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A conceptual framework to understand the creation of athlete brand and its implications

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1 Introduction

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

Celebrity athletes also tend to display extraordinary personal characteristics that elicit a long-lasting, emotional attachment with their fans (Kwon and Trail, 2001). David Beckham's transfer from Manchester United to Real Madrid prompted five million Asian fans of Manchester United to switch their loyalty to Real Madrid following Beckham's transfer (Kerr and Gladden, 2008). Within a year of signing David Beckham, replica jersey sales of Real Madrid increased

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

2 Theoretical Background

Arai et al. (2014) defined athlete brand as a public persona of an athlete, while Carter (2010) stated that a personal brand is a brand that consists of peoples' opinions about a particular individual. In this sense, an athlete brand can be defined as a brand consisting of peoples' opinions about a particular athlete. The development of an athlete brand requires fans' awareness about the athlete such as who the athlete is, what he/she does and how he/she is different from other athletes (Montoya, 2002). Yu (2005) mentioned that an athlete's successful career and positive image play

an integral part in the athlete becoming a top brand. Also, Cortsen (2013) argued that the establishment of a personal brand is related to life stories, values, charisma, authenticity and believability. The author further highlighted the significance of “winning” for attracting followers and building loyalty in sports. Generating loyalty is important, as loyal fans resist the idea to switch their allegiance to other athletes when their idol is not enjoying success (Neale and Funk, 2006).

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

Of the recent studies developed about athlete brands, Parmentier and Fischer (2012) discussed athlete brand via two characteristics of athletes: professional image and media persona. In a similar vein, Carlson and Donovan (2013) reported that athletes’ personal appeal and achievements play a major role with regard to increasing fans’ identification with an athlete. Cortsen (2013) presented the idea about hybrid athlete brand and used the famous Swedish female

golfer Annika Sorenstam as a case study. According to the author, when something positive or negative happens with an athlete, it casts the same effect on the athlete's brand. In turn, Arai et al. (2013) and Arai et al. (2014) developed the model of athlete brand image (MABI) including the dimensions of athletic performance, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle of a star athlete. Also, Williams and Agyemang (2014) suggested the athlete brand awareness is the first step to establish an athlete brand and this could be achieved through organization-related, market-related and athlete-related antecedents. All of these studies contributed to an understanding of how to conceptualize athletes as brands. However, although the notion of an athlete brand is becoming an important topic in the literature, there is a lack of a comprehensive model explaining the factors that trigger an athlete brand, its components and subsequent implications. Thus, through the proposed conceptual framework, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how fans create an image of their favourite athletes, how to measure the athlete brand and its impact on fans' subsequent reactions. In doing so, this study also intends to provide a contribution for better understanding the importance of athletes in the sport domain.

3 Proposed framework

The proposed framework was based on a thorough review of the literature related to celebrity branding, brand equity, brand loyalty and athlete branding. Based on a search among more than 400 peer-reviewed articles, conference proceedings and book chapters published in the English language, 168 were selected to develop this framework. There were no restrictions with respect to the format and age of the studies as the oldest study selected is from 1963 and most recent from 2015. The search of articles was conducted on the electronic databases of EBSCO and ProQuest. The first round of a very broad search was carried out to identify all relevant articles in the field

and in the subsequent search phase the final selection was made based on higher impact factor of the publication source of the articles. The proposed framework of an athlete brand is depicted in Figure 1.

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

toolkit to develop and nurture relationships between athletes and fans or prospective fans in a more efficient way.

[Insert Figure 1 around here]

3.1 Antecedents

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

3.1.1 Media

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

creating awareness for sport-related brands (Hamlin et al., 2006). In this study four aspects of media are further discussed: mass media, social media, mega event media spectacles, and fantasy sport and video games.

3.1.1.1 Mass media

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

3.1.1.2 Social media

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2011), social media is a group of Internet based applications (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, blogs) that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content. One of the many reasons why social media is popular in the sport context is that social media provides a live experience to fans and social platforms to discuss sport online with the community (Harrington et al., 2012; Vann, 2014). Social media provides opportunities to communicate in live sessions, and that is another reason why it is becoming increasingly popular channel among the sports enthusiasts. Furthermore, social media sites allow fans to become aware of the athletes, and

thus aid the creation of an image about those athletes. Nowadays, nearly all sport teams and athletes find it important to be represented on social media channels to increase awareness (Pronschinske et al., 2012) and communicate with fans. Sierra et al. (2010) mentioned that forms of media like blogs or text messages produce and increase fans' knowledge of and identification with human brands. Witkemper et al. (2012) added that social media is often used to supply new or upcoming information about a team or athlete, while Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) found that social media has been contributing to the creation of numerous athlete brands such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Dwyane Wade and Floyd Mayweather. Similar success stories exist for sportswomen, Ronda Rousey and Maria Sharapova have been identified as two most popular female athletes on social media (Independent, 2015).

3.1.1.3 Mega event media spectacles

Mega events such as the Olympic Games or World Cup tend to attract significant media coverage. When a mega sport event occurs, fans can witness a live experience or follow it through media, and this may lead to an increased interest in the sport, teams and/or athletes (Koenigstorfer et al., 2010). The mega event media spectacles have proven to be useful for creating awareness about the athletes even in countries where certain sports are not very popular. For example, the 1986 FIFA World Cup generated a great sensation throughout India. As the Indian team was not represented in the tournament, most Indian followers choose their favourite team on the basis of the playing style of the team, athlete qualities and loose cultural connections (Dimeo, 2002). Even in countries where sport is popular already, mega sport events can affect many segments of the population (Goodman et al., 2002).

3.1.1.4 Fantasy sport & video games

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

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

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

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

3.1.2 Oral communications

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

3.1.2.1 Word of mouth

The expression word-of-mouth (WOM) refers to one-to-one communication and exchange of spoken messages (Minazzi, 2014). WOM has the ability to impact another person's decision depending on the nature of the relationship between the two people engaging in communication. In some cases, consumers rely more on WOM, as they do not have faith in media and other channels (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2011; Rosen, 2000). In the context of sports, an oral communication from a trustworthy person could cause awareness and lead to developing a favourable or unfavourable image of a specific athlete. Complementarily, Bush et al. (2005) suggested that trust in WOM is common in young females who tend not only to be receptive to the impact of WOM but also spread positive ideas about their favourite athletes. Bush et al. (2004)

also reported that interpersonal communication might also bear some responsibility in the development of a specific image. So, the input of WOM is a vital factor in this regard as it can affect decisions of customers (i.e., fans) either positively or negatively based in its content (Buttle, 1998).

3.1.2.2 Rumours and narratives

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

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

3.1.3 Impression management

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

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

3.1.4 Social agents

A social agent is an influential entity that has the ability to create impact on people (Melnick and Wann, 2010), through other people, nations, organizations, cultures, or ideologies. Bandura and Walters (1963) suggested that people learn from what they observe, and others influence their attitudes and actions. They are influenced by different social agents such as family members, peers, school, and the community. Based on the concept of social agents (Melnick and Wann, 2010) and the distinct nature of sport (Ross et al., 2006), we consider the following social agents as antecedents of developing the athlete's brand: parents, family members, friends and community (Armstrong and Peretto-Stratta, 2004; Dixon, 2012; Wann et al., 1996).

3.1.4.1 Parents and teachers

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

is, if the father has a negative opinion about Diego Maradona, this may have an influence on the son's opinion.

3.1.4.2 Family members

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

3.1.4.3 Friends

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

3.1.4.4 Community

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

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

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

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

3.1.5 Team and sport

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

3.1.5.1 Sport interest

The popularity of a certain sport in a given society may potentially influence its population to like (or dislike) a particular athlete (Stewart et al., 2003). A large number of people are attracted to star athletes of popular types of sport, while star athletes playing sports that are less popular in that region must exert more effort to become popular. For example, football in South Asia and Cricket in Europe face this kind of difficulties (Manzenreiter and Horne, 2007). Kunkel et al. (2013)

identified consumer involvement with the sport as a reason to follow a team or athlete. Also, Robinson and Trail (2005) explained that fans could develop a connection to an athlete through the league of a particular sport, while Chadwick and Burton (2008) suggested that football itself has played a major role in establishing the features of football related brands. At the same time, athletes representing sports that are generally considered less interesting have a lower potential of generating involvement of fans, or in extreme cases those athletes may even be perceived negatively (Gilaninia, et al. 2011).

3.1.5.2 Team interest

A fan's interest in a certain team tends to lead to an increased interest in its athletes (Best, 2013). Fisher (1998) stated that as soon as the players wear the jersey of "our" club, they become one of "us". Also, Bodet and Chanavat (2010) explained that fans get direct information from the teams and this knowledge helps them create a link with the athletes, while Robinson and Trail (2005) argued that sport consumers tend to develop a connection through the team to its belongings (e.g., team athletes). On the other hand, fans from a team tend to develop a negative opinion about the athletes of rival teams. For example, when Ali Sen was the manager of Fenerbahce football club in Turkey, he was subjected to sexual verbal chanting from Besiktas supporters. Similar chants were heard from opponent supporters in the stadium for then Besiktas player Arda Turan and for his girlfriend Sinem Kobal, who is an actress and a celebrity herself (Erhart, 2011).

3.1.5.3 Team geographical location

The geographical location of the team could contribute to an athlete's popularity (Hay and Joel, 2007). People feel attached with certain regions and the teams located in those regions; its

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

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

[Insert Table_1 around here]

3.2 Athlete brand

Cortsen (2013) explained that athlete brands consist of existing values and characteristics of an athlete. The creation of certain values and characteristics about the athlete can be related with both on-field and/or off-field aspects. That is, it is the athlete's own characteristics that establish his/her brand. Similar with this view, Grant et al. (2001) stated that football athletes become famous due to their field achievements and public interest in off-field activities. For example, David Beckham and Cristiano Ronaldo are famous for both athletic characteristics and other features regarding their private lives. Beckham is well-known for his tattoos, while Ronaldo's slick hairstyle is as famous (Chadwick and Burton, 2008). Therefore, an athlete brand is dependent upon two different

dimensions of an athlete's life: on-field success and an off-field positive image (Yu, 2005). A fan's perception of his/her favourite athlete depends on how the athlete performs and also on the off-field image of the athlete (Wu et al., 2012). Based on previous literature highlighting the attention devoted to star athletes, both within and outside the field, we propose to measure an athlete brand based on the on-field attributes and off-field attributes (Chadwick and Burton, 2008; Corsten, 2013). See Table 2 below for the summary of the attributes of athlete brand.

3.2.1 On-field attributes

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

3.2.1.1 Behaviour

How an athlete behaves and performs in situations on the field of play can be referred to as behaviour (Koernig and Boyd, 2009). This pertains to how the athlete reacts in certain situations, how the athlete is connected with teammates during competition, and the athlete's leadership and character qualities. For instance, fans expect their favourite athletes to lead the team by demonstrating a sense of responsibility, maintaining focus, and exhibiting mental toughness

(Daley and Wolfson, 2010). Ben Roethlisberger, for example, is a professional player in the National Football League (NFL) who has a reputation of a leader on the pitch and his leadership skills make him one of the top quarterbacks in the league (MacRae, 2009). On the contrary, if the athlete adopts incorrect behaviours in the field, he/she could be perceived negatively by the fans (Lear et al., 2009).

3.2.1.2 Team

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

3.2.1.3 Achievements

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

athlete's past performance is one of the major contributors for enhancing the perception about his/her quality, while Kiefer (2014) noted that a good performance of an athlete increases its market value.

3.2.1.4 Style of play

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

3.2.1.5 Skills

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

3.2.2 Off-field attributes

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

3.2.2.1. Physical attraction

The face and physique of the athlete and other distinguishing features such as the hairstyle or tattoos represent the features of physical appearance (Chadwick and Burton, 2008). Previous researchers have explained athlete's physical appearance using different constructs such as sexual attractiveness of star athletes (King, 2002), sexual interest in athletes (Crolley, 1999), puck bunnies (i.e., fans who have 'lust' after the athletes; Crawford and Gosling, 2004), physical attraction (Melnick and Wann, 2010), cuteness (Kerr and Emery, 2011), and sexiness (Brook, 1997). Regardless of the terms used, it is commonly accepted that the physical features of an athlete are important when fans develop an image of that athlete. For example, Pope (2010) mentioned that a fan's link to an athlete can be derived from an athlete's look, particularly among female fans. In addition to that, Van Amsterdam et al. (2012) stated that an athlete's physical attraction tends to be important for both male and female fans. To this respect, as Hogan and Strasburger (2008)

noted that although the female tennis star Anna Kournikova has never won a major tournament in her career; she has always been very popular because of her status as a sex symbol.

3.2.2.2 Lifestyle

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

3.2.2.3 Personal appeal

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

rivals; this modest but unusual personality has made him popular as a person and player (Stauffer, 2006). In contrast, his opponent Rafael Nadal is known for his aggressive or arrogant behaviour (Bodo, 2010).

3.2.2.4 Ethnicity

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

3.2.2.5. Entertainment value

The charisma of an athlete is capable of providing good stories for the media and entertaining fans outside the football stadium (García, 2011). Besides various other roles the celebrity athletes are entertainers (Andrews and Jackson, 2001), as public figures they have a marketable lifestyle, and many people yearn to read about them (Künzler and Poli, 2012). For example, almost all of Beckham's personal characteristics (e.g., smile, hairstyle) were subject to news generation among his followers. Also, Cristiano Ronaldo's trademark scream 'Si!', Mario Balotelli's constant links with bad stories, controversies about posting selfies by Pakistani cricket players, or documentaries

about players often generate entertainment among their followers. In line with this view, Levy (2015) noted that athletes have several possibilities to entertain and become prominent among fans. Tanaka (2004) explained that fans tend to become entertained by their favourite athletes as they capture almost every facial expression (e.g., crying, smiling, anger, joy), and actions (e.g., talking, raging, swearing, passing beautifully). On the basis of previous literature, it is proposed in the current framework that:

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

[Insert Table_2 around here]

3.3 Athlete brand implications

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

3.3.1 Athlete loyalty

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

3.3.2 Team loyalty

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

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

3.3.3 Purchase intention of sponsored products

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

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

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

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

4 Discussion

The current study focused on the linkages between factors affecting an athlete brand as well its subsequent implications for the athlete him/herself, his/her team and associated sponsors. The focal point was to develop a comprehensive model of athlete brand and fill the gap in the literature by explaining how an athlete's brand is created, and how fans increase their linkages with the athletes, their teams and endorsed brands associated with the athlete. The proposed model highlights the agents that work behind closed doors to spread awareness about the athlete among potential future fans (i.e., antecedents). The role of athletes' actions on the field of play, as well their actions outside the field are also discussed. These on-field and off-field activities of athletes represent the bases for establishing athlete brand. Furthermore, the athlete's brand effect on his/her team and associated sponsors are also discussed in the model.

The model has three different parts. The first is related with the antecedents of an athlete brand. The second refers to the components of an athlete's brand. Next, the third part describes the implications an athlete's brand on the team and the brands endorsed by the athlete. Five major antecedents of the athlete's brand are proposed to act as triggers of the creation of an athlete's brand in fans' minds, including media (mass media, social media, mega event media spectacles

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

Although teams are continuously trying to increase their brand awareness (Richelieu and Desbordes 2009), not all athletes put real effort into this matter. The awareness of an athlete is important to strengthen the link with sport fans, with subsequent benefits for teams and other brands. Cristiano Ronaldo (FIFA Balon D'or in 2008, 2013 and 2014) is a good example of an athlete trying to increase awareness about him and improve his image among the public in general. He recently sold his image rights to the Singaporean Hong Kong-based company Mint Media

owned by Peter Lim (Straitstimes, 2015). Thus, it is important for athletes to promote public awareness about them. An athlete can market him or herself by using media to draw attention to aspects such as ethnicity or relevant stories (if these are known to resonate with the audiences). The first impact will be on the creation of a bond with fans. Next, an indirect effect will spill over to the athlete's club and even associated brands. Clubs in search for new markets should take steps that are not only beneficial for them, but also favour the athletes as well. The condolence letter written by Arsene Wenger (Arsenal's football manager) to a teenager's family in Karachi (Pakistan) that went viral on social media is a good example, as this action allowed the team to get new followers in the country (footyroom, 2014). Also, some players provide good examples of how their own actions can be very important for them and their teams. When Zidane visited Bangladesh in 2006, he mentioned that he was not aware of his popularity in a country so far away from Spain or France (BBC, 2006).

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

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

5 Limitations and future research directions

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

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

comparisons using different celebrity athletes. Also, this model is focused on a specific context of athletes playing mostly team sports (e.g., football), which may limit its generalizability to other sports. Thus, while this model could represent a starting point, future studies should always adapt the proposed model according to the specific sport context.

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

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

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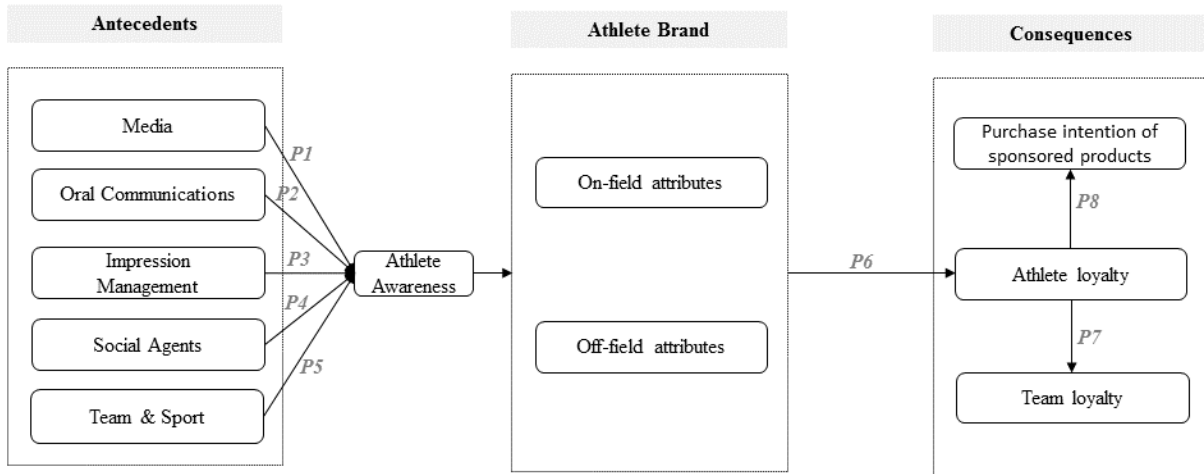


Figure 1. Proposed framework of Athlete brand

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

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

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

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