves. In the context of professional athletes, the non-significant

673   relationship between on-field image and self-brand connection may indicate difficulties for

674   fans to associate themselves with top performers. Escalas and Bettman (2003) stated that

675   consumers often select brands with meanings congruent with an aspect of their current self-

676   concept or possible self, while Pegoraro and Jinnah (2012) noted that fans mainly consume

677   sport brands loaded with meaning to which they can relate. These ideas are particularly

678   relevant in this case given that the professional soccer players in this study are some of the

679   top performers in the world and their on-field image was ranked very high. Consequently,

680   this high level of on-field performance may be perceived by fans as personally unachievable,

681   which may limit the development of a self-brand connection. In this instance, the aspirational

682   self (Fournier, 1998), not the perceived self, may play a bigger role. While fans may have

683   perceived some athletes to have unattainable on-field image, the significant role of off-field

684   image indicates that the brand associations related to the athlete's personal life (e.g.,

685   personality, role model, lifestyle, culture) may also be used to create and define a consumer's

686   self-concept (Chaplin & John, 2005; Escalas, 2004). Further research that considers a more

687   diverse range of athletes would be helpful to understand better the relationships between fans,

688   athletes and their related teams and sponsors.

Managerial Implications

689

690   The findings have several managerial implications germane to athlete brand

691   management. Considering the importance of the *Effort* association for on-field image,

692   athletes and managers should consider being more intentional in demonstrating their

693   commitment to the field of play in every competition. Such exertion often ingratiates the

694   athlete to the fan and can lead to an overall positive perception of the athlete brand. For

695   instance, consider a basketball player who dives for a loose ball or an attacking player in

696   soccer who sacrifices for his/her team and "tracks back" to deter the opposing team from

697   scoring. Such instances are often applauded and can help the player win over fans, and brand

698   managers should encourage this activity. Similarly, the associations of *Style of Play* and

699   *Achievement* suggest that athletes' self-presentation to fans (e.g., social media) should take

700   the athletic action (Guerin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016) into consideration by highlighting

701   important career achievements and their distinctive style. For example, Cristiano Ronaldo's

702   posts about match performances are often shared by thousands of followers contributing to

703   his on-field image as a dominant athlete.

704   In addition, our findings support the idea that the effectiveness of endorsement is

705   moderated by their athletic performance (Yu, 2005). Therefore, athletes must create, maintain

706   and protect an image of success on the field. To this end, the use of social media seems to

707   offer strong potential for athletes and their associated sponsors (Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012), as

708   the importance of celebrity endorsement has been suggested to strengthen over time (Spry,

709   Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). Athletes should also pursue opportunities that would allow

710   individual and collective achievements. The example of Kevin Durant (NBA player) moving

711   from the Oklahoma City Thunder to the Golden State Warriors created various opportunities

712   for sponsoring brands, resulting in Durant having the third highest endorsement earnings of

713   all NBA players (Forbes, 2018). Indeed, his move was not solely based on basketball but to

714   capitalize on the technology investment opportunities in the Bay Area (Rovell, 2018). With

715   this in mind, brand managers should consider destinations and opportunities beyond merely

716   the sport an athlete plays, given that athletes have become valuable personal brands with

717   strong reach and social capital (Ratten, 2015).

718   There are also implications tied to off-field brand image, particularly in reference to

719   its role on athlete commitment and team commitment, as well as self-brand connection by

720   fans. The importance of athlete off-field image at predicting fan outcomes extends Guerin-

721   Eagleman and Burch's (2016) research highlighting how fans value athletes' personal life

722   (i.e., life outside of sports). The findings also illustrate that *Attractiveness* is important. Thus,

723   conventional wisdom would hold that it is in athletes' best interest to manage their body and

724   overall look to the best of their ability (e.g., Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Moreover, the

725   role of *Personality* enforces the idea that brand personality regularly optimizes a consumer's

726   connection with a brand (e.g., Aaker, 1997). It is thus beneficial for athletes to demonstrate

727   their unique personality, which can be done via social media by giving consumers first-hand

728   accounts of them engaging in activities aimed at highlighting their personality and provide

729   insights on their daily life (e.g., Geurin & Burch, 2017). Such glimpses keep fans entertained

730   and allow the athlete to stand out and create strong connections with the target audience.

731   Furthermore, athletes and teams should also take notice of the cultural background

732   finding. As sport becomes more globalized, leagues are attracting players from previously

733   unchartered territory. Teams have begun to notice the benefit of having athletes from various

734   backgrounds. For instance, Mohamed Salah's athletic performance and actions off the field

735   have contributed to increase fans' sense of connection with him (The Guardian, 2018) and

736   brought an Egyptian following to Liverpool Football Club. Lastly, in the same vein as people

737   like socially responsible companies, they are attracted to athletes who are good role models

738   that "do good" within their communities. One might argue that this spills-over onto teams,

739   and that it would be advisable for athletes to seek opportunities to engage in athlete

740   citizenship (Agyemang, 2014), whereby they influence society in a positive way and utilize it

741   strategically to build their personal brand (e.g., Kunkel, Scott, & Beaton, 2016).

Limitations and Future Research

743   As with any research, there are limitations in this study that may have influenced the

744   results and provide opportunities for future research. First, data were collected only via two

745   social media platforms (i.e., Facebook and Twitter), and although the survey link was widely

746   distributed using various related hashtags, the study only targeted soccer fans. Also, the

747   results were derived from a convenience sample of individuals who may have taken the

748   survey because of their interest in soccer, followership of specific online groups and high

749   profile-athletes, or even the potential incentives that were provided. The collection of a

750   larger, representative sample including fans and athletes from different sports and using

751   different methods (e.g., online surveys and paper-and-pencil) would help future studies to

752   further investigate the accuracy of the relationships tested in the current research and increase

753   the generalizability of the results. As the current study focused on top athletes, which may

754   have been the reason why *Skill* was not a statistical differentiator to drive their brand image,

755   we recommend future research to include brand awareness and use a more diverse pool of

756   athletes, including second tier athletes and more female athletes, to further understand the

757   impact of athlete image dimensions on fans reactions toward those athletes and related

758   entities.

759   Second, athletes with different brand images were combined into the same model.

760   Although the free choice of athlete maximized the opportunity to capture participants with

761   various levels of self-brand connection, this method sacrificed certain control over the target

762   athletes. For example, the study could not exclude confounding variables such as likability.

763   Considering that fans tend to react to brands in the sport environment in different ways

764   (Biscaia et al., 2017), additional research could compare the current model across specific

765   athletes to better understand the relationships between athlete image dimensions, self-brand

766   connection and fan reactions to the athlete and related entities. Given that sport athletes tend

767   to be subjected to extensive scrutiny and high fan expectations (Summers & Johnson Morgan,

768   2008), of particular interest should be cases in which on-field and off-field image are

769   incongruent. For example, when excellent soccer players are involved in major incidents,

770   such as Lionel Messi's tax fraud, or off-court abuse, such as Cristiano Ronaldo's rape

771   allegations. The impact of athlete transgression on different entities linked to the athlete

772   would be both theoretically and practically relevant. This would likely allow to extend Lee

773   and Kwak's (2016) research, which demonstrates consumers can decouple more from the

774   transgression related to the job performance (i.e., doping) than transgressions not related to

775   the job performance (i.e., fraud). By comparing different athletes, control variables such as

776   gender or sexual orientation should be included as covariates.

777   A third limitation and research opportunity involves the inclusion of self-brand

778   connection measures allowing a distinction between perceived self and desired self. Previous

779   studies have suggested that the usage of products and brands by individuals is often linked to

780   desired self-images (Escalas, 2004; Cătălin & Andreea, 2014). Thus, measuring both

781   consumer actual self-image and desired self-image may contribute to our understanding of

782   the importance of on-field and off-field brand image dimensions and their role in fan

783   connection and subsequent reactions.

784   Fourth, the role of different types of media platforms (e.g., athletes mainly promoted

785   through traditional media, reality shows, social media; Escalas & Bettman, 2017) on the

786   formation of self-brand connection represents a research opportunity to explore why

787   consumers develop different connections with brands within the sport environment, and

788   further outcomes could be included in the current model. For example, self-brand connection

789   with an athlete brand may lead consumers to appropriate social needs (Escalas and Bettman,

790   2015), and recent studies have highlighted the importance of sports to increase individuals'

791   well-being (e.g., Inoue, Sato, Du, & Funk, 2017). Therefore, examining how self-brand

792   connections with athletes relates to sport fans' well-being may help expand our knowledge

793   about fan relationships with sport brands.

794   Fifth, we only focused on sponsors in the traditional sense of companies sponsoring

795   athletes to endorse their brand. However, an increasing number of athletes are becoming

796   entrepreneurs (Ratten, 2015) by launching their own brands, such as Cristiano Ronaldo

797   selling jeans and boxer shorts with his CR7 brand, or Zlatan Ibrahimovic selling hoodies and

798   caps with his A-Z brand. Thus, future research should investigate the role of athlete brand

799   associations and self-brand connection on fans' purchase behavior toward the athlete branded

800   merchandise vs. traditional sponsored merchandise. This would likely contribute to a better

801   understanding of athlete entrepreneurship beyond the influencer status. In addition, the

802   examination of spill-over effects between athlete sponsors and team sponsors may also prove

803   to be beneficial to extend previous research on sport brand architecture (e.g., Kunkel et al.,

804   2017).

805   **Conclusion**

806   In summary, the current study represents an initial effort to understand how

807   consumers' perception of athlete brand image influence their commitment toward the athlete,

808   his/her team and associated sponsors, as well as how these relationships are mediated by their

809   self-brand connection. It provides a deeper understanding of the aspects that contribute to the

810   development of fan relationships with not just their favorite athlete but also other brands in

811   the sport ecosystem such as teams and sponsors. In particular, the findings indicate that on-

812   field and off-field image impact outcome variables differently. On-field athlete image is

813   important to increase athlete sponsor preference, while off-field image leads to an improved

814   athlete commitment and team commitment. In addition, self-brand connection mediates the

815   relationship between off-field image and athlete commitment. Taken together, the findings

816   from the current research suggest a new perspective on athlete branding and shed light on the

817   importance of athlete brand image dimensions on fan outcomes to brands involved in the

818   sport ecosystem.

819

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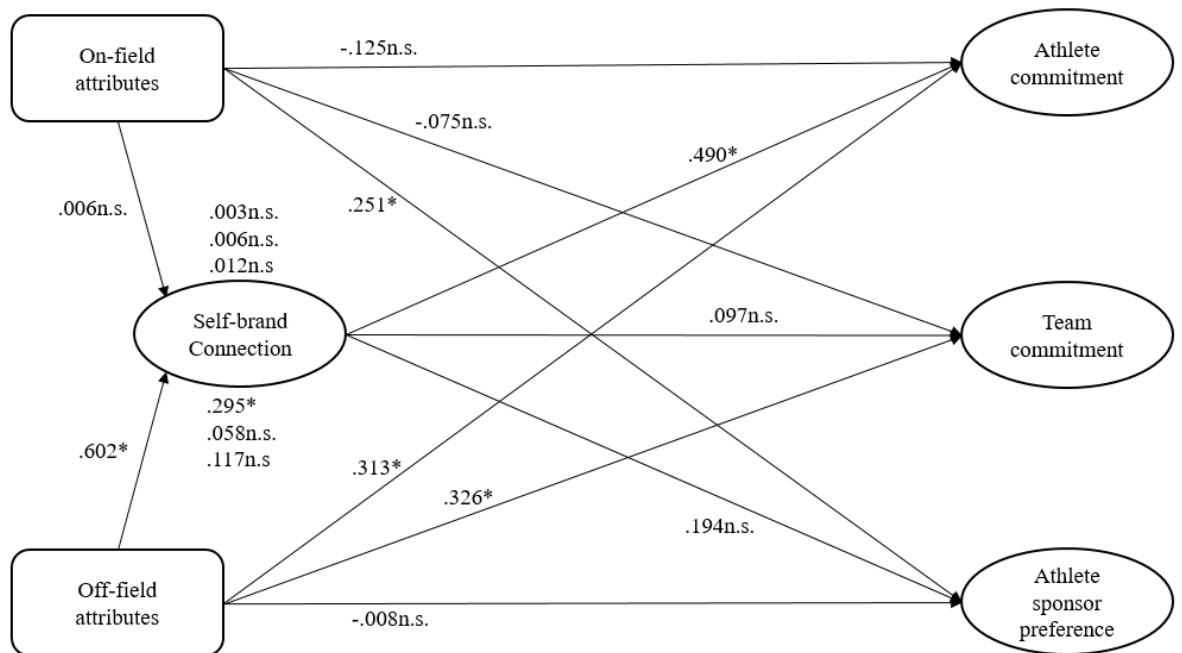
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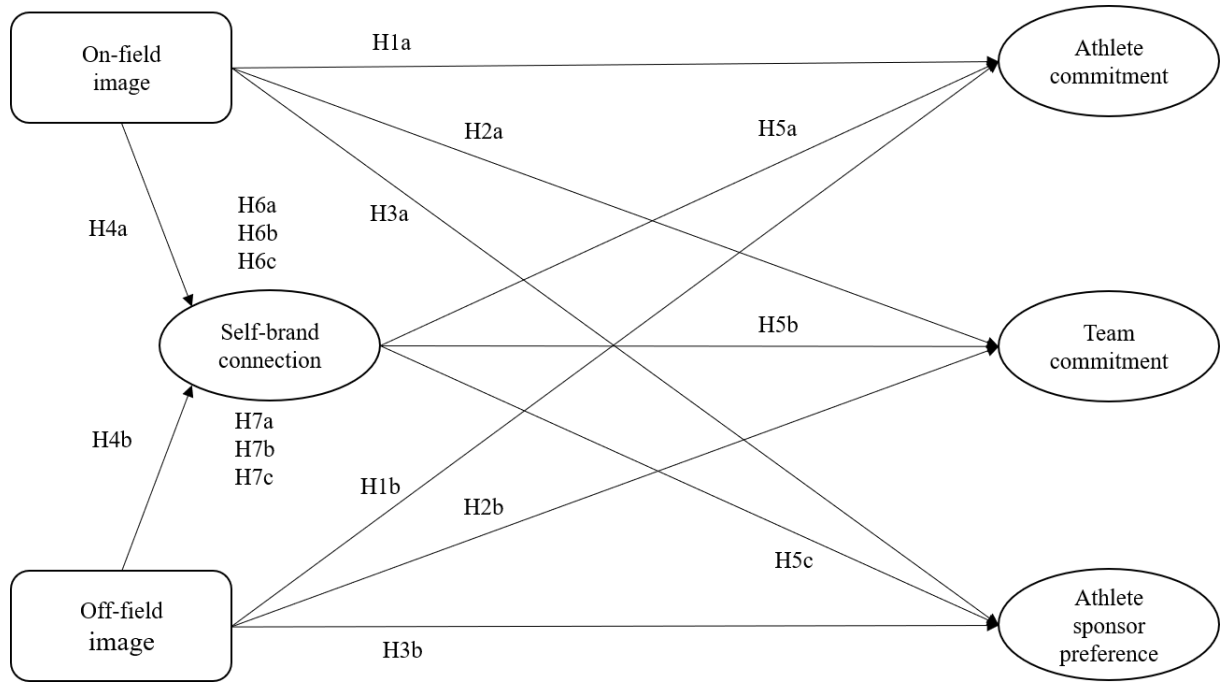
Figure 1. Hypothesized model.

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Figure 2. Summary results of the structural model. n.s. = not significant; * = significant at the .05 level

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Table 1. Athlete Brand image.

Attributes	Definition	Support	Example
On-field associations			
Fair Play	An athlete's reaction to diverse situations during the games regarding fairness, integrity, ethical behaviour, and respect for the game, opponents, and teammates.	Arai et al. (2014)	Son Heung Min, a striker who rarely conceives a yellow card
Effort	The effort invested every game by the athlete.	Hasaan et al. (2018)	N'Golo Kante, a box-to-box midfielder who works tenaciously for his team.
Achievements	An athlete's record of success including career trophies and awards.	Arai et al. (2014) Chadwick & Burton (2008).	Messi won 5 *Ballon D'Or* trophies; Tom Brady won 5 Super Bowl titles.
Style of play	The style and aesthetic elements of how an athlete plays during competition.	Arai et al. (2014) Hassan et al. (2018)	Zidane was known as the Magician because of his style the field; Michael Jordan was known as 'Air Jordan' due to famous dunks.
Impact	An athlete's ability to influence a game in a positive way.	Arai et al. (2014) Chadwick & Burton (2008)	Gareth Bale scoring two goals upon entering the Champions League final in 2018.
Skill	An athlete's ability, level of talent and competence.	Arai et al. (2014) Hasaan et al. (2018)	Messi's talent is often highlighted by professional colleagues and media.
Off-field associations			
Physical attraction	An athlete's physical qualities and characteristics that fans find aesthetically pleasing.*	*Arai et al. (2014)	Maria Sharapova and Anna Kournikova were famous for aesthetic appeal.
Body conditioning	An athlete's body fitness in his/her sport.*	*Arai et al. (2014)	Cristiano Ronaldo is known as machine – he takes care of his body to always be in the best conditions to perform.
Lifestyle	The athlete's private life including interests, behaviours, family, or friends.	Hasaan et al. (2018) Parmentier (2011)	David Beckham and the public interest in his personal life.
Personality	Visible human qualities of an athlete that permit fans to identify with and develop a relationship with the athlete.	Carlson & Donovan (2013)	Stephen Curry being regarded relatable to the common perso (e.g., a family man)
Cultural background	Captures aspects such as race, origins and other cultural patterns of an athlete.	Hasaan et al. (2018)	Pakistani and Indian followership of Cricket player Muhamad Ali gauges strong interest from black community
Social responsibility	The athlete's engagement with social concerns in a given community.	Agyemang & Singer (2013)	Recent athlete protests in NFL WNBA, NBA; Philanthropy, such as Serena Williams' support of women and young girls.
Role model	An athlete's behaviour off the field that society has determined is worth emulating.	Arai et al. (2014)	Larry Fitzgerald who is herald for his integrity and work ethic on and off the field.

* = Original definition adopted.

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Table 2. Items, Descriptive Statistics, Factor Loadings and Internal Consistency.

Factor Names and Items	M	SD	B	t	α | CR
On-field image	**4.54**	**.779**			**N/A**
Fair Play: Athlete X shows fair play on the field.	4.48	.791	.347	1.468	
Effort: Athlete X gives 100% every game.	4.58	.788	.704	3.575*	
Achievement: Athlete X has won important titles.	4.30	1.111	.548	2.731*	
Style of Play: Athlete X's style is distinctive from that of other players.	4.48	.732	.472	2.309*	
Impact: Athlete X is an impactful player on the field.	4.82	.478	-.004	.022	
Skill: Athlete X has superior skills.	4.56	.782	-.294	1.647	
Off-field image	**3.96**	**.959**			**N/A**
Body Conditioning: Athlete X's body is well conditioned.	4.25	.908	.544	5.690*	
Physical Attraction: Athlete X is good-looking.	3.65	1.131	.600	8.235*	
Lifestyle: Athlete X has an interesting personal life.	3.27	1.035	.522	6.162*	
Personality: Athlete X has a unique personality.	4.00	.959	.670	8.178*	
Culture: Athlete X represents the culture of his/her background well.	4.27	.895	.524	5.184*	
Social Responsible: Athlete X is socially responsible.	3.95	.961	.655	7.951*	
Role Model: Athlete X serves as a good role model.	4.32	.828	.685	8.931*	
Self-brand connection	**3.18**	**1.192**			**.736 | .851**
I identify with Athlete X.	3.43	1.151	.763	30.431*	
Athlete X is a mirror image of the person I would like to be.	3.22	1.207	.833	33.531*	
I think following Athlete X helps me construct my self-identity.	2.84	1.216	.831	28.490*	
Athlete commitment	**4.23**	**.923**			**.779 | .899**
I am a committed fan of Athlete X.	4.14	.967	.878	39.017*	
I am a loyal supporter of Athlete X.	4.31	.892	.929	45.320*	
Team commitment	**3.62**	**1.381**			**.803 | .909**
I am a loyal supporter of Athlete X's team.	3.91	1.387	.885	24.668*	
It is important to me to be a fan of Athlete X's team.	3.32	1.374	.939	50.462*	
Athlete sponsor preference	**4.04**	**.923**			**.888 | .947**
Sponsor X is a good brand / organization.	3.98	.885	.952	65.067*	
I would buy products from Sponsor X.	4.10	.960	.944	56.384*	

Notes. M = mean score; *SD* = standard deviation; *β* = beta weight; *t* = t-value; α = Cronbach alpha; CR = critical ratio; N/A = not applicable; * = significant at the .05 level

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Table 3. Correlation Matrix, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and squared correlations among constructs.

	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. On-Field image	---	1.00	.219	.076	.033	.011	.097
2. Off-Field image	---	.468	1.00	.339	.349	.143	.032
3. Self-Brand connection	.655	.275	.582	1.00	.412	.099	.026
4. Athlete commitment	.817	.181	.591	.642	1.00	.238	.012
5. Team commitment	.833	.106	.378	.315	.488	1.00	.004
6. Athlete sponsor preference	.899	.312	.178	.161	.109	.065	1.00

Notes. Values below the diagonal are correlation estimates. Values above the diagonal are squared correlation estimates.

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Table 4. Path Coefficients, Indicator Weights, and Explained Variance of Mediated Structural Model.

H	Path	Supported?	β	T	LLCI	ULCI
H1a	On-field image → Athlete commitment	No	-.125	1.428	-.042	.467
H1b	Off-field image → Athlete commitment	Yes	.313*	3.446	.145	.478
H2a	On-field image → Team commitment	No	-.075	0.756	-.278	.180
H2b	Off-field image → Team commitment	Yes	.326*	3.327	.127	.527
H3a	On-field image → Athlete sponsor preference	Yes	.251*	2.100	.006	.467
H3b	Off-field image → Athlete sponsor preference	No	-.008	0.075	-.178	.217
H4a	On-field image → SBC	No	.006	0.042	-.125	.185
H4b	Off-field image → SBC	Yes	.602*	9.178	.436	.707
H5a	SBC → Athlete commitment	Yes	.490*	6.519	.421	.672
H5b	SBC → Team commitment	No	.097	1.052	-.046	.292
H5c	SBC → Athlete sponsor preference	No	.194	1.877	-.113	.267
H6a	On-field image → SBC → Athlete commitment	No	.003	0.042	-.153	.065
H6b	On-field image → SBC → Team commitment	No	.006	0.037	-.031	.020
H6c	On-field image → SBC → Athlete sponsor preference	No	.012	0.026	-.025	.021
H7a	Off-field image → SBC → Athlete commitment	Yes	.295*	5.200	.204	.425
H7b	Off-field image → SBC → Team commitment	No	.058	1.038	-.046	.168
H7c	Off-field image → SBC → Athlete sponsor preference	No	.117	1.783	.007	.258

Explained Variance	
Self-brand connection	$R^2 = .392$
Athlete commitment	$R^2 = .462$
Team commitment	$R^2 = .119$
Athlete sponsor preference	$R^2 = .113$

*Notes. β = beta weight; t = t-value; LLCI = lower level confidence interval; ULCI = upper level confidence interval; SBC = Self-brand connection; * = significant at .05 level*

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